

Gossip and the Informal Organization: How Gossiping Shapes Emergent Social Structures at Work

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ABSTRACT

Broadly speaking, this thesis explores how workplace gossip shapes the informal organization. It comprises three papers—a review paper, an empirical paper, and a theory development paper. The review paper is the most broadly focused. It draws on cross-disciplinary gossip research to (a) provide a conceptual framework for understanding the interdependent social functions of gossip and (b) demonstrate how these functions shape key elements of the informal organization. The empirical paper focusses more narrowly on how workplace gossip shapes one key element of the informal organization—interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the paper draws on qualitative data and employs inductive analysis to build and enrich theory regarding how gossip recipients' responses to gossip incidents shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. Findings reveal three nuanced processes whereby recipient responses to gossip shape the relational outcomes of gossip incidents, all of which are initiated by recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions. The theory paper builds on findings from the empirical paper to develop a conceptual model of how recipients' interpretations of gossip shape their relationships and behavior. This paper integrates gossip and identity research to propose that when recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their identities, this interpretive process affects their relationships and behavior in important ways. Thus, the paper provides a unique perspective on how the social information communicated via gossip gets translated into relational and behavioral outcomes at work.

The thesis makes three broad contributions to the literature. First, it advances knowledge on how workplace gossip shapes the informal organization. It does so by developing conceptual frameworks for understanding the links between gossip and the informal organization and by empirically exploring how organizational members' experiences of gossip shape their interpersonal relationships. This contribution is important

because, although prior research implies links between gossip and the informal organization, little is known about how the informal organization emerges through individuals' experiences of gossip. Second, the thesis extends understanding of the social functions of workplace gossip. Over the course of the thesis, I argue that the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information. I also argue that recipients' responses to and interpretations of such information are crucial in shaping the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip. Thus, I highlight interdependencies between three core social functions of gossip—information, influence, and bonding—by contending that the social information communicated by gossip is what influences behavior and bonds people in relationships. Finally, my thesis spotlights the role of the gossip recipient in the gossip triad. By focusing on gossip as social information and on the recipient as the person who interprets and responds to that information, I contribute to a more comprehensive account of how the triad operates. Illuminating the recipient's role is important given that most research to date has taken the perspective of either the gossiper (the person who initiates gossip) or the gossip target (the person gossip is about).

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

James Greenslade-Yeats

Co-Authored Works

I declare that I am the principal author of the three jointly authored manuscripts in this thesis. I am the person who took primary responsibility for the major tasks involved in my empirical research, which consisted of designing the study, gaining ethics approval, recruiting participants, collecting data, and analyzing data. I am also the person who undertook the literature reviews that inform the two conceptual papers in the thesis. Finally, I was the lead writer for all three manuscripts. The three co-authors on these papers, who are my primary and secondary supervisors, as well as my initial primary supervisor (who left the supervision team after moving to a Canadian university at the end of 2018), contributed to the following tasks: refining my research topic, designing my empirical study, identifying potential participants, secondary coding of data, and editing and structuring the three manuscripts. References for the three manuscripts in the thesis appear below (none is currently published). The percentage contributions for each manuscript appear in parentheses at the end of each reference in the same order as the authors are listed in the reference.

Manuscript 1: Greenslade-Yeats, J., Cooper-Thomas, H., Corner, P., & Morrison, R. *Information, influence, and bonding: How the functions of workplace gossip shape the informal organization.* (Author contributions: 80/10/5/5). I presented the early ideas for this paper at the 2018 Aotearoa/ New Zealand Organisational Psychology and Organisational Behaviour Conference, hosted by the University of Auckland. The presentation was entitled “The functions and challenges of gossip in organisations.” This manuscript has been submitted the *International Journal of Management Reviews*.

Manuscript 2: Greenslade-Yeats, J., Cooper-Thomas, H., Morrison, R., & Corner, P. *The good, the bad, and the genuine: How gossip shapes interpersonal relationships at work.*

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Manuscript 3: Greenslade-Yeats, J., Cooper-Thomas, H. Corner, P., & Morrison, R. *How interpretations of gossip shape relationships and behavior in organizations: An identity perspective*. (Author contributions: 80/10/5/5). I presented the early ideas for this paper at the 2020 Aotearoa/ New Zealand Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior Conference, hosted by the University of Canterbury. The presentation was entitled “How do employees’ interpretations of gossip shape their relationships and behavior?” This manuscript has been submitted to *Organization Theory*.

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¹ Except when it comes to deviating from the APA Style Guide.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The overarching purpose of this thesis is to advance knowledge on how workplace gossip shapes the informal organization. In this chapter, I elaborate this purpose by clarifying what I mean by workplace gossip and the informal organization. I also briefly review what the existing academic literature says—and, more importantly, does not say—about these two interrelated phenomena. In doing so, I introduce the key aims and research questions that motivate the thesis and provide an academic rationale for its undertaking. But first, I share some reflections about the personal journey of writing this thesis, starting with a story about the experiences I commonly had when trying to justify my decision to spend three years studying workplace gossip.

A PhD is a major undertaking. At a minimum, it takes three years to complete—equivalent to approximately four percent of the average New Zealander’s expected lifespan (World Bank, 2018). Therefore, only a fool or dilettante would undertake a PhD without first giving serious consideration to their choice of topic. Yet when I told non-academic acquaintances that I was doing my doctorate on workplace gossip, their initial responses often suggested I had not thought seriously enough about my own topic choice. Typically, people would either: (a) laugh out loud, (b) say, “You’re kidding?” or “Can you even do a PhD on workplace gossip?” or (c) look at me with an expression of bemused disbelief, as though waiting for the punchline to a disappointing joke. Such responses were revealing. They showed that, on the surface, our society does not take gossip very seriously. However, people’s subsequent responses—those that came once they realized I was *not* kidding—were equally revealing. “Actually,” they would usually say, “that sounds like it would be really interesting.”

Gossip *is* interesting. If it were not, people surely would not spend so much time engaging in it: Research suggests that, on average, people dedicate up to 65 percent of discretionary conversation time to gossiping (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997). The language we use to characterize gossip also belies an almost salacious interest in it; gossip is often described as “juicy,” whereas technical topics are “dry.” However, as the acquaintances who initially laughed at my PhD topic seemed to be implying, just because something is interesting does not necessarily mean it is worth researching for three whole years. To meet that criterion, a topic must also be *important*.

Outside management and organizational studies, scholars have long recognized the importance of gossip in human social life (Abraham, 1970; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Ben-Ze’ev, 1994; Dunbar, 1998; Eder & Enke, 1991; Enquist & Leimar, 1993; Fine, 1985; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963; Hannerz, 1967; Paine, 1967; Suls, 1977; Szwed, 1966). Indeed, as far back as 1963, the anthropologist Max Gluckman declared gossip to be “among the most important societal and cultural phenomena we are called up to analyze” (Gluckman, 1963, p. 307). In contrast, organizational researchers were relatively slow to acknowledge the importance of gossip in shaping workplace social relations. It was not until Noon and Delbridge (1993) published a call-to-arms, imploring researchers to reconsider their views of workplace gossip, that the phenomenon started to gain traction as a legitimate focus for organizational inquiry. Before then, workplace gossip was predominantly characterized as “idle talk” or “malicious tales”—a form of communication that was, at best, unproductive and, at worst, socially destructive (Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p. 24).

Since Noon and Delbridge (1993) published their seminal paper, scholarly perspectives on workplace gossip have changed substantially. Academic interest in the topic has grown and, in the last few years, burgeoned (Dores Cruz, Nieper, Testori, Martinescu, &

Beersma, 2021). A key theme of this burgeoning literature is that gossip fulfils important social functions in the workplace. Some of these functions engender negative outcomes, as one would expect from traditional characterizations of gossip, yet others engender mixed and even positive outcomes—outcomes that enhance employee wellbeing and firm performance. In this thesis, I argue that understanding why workplace gossip engenders such varied outcomes requires a comprehensive and balanced understanding of how it shapes the informal organization.

The informal organization is a broad phenomenon that incorporates many crucial aspects of organizational life (McEvily, Soda, & Tortoriello, 2014; Reif, Monczka, & Newstrom, 1973). In essence, the informal organization refers to the unofficial social structures that emerge through people’s experiences of organizational membership² (Bittner, 1965; McEvily et al., 2014; Pierce & White, 2006). As discussed below, these structures are comprised of elements including informal interpersonal relationships, emergent culture and climate, and unofficial power and status dynamics. Importantly, while scholars recognize that the social structures of the informal organization are shaped and sustained by interpersonal communication (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Sosa, Gargiulo, & Rowles, 2015), researchers are yet to demonstrate the full extent to which workplace gossip shapes these structures. Therefore, my overarching thesis is that to appreciate the role and impact of gossip in organizations, scholars must develop a richer, more comprehensive understanding of *how* gossip shapes the various elements of the informal organization.

The purpose of the present chapter is to introduce this overarching thesis. I start by reflecting on the personal journey that led me to choose workplace gossip as the focus of my doctoral thesis. I then briefly review the relevant academic literature on workplace gossip and

² I provide a precise definition of the informal organization in the subsection of this introduction entitled “The informal organization.”

the informal organization, defining key concepts and highlighting gaps in understanding on the links between these two interrelated phenomena. Next, I present my overarching aims and intended contributions, as well as the specific research questions that motivate the three manuscripts of the thesis. Finally, I discuss the methodological approach and assumptions that inform how I undertake my research.

RESEARCHING WORKPLACE GOSSIP: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

My interest in workplace gossip grew out of my experience in the hospitality industry. Prior to starting my PhD, I worked in hospitality for over a decade, first in part-time roles as a kitchen hand and waiter, and then full-time as a barista and cook. Gossip was an omnipresent feature of the restaurants and cafés in which I worked. Almost every day, I would hear—or overhear—coworkers talking about other coworkers who were not present, most often in an evaluative manner. Sometimes I also participated in workplace gossip more directly: Coworkers would gossip to me, and I would gossip to coworkers. In this way, I experienced first-hand how gossip could shape the culture, climate, and interpersonal dynamics of close-quartered work environments.

By the time I finished working in hospitality, I did not really like gossip. I guess I had developed the impression that gossip's destructive powers outweighed its positive potential. The sort of gossip that tended to stick in my mind was negative and often malicious—what Waddington (2012) calls *toxic gossip*. Multiple times I worked in establishments where gossip manifested as a sort of constant back biting, with one person slandering an absent colleague one minute, only to become the target of similar slander from others as soon as they left the room. In such environments, I couldn't help suspecting that I, too, must sometimes be the target of slander—or at least negative gossip. And, indeed, I sometimes overheard conversations that confirmed this suspicion. Maybe I am just over-sensitive to the

opinions of others, but I found that overhearing people gossiping negatively about me was one of the most uncomfortable experiences I had in any workplace.

Yet during my time in hospitality, I also made certain observations that piqued my curiosity regarding the deeper meaning of gossip. One observation was that individuals who held a high level of formal power were frequently the targets of the most merciless negative gossip, especially if those individuals were perceived to be abusing or exploiting their power. Another observation was that workers who were perceived as failing to carry their fair share of the collective workload were also the targets of sustained negative gossip. Around this time (that is, just before I started my PhD), I was reading books and articles about evolutionary theories of human behavior. I had recently discovered the concept of *counter-dominance behavior* in the work of anthropologist Christopher Boehm (1999). Boehm (1999) contends that humans have evolved instincts to constrain the social power of dominant, overbearing group members, and proposes that one way such instincts manifest is through gossip. In egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, Boehm (1999) reports, subordinate group members tend to gang up and gossip negatively about high power individuals who are seen to be taking advantage of their exceptional authority and status. Another interesting thread in my reading concerned humans' evolved instincts against free-riding—that is, against the practice of not contributing one's fair share to collective tasks and thus forcing others to pick up the slack (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). As I read more, I discovered that there was even an entire literature about gossip having evolved as a means of discouraging and policing free-riders (Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005).

Curiously, these evolutionary theories aligned quite well with my own observations from hospitality establishments, where the most merciless negative gossip was often directed at high power individuals and at those who didn't appear to be carrying their fair share of the

workload. Thus, I started to entertain the idea that gossip—even though I personally disliked it—was possibly *functional* from the perspective of interdependent social groups.

That was the intellectual spark that started my PhD journey. As the journey progressed, my ideas and theories changed substantially. In the end, I stopped using evolutionary theories to frame my thesis, because they simply didn't support my interpretations of the data. However, given that my thesis adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach—and given that reflexivity is a core component of this methodological approach (Berger, 2015)—it is necessary to tell readers how I started my PhD journey at the outset.

WORKPLACE GOSSIP

What Is Workplace Gossip?

For the purposes of this thesis³, I define workplace gossip as *informal and evaluative communication about another organizational member, or members, who is not directly involved in the communication*. This definition, which is consistent with conceptualizations from both the organizational and wider social science literatures (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Eder & Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Hannerz, 1967; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2018a), incorporates four key features of gossip. First, gossip is about other people, not objects or events (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Thus, it is possible to gossip about one's

³ 3 In Manuscript 2, my empirical paper, I use a modified version of this definition: “Informal and evaluative talk about a coworker (or coworkers) who is not present.” I use this slightly modified definition for two reasons. First, I am specifically interested in face-to-face gossip for my empirical study, in which I focus on gossip taking place in physical work environments that permit regular interpersonal interactions. Consequently, “talk” is more appropriate (and less ambiguous to participants) than “communication.” Second, after consulting with peers and supervisors, I determined that “not present” would be less ambiguous than “not directly involved” for participants. Hence, I switch these terms for my definition in Manuscript 2. Importantly, the definition I use in Manuscript 2 fits within the bounds of the conceptually broader definition I use in my review and theory development papers, where I implicitly acknowledge that gossip may also take visual and textual forms (Waddington, 2012).

manager buying a new sportscar, but it is not possible to gossip about the sportscar itself. This characteristic of gossip distinguishes it from rumors, which can be about other people, objects, *or* events and are defined by their *speculative* nature (Mills, 2010; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Second, gossip must be about a person (or persons) not directly involved in the conversation (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Foster, 2004). The expression “We’re talking *about* you, not *to* you” captures this characteristic of gossip. Third, gossip is evaluative: It necessarily casts some sort of positive or negative judgement on its target (Foster, 2004). Such judgements can be explicit (e.g., “David is so annoying in meetings”) or implicit (e.g., “David interrupted me three times during that meeting”). Lastly, gossip is informal, taking place outside an organization’s official channels of communication. This characteristic of gossip is especially important in workplace contexts, where there is typically a division between official and unofficial forms of communication (Brady et al., 2017; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Thus, an official announcement that an employee is under investigation for sexual harassment is not gossip, whereas unofficial discussion about the same employee sending sexually explicit text messages is gossip.

It is worth noting that some scholars may not fully agree with the definition of workplace gossip used in this thesis. Even after decades of debate, gossip remains a slippery and contested term that is difficult to pin down with an exact definition (Adkins, 2017; Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010). Consequently, the four features of workplace gossip included in my definition do not necessarily align with those cited in all definitions. For example, certain researchers hold that workplace gossip can be about events and issues in an organization, such as restructurings or celebrations, as well as about other organizational members (Waddington, 2012). Others propose an additional feature of gossip, contending that gossip necessarily occurs in a context of interpersonal intimacy (Adkins, 2017). Nonetheless, the four features of gossip captured in my definition align with the four most

common characteristics of gossip identified in a systematic review of 6,114 peer-reviewed articles on gossip from the cross-disciplinary literature (Dores Cruz et al., 2021).

Another potentially controversial aspect of the way I write about gossip in this thesis relates to my conceptualization of the *gossip triad*. Following scholars from across disciplines (Bai, Li, Wang, & Chen, 2020; Bergmann, 1993; Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Hannerz, 1967; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), I hold that gossip involves a triad of actors: the gossipers, who send the gossip message; the gossip recipients, who receive the message; and the gossip target, whom the message is about. As communications scholars will note, describing the dynamics of the gossip triad in this way implies that I am adopting a *transmission* model of organizational communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The transmission model views communication as an act whereby one entity *sends* information to another entity. During an instance of workplace gossip, for example, an employee (the gossipers) might send evaluative information about a manager (the gossip target) to a coworker (the gossip recipients). While noise and other factors may interfere with the effective transmission and reception of the information contained in gossip, the transmission model assumes that the gossip message simply transmits information about some aspect of an already established social reality. Thus, the transmission model portrays organizational communication in all its various forms—including gossip—as a *conduit* for sending and receiving information about pre-established social realities (Axley, 1984).

The transmission model has been criticized by scholars adopting a *constitutive* perspective of organizational communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Fan, Grey, & Kärreman, 2020). From the constitutive perspective—which has been dubbed *communicative constitution of organizations* (CCO)—communication is not simply a conduit for sending and receiving information about the pre-formed social realities of organizations. Rather, communication is a process through which

the social realities of organizations are established, altered, negotiated, and otherwise *constituted* (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011). The CCO perspective thus acknowledges communication as playing a much more powerful role in shaping the realities of organizational life than does the transmission model. Specifically, the CCO perspective proposes that communication constitutes organizing and thus the organization, rather than being simply a tool for doing things in organizations (Cooren et al., 2011).

Ostensibly, my focus on the gossip triad—which adopts the sender-recipient terminology associated with the transmission model—suggests that I am underplaying the role of gossip in *shaping* the social realities of organizations. However, I continue to employ this terminology for two reasons. First, I want to contribute to knowledge on how the workplace gossip triad works, and the dominant way of conceptualizing the triad continues to use the transmission-based terminology of sender (or gossiper), recipient, and target (Bai et al., 2020; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Lee & Barnes, 2021). Second, as discussed in the methodology section of this introductory chapter, I am interested in investigating people’s *commonsense* experiences of workplace gossip (Gephart, 2018). Given that the conduit metaphor of the transmission model is intuitively understood by general audiences (i.e., by non-experts in organizational communication) (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Axley, 1984), describing gossip as a form of communication involving a sender, recipient, and target allows me to communicate to the research participants using a framework they are familiar with.

Why Is It Important to Understand Workplace Gossip?

Following other scholars (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Michelson et al., 2010; Waddington, 2012), I contend that understanding workplace gossip is important because gossip serves critical social functions that have a substantive bearing on employee and organizational outcomes. Although organizational scholars traditionally dismissed gossip as unproductive or counterproductive (Noon & Delbridge, 1993), recent

research demonstrates that gossip fulfils a range of functions in the workplace—some positive, others negative. On the more positive side, workplace gossip provides social information that can reduce uncertainty and ambiguity (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2019b; Mills, 2010); enables individuals to express and validate their emotions (Brady et al., 2017; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005); serves as a group-level means of social control (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Vaidyanathan, Khalsa, & Ecklund, 2016); and is associated with the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012a; Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012c; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). On the more negative side, workplace gossip serves to bully and ostracize (Einarsen, Notelaers, & Hoel, 2009; Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2011); engenders employee cynicism (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015); and undermines the likeability of those who engage in it excessively (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010; Farley, 2011). Thus, there is evidence that workplace gossip engenders both positive and negative outcomes. My thesis is that understanding why workplace gossip engenders such varied outcomes requires in-depth knowledge of how gossip shapes the informal organization.

THE INFORMAL ORGANIZATION

What Is the Informal Organization?

For the purposes of this thesis, I define the informal organization as the *set of emergent social structures in an organization that coexist alongside the organization's formal structures* (Bittner, 1965; De Toni & Nonino, 2010; Gulati & Punaram, 2009; McEvily et al., 2014; Reif et al., 1973). Accordingly, the key features of the informal organization are that it *emerges* through social interactions between organizational members (Pierce & White, 2006) and that it is *not officially recognized* as part of the formal organization (Bittner, 1965; Bittner, 1974; De Toni & Nonino, 2010; McEvily et al., 2014).

Embedded in the emergent social structures of the informal organization are many phenomena of interest to organizational scholars: the unwritten rules of group norms (Feldman, 1984; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015), interpersonal relationships and power dynamics that go beyond official positions (Lamertz & Aquino, 2004; Methot, Rosado-Solomon, & Allen, 2018; Morrison, 2004), and forms of communication that leave no trace in official documents (Fan et al., 2020; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Sosa et al., 2015). Krackhardt and Hanson (1993, p. 105) evocatively describe the informal organization as “the company behind the charts.” Thus, whereas the formal organization is embodied in official policies and procedures, in hierarchical relationships and documented channels of communication, the informal organization exists solely in the unmanaged spaces of organizations (Gabriel, 1995; McEvily et al., 2014; Sosa et al., 2015).

It is important to note that there is not always a clear separation between the formal and informal aspects of organizational life (McEvily et al., 2014; Mills, 2010). The formal-informal distinction in organizations is artificial and often blurry. What I label the *informal organization* is in fact a web of interdependent social phenomena—including culture, climate, relationships, and communication—that is inherently linked to and embedded in the web of interdependent social phenomena which scholars call the *formal organization* (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Mills, 2010). In saying that, the formal-informal distinction *is* useful and worthwhile maintaining from an interpretive researcher’s perspective if it describes an important feature of people’s *commonsense* experiences of organizations (Gephart, 2018). And while the formal-informal boundary may not always be clear (McEvily et al., 2014) because formal and informal organizational processes can be embedded in each other (Mills, 2021), decades of research suggests this distinction does capture an important aspect of what it means to be an organizational member (Bittner, 1965; Farris, 1981;

Feldman, 1984; French & Raven, 1959; Gulati & Punaram, 2009; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Methot et al., 2018; Morrison, 2004; Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004).

Why Is It Important to Understand the Informal Organization?

Understanding how the informal organization emerges and operates can provide unparalleled insights into what really goes on in organizations. Although outside attention tends to focus on the formal side of organizations—the side captured in official press releases, for instance—research suggests the informal organization is equally important for employee wellbeing and organizational performance (Farris, 1981; Methot et al., 2018; Oh et al., 2004). Indeed, the news media implicitly acknowledge the importance of the informal organization each time they report on an unsanctioned workplace relationship (Bayer, 2015), allegations of sexual harassment by a firm’s senior staff (Johnston, 2020), or workplace accidents stemming from a dangerous company culture (Block, 2020). These highly impactful phenomena are integral to people’s experiences within organizations. However, the formal organization reveals little about such phenomena until news of them erupts as scandal, often prompting an official investigation (e.g., Davenport, 2021). Before then, individuals’ experiences provide the only source of information about what really happens in the informal organization.

Therefore, investigating people’s experiences of the informal organization seems imperative for improving workplace relationships, behavior, and culture. Organizational members who are aware of the informal organization can better recognize how their own behavior shapes it. Consultants who understand the informal organization can provide guidance on how to manage it. In turn, better awareness and management of the informal organization is likely to engender favorable outcomes for organizations and their members. While the examples in the previous paragraph highlight adverse consequences of the informal organization, scholars recognize that the informal organization is also associated with a range

of positive outcomes, which enable flexible and efficient forms of cooperation and coordination (De Toni & Nonino, 2010). Thus, proactive management of the informal organization may not only prevent negative outcomes such as workplace harassment and accidents but enhance positive outcomes including interpersonal trust and knowledge sharing (De Toni & Nonino, 2010; McAllister, 1995; Oh et al., 2004). In sum, researchers, practitioners, and organizational members would all benefit from a better understanding of the informal organization.

Gaining insight into the informal organization is not straightforward, however. As early investigators noted, the informal organization does not exist in structured, programmatic ways that lend themselves to objective investigation by outsiders (Bittner, 1965). Rather, it emerges through everyday interactions between people sharing their experiences of organizational contexts. Consequently, I propose that advancing knowledge on the informal organization requires exploration of how people experience the interactions and behaviors that underpin its emergence in real-world situations. In this thesis, I argue that workplace gossip provides an illuminating example of a behavior that underpins and shapes the informal organization.

WORKPLACE GOSSIP AND THE INFORMAL ORGANIZATION

As an unsanctioned form of communication—one that leaves no trace in official documents—workplace gossip belongs to the informal organization (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). However, extant research reveals little about how the informal organization emerges through individuals' *experiences* of workplace gossip (Mills, 2010). The limited research that does address the links between gossip and the informal organization does so *implicitly*, suggesting (but not elaborating) associations between gossip and elements of the informal organization such as informal interpersonal relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et

al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). For example, some studies indicate that relationship quality affects the type of gossip that coworkers exchange (e.g., positive versus negative; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010), while another study reports that gossiping supports the development of friendships between coworkers (Ellwardt et al., 2012a). Importantly, while such research implies that gossip is associated with informal interpersonal relationships—a key element of the informal organization—it does not explicitly elaborate how such relationships develop through individuals' experiences of gossip. Thus, it remains unclear how gossip might shape key elements of the informal organization.

OVERARCHING AIMS

This thesis has three overarching aims. The individual manuscripts in the thesis also have their own specific aims, research questions, and intended contributions, which I discuss below in the subsection entitled “Manuscripts and Research Questions.” The first overarching aim of the thesis is *to advance knowledge on the specific ways in which workplace gossip shapes elements of the informal organization*. This aim is important for the reasons discussed in the preceding subsection, the most salient of which is that there is little explicit understanding of how gossip shapes specific elements of the informal organization.

The second overarching aim of the thesis is *to identify and elaborate interdependencies between the key social functions of workplace gossip*. As noted earlier, gossip fulfils multiple social functions in organizations (Brady et al., 2017). Moreover, an emerging consensus suggests that the three key social functions of gossip are information, influence, and bonding (Martinescu et al., 2019b). However, scholars are yet to provide a comprehensive account of the ways in which these three functions are interdependent. Consequently, researchers tend to study the functions of workplace gossip in isolation, drawing on disconnected theories to explain how gossip engenders discrete outcomes in specific contexts (e.g., Kuo et al., 2015; Kuo, Wu, & Lin, 2018; Tassiello, Lombardi, & Costabile, 2018). For example, Kuo et al. (2018) draw on regulatory focus theory to explain why positive gossip serves a bonding function in supervisor-subordinate dyads, engendering positive outcomes such as developing leader-member exchange relationships. I suggest that relying on relatively narrow theoretical perspectives—such as regulatory focus theory—to explain the bonding function of gossip limits researchers’ ability to link this function to the other functions of gossip, such as information and influence. Therefore, I aim to provide a more comprehensive and integrative understanding of gossip’s social functions by delineating their interdependencies. Specifically, I contend that the primary function of gossip is to

communicate social information and that such information, in turn, shapes behavior (via the *influence* function of gossip) and relationships (via gossip's *bonding* function).

The third overarching aim of the thesis is *to illuminate the recipient's perspective of workplace gossip*. The recipient is the member of the gossip triad who receives a message about the gossip target from the gossiper (Michelson et al., 2010). As such, the recipient is the person who interprets and responds to the social information communicated by gossip. Nevertheless, scholars have only recently begun to acknowledge the role of the recipient in shaping the outcomes of gossip (Bai et al., 2020; Kuo et al., 2018; Lee & Barnes, 2021). Importantly, while this limited research provides interesting insights, it is either purely conceptual (Lee & Barnes, 2021) or focused exclusively on recipient responses to gossip from supervisors (Bai et al., 2020; Kuo et al., 2018). Therefore, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of (a) how individuals interpret gossip as a source of social information and (b) how such interpretations of gossip shape relationships and behavior in organizations, it seems imperative to investigate the recipient's perspective of workplace gossip. Additionally, examining the recipient's perspective contributes to a more complete picture of how the gossip triad operates, which is important given that most extant research takes the perspective of either the gossiper (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Tassiello et al., 2018; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005) or gossip target (e.g., Ellwardt, Wittek, & Labianca, 2012b; Shallcross et al., 2011; Tian, Song, Kwan, & Li, 2019; Wu et al., 2018a; Xing, Xia, Zhao, & Lan, 2021).

MANUSCRIPTS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Addressing the overarching aims of my thesis resulted in three individual manuscripts. As described below, each manuscript is motivated by an overarching research question and makes multiple contributions to the literature.

Manuscript 1: Review Paper

This integrative review paper addresses the following overarching research question: “*How does workplace gossip shape the informal organization?*” In turn, this overarching research question incorporates three implicit, subordinate research questions:

1. What are the social functions of workplace gossip?
2. What are the key elements of the informal organization?
3. How do the social functions of gossip shape the key elements of the informal organization?

To address these research questions, Manuscript 1 integrates cross-disciplinary research to provide an integrative framework for understanding the social functions of gossip. It highlights interdependencies between these functions and demonstrates how they shape key elements of the informal organization, as identified in the organizational and sociological literature. In doing so, Manuscript 1 makes three principal contributions. First, it provides a more integrative understanding of the functions of workplace gossip. Second, it explicitly links the functions of gossip to discrete elements of the informal organization. Third, it proposes that gossip’s influence on the informal organization is the critical mechanism whereby gossip engenders a range of positive and negative outcomes in organizations.

Manuscript 2: Empirical Paper

This empirical paper investigates how workplace gossip shapes informal interpersonal relationships—a key element of the informal organization. The specific research question addressed in the paper is: “*How do gossip recipients’ responses to workplace gossip incidents shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets?*” As this research question suggests, Manuscript 2 takes the perspective of the gossip recipient to explore the relational outcomes of workplace gossip. More specifically, the paper implements a qualitative research design to induce theory on how recipients’ experiences of positive and negative workplace

gossip shape their relationships with the other members of the gossip triad. Thus, the contributions of Manuscript 2 are as follows. First, the paper elaborates the nuanced processes whereby positive and negative workplace gossip shapes interpersonal relationships. Second, it provides a comprehensive account of how gossip shapes relationships across the gossip triad by examining the relational outcomes of gossip incidents vis-à-vis both recipient-gossiper and recipient-target relationships. Third, Manuscript 2 underscores the important role of the recipient in the triad by demonstrating how recipients' responses to gossip incidents shape relational outcomes, which, in turn, shape the informal organization.

Manuscript 3: Theory Development Paper

The third and final manuscript in my thesis builds on empirical findings from Manuscript 2 to further enhance knowledge of how recipients' interpretations of gossip shape its relational and behavioral outcomes. The overarching research question in this conceptual paper is: "*How do recipients' interpretations of workplace gossip shape their relationships and behavior?*" I adopt a novel perspective to address this question, drawing on identity research to propose that recipients' identities serve as lenses for the interpretation of gossip. As such, I address two secondary research questions in Manuscript 3:

1. How do recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their personal, relational, and social identities?
2. How do identity-based interpretations of gossip shape recipients' relationships with, and behavior toward, gossipers and gossipers' wider social collectives?

In addressing these research questions, Manuscript 3 contributes in three ways. First, it extends knowledge of how individuals interpret gossip and, by extension, how such interpretations shape relationships and behavior. Second, it sheds further light on the gossip recipient's role as an interpreter of social information. Third, it merges two previously

unconnected bodies of research—that on workplace gossip and that on identities in organizations—to illustrate how these phenomena interact to shape the informal organization.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND ASSUMPTIONS

In this subsection, I introduce the methodological approach and assumptions that inform my research. As noted earlier, the overarching aims of my research require that I understand how people experience gossip in real-life organizational contexts. Thus, it is imperative that I implement a design that reveals the rich details of people’s experiences of workplace gossip (Beuving & de Vries, 2015; Gephart, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this reason, my empirical study employs a qualitative, inductive research design to understand how recipients’ experiences of workplace gossip shape their interpersonal relationships. I detail the specific data collection and analysis methods of this study in Manuscript 2. Here, I briefly discuss my research paradigm, which captures the methodological and philosophical assumptions that inform the overall design of the study.

Multiple paradigms exist for conducting social scientific research (Beuving & de Vries, 2015; Gephart, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A paradigm is a “basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Consequently, it is important that researchers identify a paradigm that aligns not only with their research aims and methods, but with their underlying assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology). I situate my research in the paradigm that Gephart (2018) calls *interpretive social science*. This paradigm occupies a middle ground between the more commonly known paradigms of positivism and constructivism (Gephart, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, it aligns well with the epistemological and ontological assumptions that inform my research.

Interpretive social science is defined by Gephart (2018, p. 3) as “research that systematically constructs scientific theory and concepts (knowledge) as ‘second-order’ interpretations based on inductive and abductive analysis of members’ actual commonsense or ‘first-order’ concepts and actions and meanings.” Such research aims to produce practically useful and testable knowledge that privileges and preserves the commonsense meanings that social actors ascribe to their own experiences of social reality (Gephart, 2018). Interpretive social science differs from other forms of interpretive research (e.g., constructivist research and critical inquiry) (Bhattacharya, 2008) in that it aims to produce broadly applicable *scientific theory*, which includes testable propositions about the nature of social reality (Gephart, 2018). However, interpretive social science aligns with other interpretive approaches—and therefore differs from *positivist* research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994)—in that it privileges the meanings that social actors themselves ascribe to their experiences of social reality over the meanings imposed by an outside researcher (Gephart, 2018). Thus, the epistemological assumptions of interpretive social science are more subjectivist than objectivist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), because it views knowledge as stemming from agreement between participants and researchers about what constitutes social reality. On the other hand, the ontological assumptions of interpretive social science are more in line with critical realism than relativism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), because it aims to derive abstract understandings of social reality that can be tested across diverse cultural and historical contexts (Gephart, 2018).

The interpretive social science approach is well suited to the aims of my empirical research. As noted earlier, the purpose of this research is to develop theory regarding how interpersonal relationships are shaped by people’s experiences of workplace gossip. Consequently, I need an approach that (a) reveals the details of how people experience the relational outcomes of gossip in real-world organizational contexts and (b) enables me to

develop abstract theory based on people's commonsense understandings of these experiences. Interpretive social science suits these purposes for two reasons. First, it privileges the commonsense meanings that social actors themselves ascribe to their experiences of organizational life. Second, it assumes that these meanings provide an empirical basis for developing abstract theory. Therefore, when I ask participants about how workplace gossip affects their interpersonal relationships, I assume that their responses reveal a commonsense logic that provides the basis for inducing transferable theory. I expand on the specific ways in which the interpretive social science paradigm informs my research process in the Preface to Chapter 3/ Manuscript 2.

Another important aspect of my methodological approach is reflexivity. Many scholars hold that *reflexivity* is a core component of qualitative research, especially qualitative research adopting an interpretivist approach (Berger, 2015; Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001). Reflexivity can be defined as "continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation" about how the researcher's positionality may affect the outcomes of research (Berger, 2015, p. 220). In other words, reflexivity is about acknowledging the researcher's own subjective role in generating knowledge. Reflexivity is particularly important for interpretivist research because such research is self-consciously based on the researcher's subjective interpretations of data. I expand on the reflexive aspects on my own research in the Preface to Manuscript 2, Chapter 3.

THESIS LAYOUT

I structure the thesis as follows. The present chapter, Chapter 1, has introduced the background, overarching aims, research questions, intended contributions, and methodological and philosophical assumptions of the thesis. Chapter 2 presents my literature review, which is also my first manuscript. Chapter 3 describes the empirical research that

constitutes my second manuscript. Chapter 4 presents my third manuscript, a theory development paper, which builds on findings from the preceding empirical study. I introduce my three manuscript chapters, Chapters 2 – 4, with a brief Preface that links each manuscript to the overall thesis. Chapter 5 is my General Discussion, where I consider how my three papers address to my overarching aims, and Chapter 6 presents the theoretical and practical implications of my research then concludes with some final reflections.

Chapter 2/ Manuscript 1 – Information, Influence, and Bonding: How the Functions of Workplace Gossip Shape the Informal Organization

PREFACE

Manuscript 1 sets the scene for the remainder of my thesis. The paper implements an integrative review of cross-disciplinary gossip research to develop a framework for linking the interdependent social functions of gossip to key elements of the informal organization. Thus, Manuscript 1 primarily addresses my first and second overarching aims: (1) to advance knowledge on how gossip shapes the informal organization and (2) to elaborate interdependencies between the social functions of gossip. The evidence for my framework comes from a review of the wider social science literature on gossip. I integrate this literature with research on the informal organization. By synthesizing evidence from these two complementary areas of inquiry, I highlight what can be inferred from current evidence regarding how workplace gossip shapes the informal organization. More importantly, I also reveal what would be useful to investigate regarding the links between these two phenomena in future research. In the manuscript itself, I focus largely on presenting the evidence from my literature review without going into the method. Therefore, in this Preface, I provide a rationale for, and brief description of, the search process I used in my literature review.

Literature reviews are a crucial method for synthesizing existing evidence and developing novel theoretical perspectives on a topic. The search processes involved in conducting literature reviews vary considerably depending on the type of review one undertakes (Snyder, 2019). For systematic reviews and meta-analyses, search processes must be highly structured and follow strict reporting guidelines (e.g., Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009), whereas for integrative and narrative reviews, a loosely structured search process typically suffices (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The degree of structure suitable for

a particular review depends on a range of factors, including the purpose of the review, the maturity of the topic, and the distribution of published research within or across disciplines (Snyder, 2019).

The purpose of my review paper was to develop a novel framework by integrating evidence from the wider social science literature on gossip with research on the informal organization. As such, I employed a loosely structured search process to find the articles, books, and book chapters I reviewed. This search strategy was appropriate not only because my primary purpose was integration, but also because the literature I reviewed was scattered across multiple disciplines and time periods (Snyder, 2019). In specific terms, my search process started with running keyword searches in Google Scholar, Business Source Complete (EBSCO), and Scopus. My keywords were “workplace gossip” and “organizational gossip.” Reading the articles that these searches yielded enabled me to identify important gossip papers from not only within the organizational literature (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010; Noon & Delbridge, 1993), but also from *outside* that literature. For example, many organizational scholars cite the psychologist Foster (2004), whose taxonomy of gossip draws on cross-disciplinary research. Thus, reading Foster (2004) enabled me to identify seminal papers in disciplines including anthropology (Gluckman, 1963), sociology (Eder & Enke, 1991), communication studies (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), and evolutionary psychology (Dunbar, 2004). In turn, reading these papers led me to other seminal papers from the same disciplines. I also used the “Cited By” function in Google Scholar to find more up-to-date gossip papers across disciplines. In the end, my search process yielded a broad body of cross-disciplinary gossip research, which forms the evidential basis of the framework I develop in Manuscript 1.

ABSTRACT

Researchers increasingly recognize that gossip fulfils important social functions in organizations yet lack a clear understanding of how these functions are interrelated and interdependent. Moreover, although prior studies associate workplace gossip with a range of positive and negative outcomes, scholars are yet to develop a comprehensive picture of the mechanisms linking gossip to such outcomes. To redress these gaps, we develop an integrative framework that (a) reorganizes the social functions of gossip into an interdependent hierarchy and (b) shows how the functions of gossip engender outcomes by shaping the informal organization. More specifically, we propose that the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information and that such information enables two secondary functions of gossip: influence and bonding. We demonstrate how the information, influence, and bonding functions of gossip shape three key elements of the informal organization—interpersonal relationships, culture and climate, and power and status dynamics—as well as outcomes associated with each element. Our framework is informed by a cross-disciplinary review of gossip research, drawing on evidence from organization studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communication studies. By integrating this wider gossip literature with research on the informal organization, we advance knowledge in both areas. We conclude by discussing specific ideas for future research.

Keywords: Workplace gossip; functions of gossip; informal organization; integrative review; cross-disciplinary research.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers' views of workplace gossip—defined in this paper as informal and evaluative communication about another organizational member(s) who is not directly involved in the communication (Brady et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2018a)—are changing. Traditionally, management scholars dismissed gossip as unworthy of serious attention, assuming the behavior was either unproductive or counterproductive—something to be managed out of organizations (e.g., Daily, 2018; Kuo et al., 2015; Lewis & Roth, 2019; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Over the past two and a half decades, some scholars have challenged these assumptions and, inspired by research from the wider social science literature, started to reconceptualize workplace gossip in a way that allows for investigation of its positive functions, as well as its widely acknowledged negative ones (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Tassiello et al., 2018). The present paper embraces this more balanced view of workplace gossip and develops an integrative framework that encompasses both the positive and negative functions of this ubiquitous behavior.

Despite progress, organizational scholars' understanding of *how* gossip functions in the workplace remains limited and fragmented, lagging behind research in fields such as psychology and anthropology (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Gambetta, 1994; Gluckman, 1963; Wert & Salovey, 2004). While there is some agreement on *what* the predominant functions of workplace gossip are (Martinescu et al., 2019b), there is little consensus on how these functions are interrelated and interdependent. Moreover, although prior research indicates associations between workplace gossip and a range of impactful outcomes—for example, employee cynicism and workplace friendships (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Kuo et al., 2015)—scholars are yet to develop a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms linking gossip to such outcomes. Consequently, workplace gossip research remains fragmented at the theoretical level, with scholars relying on

relatively narrow theoretical frameworks to link disparate functions of gossip to specific outcomes (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Guo, Gong, Li, & Liang, 2021; Kim, Moon, & Shin, 2019; Kuo et al., 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to develop an integrative framework that shows (a) how the functions of workplace gossip are interrelated and interdependent and (b) how the functions of gossip engender outcomes by shaping key elements of the informal organization. We start by briefly reviewing research on workplace gossip. We note how scholarly perspectives of workplace gossip are changing and argue that researching gossip provides a novel means of investigating the informal organization. We then enumerate and explain the three predominant functions that gossip serves across human social settings: information, influence, and bonding. Our categorization of gossip's functions draws on cross-disciplinary research (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Martinescu et al., 2019b) yet extends such research by reorganizing the functions of gossip into an interdependent hierarchy. Next, we develop an integrative framework for understanding how the functions of gossip shape the informal organization. Specifically, we demonstrate that gossip shapes three key elements of the informal organization—interpersonal relationships, culture and climate, and power and status dynamics—and link these elements to a range of positive and negative outcomes. Finally, we discuss possibilities for future research based on the ideas developed in the paper.

Our paper makes three contributions to the organizational literature. First, we extend understanding of the social functions of workplace gossip. In particular, we contend that the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information and that the influence and bonding functions of gossip are inextricably linked to this information function. Thus, we provide an integrative, interdependent explanation of the functions of gossip, which are typically catalogued as discrete and independent in existing research (Brady et al., 2017; Foster, 2004). Second, we broaden knowledge regarding how gossip engenders both positive

and negative outcomes in organizations. Our contention that gossip engenders outcomes by influencing key elements of the informal organization helps explain why gossip can have varied impacts in organizations, ranging from positive through negative (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2021; Kuo et al., 2015). For example, we demonstrate that gossip can communicate and reinforce either constructive or counterproductive group-level norms, thus engendering positive or negative outcomes from the organization's perspective. Finally, we advance research on the informal organization. We argue that key elements of the informal organization, such as power dynamics and interpersonal relationships, are shaped by people's experiences of workplace gossip. As such, we suggest that researching gossip may provide novel insights into how the informal organization emerges, which is important given that scholars frequently acknowledge the importance of the informal organization (De Toni & Nonino, 2010; Methot et al., 2018) yet rarely identify the specific interpersonal behaviors that shape and sustain it.

WORKPLACE GOSSIP

Changing Perspectives on Workplace Gossip

In both the popular and scholarly management literatures, authors traditionally characterize gossip as an undesirable workplace behavior—something to be managed out of organizations (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2009; Lewis & Roth, 2019; Lipman, 2016). This is not surprising given that the sociocultural connotations of the label *gossip* are generally pejorative. To most, gossip suggests a form of communication that is negative, trivial, and prying (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Wikipedia's definition of gossip captures this popular view, which is now contested in the literature, as discussed below: "Gossip is idle talk or rumor, especially about the personal or private affairs of others; the act is also known as dishing or tattling" (Wikipedia, 2021).

Subscribing to the popular view of gossip, management researchers frequently focus on gossip's negativity. For example, Einarsen et al. (2009) list gossip as an item on their negative workplace acts questionnaire, a measure of workplace bullying. The implication of classifying gossip as a negative act is that gossip has no positive elements, functions, or outcomes. Similarly, Robinson and Bennett (1995) categorize gossip as a type of interpersonal deviance, while Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere, and Tripp (2013) depict gossip as a means of retaliation. Baker and Jones (1996, p. 75) go so far as to describe gossip and rumor in organizations as "the poison grapevine." In all these instances, researchers characterize gossip as inherently negative.

An alternative perspective on workplace gossip has emerged in the last two and a half decades, as scholars have noted that characterizing workplace gossip as inherently negative limits our understanding of the phenomenon. Noon and Delbridge (1993) were the first management researchers to promote a more balanced view of gossip, acknowledging that gossip has both positive and negative attributes. Recently, a growing number of scholars have built on their work, challenging traditional characterizations of workplace gossip and suggesting that gossip can have benefits as well as drawbacks for organizations (Brady et al., 2017; Michelson et al., 2010; Tassiello et al., 2018; Waddington, 2012).

The work of Kathryn Waddington is an eminent example of this emerging view (Michelson et al., 2010; van Iterson, Waddington, & Michelson, 2011; Waddington, 2005, 2012, 2016; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Waddington (2012) has not only helped overturn the assumption that gossip is a deviant behavior; she has also advanced the notion that workplace gossip may be a core component of the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO). From this perspective, gossip is not merely a means of communicating *about* the social realities of organizations. The CCO perspective asserts that gossip helps *constitute* the social realities of organizations (Fan et al., 2020; Waddington, 2012). In her

work, Waddington shows how gossip shapes workplace emotions, power relations, and identities, among other phenomena (Waddington, 2012). Her empirical research has charted new methodological territory (Waddington, 2005) and highlighted the links between gossip and emotion in the nursing profession, showing that nurses view gossip as a key way of expressing and validating their emotions (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Drawing on anthropological work, Waddington (2016) also makes a case that gossip and scandal can play a functional role in healthcare organizations, even from the perspective of management. In healthcare organizations, management typically only pays attention to gossip when it erupts as scandal. Yet Waddington (2016) contends that by paying attention to the social realities constituted in gossip, management could identify problems before they turn into scandals.

Redefining Workplace Gossip

Arguably the most important step in overturning traditional assumptions about workplace gossip is to provide a balanced definition of the phenomenon (Brady et al., 2017; Michelson et al., 2010; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). As Noon and Delbridge (1993) note, if one wants to study gossip seriously, one must look past the pejorative sociocultural connotations attached to the label *gossip*. Hence, scholars have drawn on the wider gossip literature to inform their definitions of workplace gossip (Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Following this tradition, we define workplace gossip as *informal and evaluative communication about another organizational member(s) who is not directly involved in the communication*. This definition, which is consistent with cross-disciplinary conceptualizations (Brady et al., 2017; Eder & Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Hannerz, 1967), captures four key features of gossip. First, gossip is about other people, not objects or events. Second, gossip is evaluative: It necessarily casts judgement on the person it is about, either explicitly or implicitly. Third, the person gossip is

about must either not be present or not be directly involved in the conversation. Fourth, in workplace contexts, gossip is informal, taking place outside the organization's official channels of communication.

Taken together, these four features provide a precise yet balanced conceptualization of workplace gossip. Importantly, our definition does *not* specify the valence of the judgements cast by gossip, despite the pejorative connotations attached to the term (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Thus, in our definition, gossip is just as likely to communicate positive or negative information about another person. Moreover, our definition does not mention whether the information conveyed by gossip is speculative or verified. This is important to note given that many people conflate gossip with rumor and hearsay, assuming that gossip is always unverified (Wikipedia, 2021). In contrast, scholars recognize a distinction between gossip and rumor—namely, that rumor must be speculative and can be about people, objects, or events, whereas gossip can be speculative or verified but must be about people (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Thus, while some gossip overlaps with rumor (e.g., speculative gossip about a manager abusing company expenses for personal travel), a large portion of gossip is distinct from rumor (Mills, 2010).

Another important aspect of our definition is that it covers certain types of digitally mediated gossip—a type of gossip that is likely to be a focus for future research (Adkins, 2017). We use the word *communication* (Wu et al., 2018a) instead of *talk* (Brady et al., 2017) to acknowledge that some workplace gossip may now take place via channels including online meetings (e.g., Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and messaging apps (e.g., Whatsapp and Viver) (Adkins, 2017). In saying that, we also acknowledge that the evidence for our review comes largely from empirical research investigating the functions of *face-to-face* gossip.

To highlight the specific types of workplace gossip potentially covered by our definition, it is worth considering what the literature says regarding that key differences

between digitally mediated gossip and face-to-face gossip. To start, digitally mediated gossip leaves a digital trace; virtual meetings are frequently recorded, while emails and other forms of text message are stored for months (or longer) after they are sent (Quinn, 2020). This facet of digital gossip distinguishes it from face-to-face gossip in two ways. First, digital gossip's traceability potentially makes it higher risk than face-to-face gossip, especially if it communicates negative or controversial information about its target (Adkins, 2017). Second, the confirmability of digital gossip means that the information it communicates can potentially be used as evidence against its target, amplifying some of gossip's functions including social control (Gabriels & De Backer, 2016).

Next, digital gossip potentially has a less specific audience (or recipient) than face-to-face gossip (Adkins, 2017). Social information posted on social media sites is often visible to a broad audience (Okazaki, Rubio, & Campo, 2014), and this aspect of communicating via social media breaks down the private-public distinction inherent in face-to-face communication (Ford, 2011). Scholars traditionally viewed gossip as private communication (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), yet the advent of social media raises the possibility of gossip being broadcast to a wider, more public audience, much as printed gossip about celebrities is (Adkins, 2017).

The final noteworthy feature of digitally mediated gossip is its potential to enable anonymous gossip—that is, gossip from an unnamed source (Adkins, 2017). In its face-to-face forms, the recipient of gossip always knows the identity of the gossiper. Yet online—and especially on social media sites—the source of gossip is not always clear (Okazaki et al., 2014). Consequently, digital gossip may encourage unscrupulous individuals to spread destructive forms gossip, tarnishing the reputations of targets unnecessarily, because they can remain anonymous in doing so.

The three features of digitally mediated gossip—greater traceability, higher audience reach, and anonymity—mean that such gossip deserves a separate treatment from face-to-face gossip. Our definition of workplace gossip does not cover digitally mediated gossip that takes place in public domains because our definition implies that workplace gossip is from one organizational member to another. For the same reason, our definition does not cover anonymous digital gossip. Our definition does potentially cover workplace gossip that leaves a digital trace—making the definition suitable for future research in this area—although the focus of our review, and the evidence for it, remain on face-to-face workplace gossip.

A Functional Workplace Behavior?

Reconceptualizing workplace gossip has raised the question of whether gossip is a functional or dysfunctional workplace behavior (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 2015; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Shallcross et al., 2011). On the one hand, an emerging body of evidence supports the notion that gossip is functional because it fulfills beneficial roles in organizations. For example, gossip serves as an outlet for individual emotions (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005); provides information that reduces workplace uncertainty (Brady et al., 2017; Mills, 2010); supports the maintenance and development of close relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Grosser et al., 2010); and facilitates group-level social control (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, 2010; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016). On the other hand, there is continuing evidence that gossip is dysfunctional because it is associated with detrimental outcomes including employee cynicism (Kuo et al., 2015) and bullying and ostracism (Einarsen et al., 2009; Shallcross et al., 2011).

We suggest that debating whether workplace gossip is functional or dysfunctional misses a critical point—namely, that the same functions of gossip can be functional or dysfunctional depending on whose perspective one takes. To illustrate, negative gossip about an absent third party may be functional from the perspective of those who engage in it

because it reinforces their trust in each other (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). However, the same gossip may be *dysfunctional* from the perspective of the workgroup or organization—not to mention the absent third party—because it creates division between the gossipers and the third party. Therefore, we contend that understanding the impact of gossip in organizations requires a nuanced appreciation of how gossip engenders a range of outcomes that different parties—whether individuals, dyads, groups, or organizations—may simultaneously view as positive or negative. To this end, we develop an integrative framework showing how the broad social functions of gossip engender outcomes by influencing the informal organization.

Gossip and the Informal Organization

The informal organization is the set of emergent social structures in an organization that coexist alongside the formal organization (De Toni & Nonino, 2010). Krackhardt and Hanson (1993, p. 105) evocatively describe the informal organization as “the company behind the chart.” Management scholars have long recognized the value of the informal organization to firm performance, arguing that it enables dynamic and flexible forms of cooperation and coordination that complement the more rigid, top-down approaches of the formal organization (De Toni & Nonino, 2010; Farris, 1981; Gulati & Punaram, 2009). Nevertheless, scholars’ knowledge of the specific behaviors that underpin the informal organization remains limited.

The informal organization comprises a number of interrelated elements, including informal interpersonal relationships (Morrison, 2004; Oh et al., 2004), emergent cultures and climates (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Ashforth, 1985), and unofficial power and status dynamics (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lamertz & Aquino, 2004). Another key element of the informal organization is the grapevine—the set of unofficial communication networks through which social information passes (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Researchers have

previously suggested that informal communication networks provide insight into the structure and operation of the informal organization because they reveal how employees relate to one another on an unofficial level (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). For instance, understanding whom employees go to for informal advice can reveal the most trusted and well-connected individuals in a social network (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). We agree with these scholars that understanding informal communication is critical for gaining insight into the informal organization. However, we go a step further than them and argue that understanding workplace gossip—an important genre of informal communication—can unveil not only interpersonal connections within networks but also other elements of the informal organization, such as emergent culture and climate and unofficial power and status dynamics. In brief, we contend that understanding workplace gossip advances knowledge regarding how the informal organization emerges through interpersonal interactions and communication. To make this argument, we develop an integrative framework linking the functions of gossip to the informal organization's key elements.

Incorporating a Wider View of Gossip

We propose that to understand how gossip functions in organizations, one must first understand how gossip functions across diverse social settings. Our framework is therefore informed by cross-disciplinary research that reveals the functions of gossip across varied social, cultural, and historical contexts. Gossip is a ubiquitous human behavior. Research indicates that people gossip regardless of their sociocultural environment, from Israeli prisons (Einat & Chen, 2012), to remote hunter-gatherer societies (Boehm, 1999), to scientific institutions in the United States and India (Vaidyanathan et al., 2016). Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that children start to gossip by the age of five (Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2016); that gossip is among the most common forms of discretionary interpersonal communication (Dunbar et al., 1997; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996); and that

gossip affects people physiologically (Brondino, Fusar-Poli, & Politi, 2017) and unconsciously (Anderson, Siegel, Barrett, & Bliss-Moreau, 2011). Collectively, research findings suggest that gossip is endemic to human social settings.

The prevalence of gossip across diverse social environments suggests it fulfills important social functions. Consequently, researchers across disciplines have developed taxonomies of the functions of gossip, emphasizing its indispensable role in human social life and suggesting it has both benefits and drawbacks for groups and individuals (Brady et al., 2017; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Gambetta, 1994). To develop a comprehensive understanding of how gossip functions in the workplace, we used these existing taxonomies as a starting point to review cross-disciplinary research on the functions of gossip. Specifically, we reviewed key empirical and conceptual articles on gossip from not only the organizational literature, but also from anthropology, psychology, sociology, and communication studies. We contend that our review of this wider gossip literature provides the basis for an integrative understanding of how gossip functions to shape the informal organization.

HOW GOSSIP SHAPES THE INFORMAL ORGANIZATION: AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

In our framework, gossip serves three interrelated social functions: information, influence, and bonding. As such, the framework is consistent with an emerging consensus on *what* the predominant functions of gossip are (Martinescu et al., 2019b). However, our framework goes beyond existing categorizations by elaborating *how* gossip's information, influence, and bonding functions are interrelated and interdependent. In short, we contend that the overarching function of gossip is to provide social information and that such information, in turn, enables influence and bonding. We explain this argument in the

subsections below, then elaborate how the interrelated functions of gossip shape key elements of the informal organization.

Information

The overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information. Evidence of gossip functioning as information abounds in the wider social science literature (Anderson et al., 2011; Bai et al., 2020; Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Besnier, 1989; Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann Jr, 2006; Feinberg et al., 2012; Hannerz, 1967; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Mills, 2010; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007; Suls, 1977; Szwed, 1966; Wert & Salovey, 2004; Wu, Balliet, & van Lange, 2016a). For example, in a study assessing gossip motivations, psychologists found that the most frequently cited motive to gossip was “information gathering and validation” (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012, pp. 2648-2649). The ethnographic literature also contains many instances in which gossip acts as a source of social information (Besnier, 1989; Gilmore, 1978; Hannerz, 1967; Szwed, 1966). To mention just one example, Szwed (1966, p. 435) observed in a Newfoundland parish that “information flow was maintained by means of gossip and the various techniques surrounding its use”.

The wider literature reveals that gossip communicates three predominant types of social information: information about targets, information about gossipers, and information about a social or cultural group. To understand these types of information, one must first understand the structure of the gossip triad (Bergmann, 1993). The triad involves three actors: The gossipier, who sends the gossip message; the recipient, who receives the message; and the target, whom the message is about. Given this structure, gossip necessarily involves the transfer of information from one person (the gossipier) to a second person (the recipient) about a third person (the target) (Hannerz, 1967).

Consequently, the first and most direct type of social information gossip communicates is information about gossip targets, or information about other individuals within a social environment. Evolutionary theorists posit that such information predominantly concerns targets' trustworthiness (or untrustworthiness) as partners in cooperative endeavors (Dunbar, 2004; Enquist & Leimar, 1993; Feinberg et al., 2012; Fonseca & Peters, 2018; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Wu, Balliet, & van Lange, 2016b). However, the wider literature suggests that gossip also conveys information about many other aspects of targets, including their relative social status, their personalities and habits, their romantic and sexual behaviors, their achievements and failures, and their allegiances and rivalries (Baker & Jones, 1996; Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Bergmann, 1993; Brenneis, 1984; Cox, 1970; Dunbar et al., 1997; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Gambetta, 1994; Hafen, 2004; Hannerz, 1967; Loudon, 1961; Mills, 2010; Szwed, 1966; Watson, 2012). Importantly, information about targets provides the raw material for certain types of social comparison (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Social comparison is the process of comparing aspects of oneself to the same aspects of other people in one's social environment (Festinger, 1954). Scholars posit that gossip facilitates this process by providing sensitive or informal information about the other members of one's social milieu (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). For example, gossip may provide information about the unofficial achievements of a workplace peer, thus enabling the recipient of this information to compare their own achievements to those of the gossip target.

Second, gossip communicates information about gossipers—the people who send the gossip message. The evaluative content of gossip is crucial in this regard. By communicating negative or positive evaluations of other people, gossipers simultaneously communicate information about themselves. This information can be about gossipers' attitudes toward another person (Bosson et al., 2006), their emotions (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005), or their

behavioral expectations and values (Bai et al., 2020). For instance, by gossiping positively about a colleague who often stays late to finish their work, a gossip communicates the notion that they value self-sacrifice and perhaps even expect coworkers to stay late for the good of the organization. Gossip can also communicate information about gossipers' relative power and influence in a social network (Banerjee, Chandrasekhar, Duflo, & Jackson, 2014; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). To illustrate, sharing a lot of gossip indicates that an individual is privy to the inside word on other colleagues and, therefore, occupies a central and potentially influential position in their network.

Finally, gossip communicates information about a social or cultural group. Revealingly, anthropologists see their own inclusion in gossip as a sign that they have become fully immersed in the culture they are studying (Boehm, 1999; Sapolsky, 2017). Thus, from an anthropological perspective, gossip is an indispensable source of sociocultural information. Such information can be about the norms and behavioral expectations of a group (Baumeister et al., 2004) or about a group's values and attitudes (Gluckman, 1963). For example, by gossiping negatively about a workgroup member who took credit for a colleague's work, existing employees can inform newcomers that the norm in their workgroup is to only take credit for one's own work. Importantly, gossip is most effective at communicating such sociocultural information—as opposed to personal information about the gossip—when the gossip is seen as a representative of the wider social or cultural group to which they belong (Baumeister et al., 2004). Thus, in organizational contexts, leaders' gossip may be particularly effective at communicating sociocultural information.

In sum, gossip communicates three interrelated types of social information. We contend that such information is what enables the influence and bonding functions of gossip. Next, we explain and illustrate the influence and bonding functions of gossip and show how they are inextricably linked to the social information that gossip communicates.

Influence

Gossip functions as a means of influence by enabling groups and individuals to shape the behavior of others. There is abundant evidence of gossip serving as a form of influence in the social science literature (Besnier, 1989; Boehm, 1999; Feinberg et al., 2012; Gluckman, 1963; Hafen, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; Paine, 1967; Reynolds, Baumeister, & Maner, 2018; Szwed, 1966; Tassiello et al., 2018; Waddington, 2016; Wu et al., 2016a; Wyckoff, Buss, & Asao, 2019). Generally, gossip facilitates influence in two ways. First, gossip provides social control at the group level, enabling collectives to shape the behavior of their individual members (Gluckman, 1963; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Wu et al., 2016a). Second, gossip increases gossipers' influence at the individual level, enabling gossipers to shape others' behavior and thus advance their own interests (McAndrew et al., 2007; Paine, 1967; Reynolds et al., 2018; Wyckoff et al., 2019).

We propose that the social information communicated by gossip is essential to its influence function at both the group and individual levels. To start, gossip enables group-level social control by providing information that supports the communication and reinforcement of collective norms. Collective norms are shared expectations about how the members of a group ought to behave (Feldman, 1984; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Such norms can be prescriptive, informing people of appropriate behaviors, or prohibitive, warning people against inappropriate behaviors (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Gossip provides two types of information that facilitate the communication and reinforcement of norms. First, as mentioned above, gossip provides information regarding the norms of a sociocultural group. Gossip is effective at communicating such norms because it is anecdotal and therefore easily relatable to individual behavior (Baumeister et al., 2004). To illustrate, imagine you are on an introductory tour of a new office and that the staff member tells you the story of Jeff, the unfortunate coworker who ended up with dishwash detergent in his cappuccino after

repeatedly failing to clean up his mess in the cafeteria. For office newcomers, this gossip anecdote conveys the behavioral rule “clean up your own mess” more vividly than a sign stuck to a microwave (Baumeister et al., 2004).

Additionally, gossip enables the enforcement of group-level norms by providing information about targets. Such information facilitates norm enforcement and, by extension, social control through the process of reputational information sharing (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012). In systems of reputational information sharing, people exchange negative gossip about norm-violators (gossip targets), damaging the reputations of those individuals (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). People also exchange positive gossip about targets who adhere to norms, giving them a reputational boost. Given that individuals benefit from maintaining a positive reputation in their group (Whitfield, 2012), sharing reputational information about targets enables social control by discouraging norm violations and encouraging norm adherence.

Moreover, gossip enhances individual-level influence by providing information about gossipers. As discussed earlier, gossip informs recipients about gossipers’ relative social power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). For example, positive gossip informs the recipient that the gossipers are willing to reward good behavior with a reputational boost (e.g., “If you do what I want, I will say good things about you to other people”), thus enhancing their reward-based social power over recipients. Gossip also provides information about the gossipers’ relative position in a network or group. Gossipers who share information about the social norms of their group, for example, imply that they have access to inside information and, therefore, occupy a central and influential position in their network (Banerjee et al., 2014; Grosser et al., 2010). Such perceived influence, in turn, translates into the power to actually influence behavior. Finally, gossip influences behavior by communicating information about gossipers’ behavioral expectations (Bai et al., 2020). For instance, a supervisor may inform a

subordinate of their personal behavioral expectations by gossiping negatively about the specific shortcomings of an underperforming team member (Bai et al., 2020). From this information, the subordinate learns what constitutes good versus bad performance in the eyes of their supervisor and is influenced to meet the supervisor's perceived behavioral expectations.

Bonding

Gossip functions as a means of bonding by facilitating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The associations between gossip and relationships are evident throughout the wider literature on gossip (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Bergmann, 1993; Dunbar, 1998; Dunbar et al., 1997; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Gilmore, 1978; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Grosser et al., 2010; Hannerz, 1967). Indeed, the etymology of the English word gossip belies its inherently relational nature. Gossip is derived from *godsibb*, a term that initially described someone of close kin, such as the godparent of one's child, and later came to denote a very close friend (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Rysman, 1977; van Iterson et al., 2011). Thus, gossip was originally defined not by its content or valence but by the relationship between those who engaged in it: Only close kin or friends gossiped together. Further evidence of gossip's links to interpersonal relationships can be found in the communication literature, where scholars report that gossiping is the most common way of constituting relationships in talk (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Moreover, evolutionary psychologists argue that gossiping first evolved as a means of social bonding, replacing in humans the primate activity of allogrooming (Dunbar, 1998).

We posit that the social information communicated by gossip is essential to its bonding function. To start, information about targets gives people "something to talk about" (Mills, 2010, p. 235), especially when targets are mutual acquaintances of both the gossipers and the gossip recipient (Bergmann, 1993). Across many cultures, discussing and passing

judgement on the affairs of mutual acquaintances is seen as a ritualized form of entertainment that solidifies in-group bonds (Abraham, 1970; Brenneis, 1984). The notion that gossip provides ritualized entertainment and “something to talk about” is consistent with Dunbar’s (1998) theory of gossip being the human equivalent of allogrooming. Allogrooming involves picking lice and debris from the fur of another animal. While this grooming serves an obvious physical function—removing lice and debris—primatologists contend that it also fulfils a critical social function: Among baboons, chimpanzees, and other Old World apes, allogrooming serves to form and cement social bonds and allegiances (Dunbar, 1998). Thus, the more time two primates spend grooming each other, the stronger the social bonds between them become. Following this logic, the sheer amount of time that people spend gossiping together may influence how close they feel to one another.

The social information conveyed by gossip also serves as a social resource which enables exchange-based interpersonal relationships (Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Rosnow, 2001). According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), interpersonal bonds develop through reciprocal exchanges of valued social resources, such as affection, money, and information. Given that gossip transmits inside information that is valuable for navigating social environments, gossip constitutes a social currency that individuals can exchange for other resources. Therefore, from an exchange perspective, gossip supports the development and maintenance of interpersonal bonds by serving as a source of social information that individuals can exchange with social partners (Martinescu et al., 2019b).

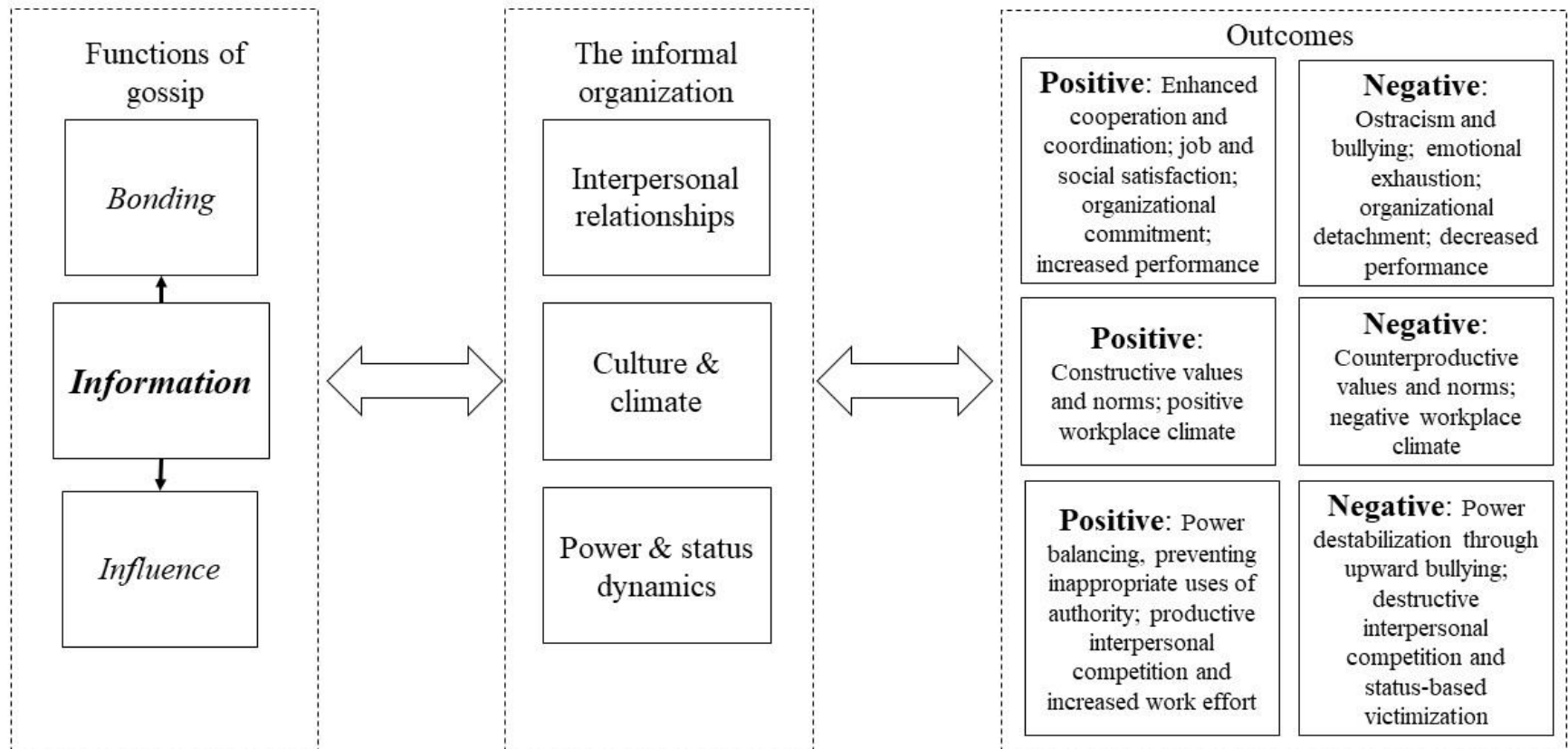
Lastly, gossip enables bonding by providing information about gossipers. As noted earlier, gossip informs recipients about gossipers’ attitudes, values, emotions, and behavioral expectations (Bai et al., 2020; Bosson et al., 2006; Brady et al., 2017; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Some research suggests that such information supports relationship development by signaling similarities between gossipers and recipients

(Bosson et al., 2006). For example, individuals who discover that they share a negative attitude toward a mutual acquaintance are more likely to become friends (Bosson et al., 2006). This notion is consistent with research showing that perceived similarities are important for the development of workplace friendships (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Functions of Gossip and the Informal Organization

How do the three interrelated functions of gossip—information, influence, and bonding—shape the informal organization? In this subsection, we address this question by demonstrating how gossip affects three key elements of the informal organization: interpersonal relationships, culture and climate, and power and status dynamics. We also argue that gossip's impact on the informal organization is the primary mechanism whereby gossip engenders a range of positive and negative outcomes in the workplace. Thus, we integrate research on the functions and outcomes of workplace gossip with research on the informal organization, advancing knowledge in both areas.

Figure 1: How the social functions of gossip shape elements of the informal organization and associated outcomes



To make our argument tangible, we created Figure 1. As depicted in the figure and described in the text below, the functions of gossip shape elements of the informal organization in important ways. While the alignment of boxes in the figure suggests links between specific functions of gossip and specific elements of the informal organization (e.g., between bonding and interpersonal relationships) we remind readers that, in our framework, the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information. Thus, we maintain that gossip's impact on interpersonal relationships and on power and status dynamics, as well as on culture and climate, hinges on the social information it communicates. The figure also shows that the elements of the informal organization are associated with important outcomes. We provide representative examples of both positive and negative outcomes associated with each element of the informal organization. For instance, interpersonal relationships are associated with positive outcomes including enhanced cooperation and coordination (Ellwardt et al., 2012b; Oh et al., 2004), but also with negative outcomes such as ostracism and bullying (Shallcross et al., 2011). In linking gossip to outcomes in this way, our aim is not to provide an exhaustive list of the positive and negative outcomes associated with gossip, but rather to suggest a broad framework for understanding how and why the same functions of gossip can engender such varied outcomes in different circumstances. Importantly, we classify outcomes as positive or negative from the organization's perspective. Individuals and groups within the organization may have differing views on whether such outcomes are positive or negative.

Figure 1 also acknowledges that the outcomes of gossip feed back into shaping the elements of the informal organization and that these elements, in turn, shape how gossip functions in organizations. Specifically, the double-headed arrows in the figure illustrate these feedback mechanisms. To illustrate how these feedback mechanisms would work in concrete terms, consider the example of an organization in which gossip is used to establish

counter-productive norms. These norms become part of the organization's culture and, in turn, make it more likely that gossip will function as a source of information that maintains counter-productive norms. While the double-headed arrows in Figure 1 acknowledge such feedback mechanisms, the remainder of the paper concentrates on explaining the left-to-right direction of the arrows in the figure. This is because our focus is on how gossip shapes the informal organization, not on how the informal organization shapes gossip.

Informal interpersonal relationships

Gossip is linked to the informal interpersonal relationships that develop between individuals in the workplace. Interpersonal relationships can be understood as comprising two interrelated elements: interactions and emotions (Methot, Melwani, & Rothman, 2017). Interactions are the behavioral and communicative encounters—the “social events”—that individuals in a relationship experience together (Methot et al., 2017, p. 1790). Emotions are the valenced, affective responses that individuals in a relationship feel toward each other, often as a result of interactions. Thus, interpersonal relationships are built and maintained by interpersonal interactions and are typically characterized by a valenced emotional tone, whether positive, negative, indifferent (neither positive or negative), or ambivalent (simultaneously positive and negative) (Methot et al., 2017).

Gossip's bonding function makes it an important means whereby individuals form and maintain positive interpersonal relationships at work. Prior research indicates that employees are more likely to gossip with colleagues to whom they feel close (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010; Tassiello et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is evidence that gossip aids in the formation of close relationships, not merely their maintenance. In a longitudinal study of gossip and relationships among childcare workers, Ellwardt et al. (2012a) found that sharing gossip with another colleague was a predictor of becoming friends with that colleague in future. Research also indicates positive correlations

between gossiping and interpersonal trust—a key element of close relationships (e.g., Ellwardt et al., 2012c). Some studies even imply that gossiping builds trust at an unconscious level (Brondino et al., 2017; Rudnicki, De Backer, & Declerck, 2019).

Given these persuasive findings, we suggest gossip shapes informal workplace relationships and, in turn, affects outcomes associated with this element of the informal organization. Research links informal interpersonal relationships to positive outcomes including job and social satisfaction, organizational commitment, and increased supervisor-rated job performance (Methot, Lepine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2016; Morrison, 2004; Venkataramani, Labianca, & Grosser, 2013). Informal interpersonal relationships also facilitate cooperation and coordination in organizations because they are crucial to the development of social capital (Gulati & Punaram, 2009; Oh et al., 2004; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Indeed, as Ellwardt et al. (2012b, p. 193) observe, “the quality and strength of ... informal relationships smooth or impede cooperation within formal work groups, as well as across the entire organization, thereby potentially affecting the entire organization’s outcomes.” Nonetheless, even positive relationships can produce negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, leading to organizational detachment and decreased supervisor-rated job performance (Methot et al., 2016; Venkataramani et al., 2013).

Collectively, findings indicate that informal interpersonal relationships are a mixed blessing in the workplace, resulting in both positive and negative outcomes (Methot et al., 2016; Venkataramani et al., 2013). As shown in Figure 1, we suggest the same is likely true for gossip’s effects on relationship-based outcomes. Functioning as a means of bonding, gossip may engender positive outcomes such as greater social satisfaction and organizational commitment, but it may also lead to negative outcomes including emotional exhaustion and lowered performance. Moreover, while gossip can build and reinforce close relationships between gossipers and gossip recipients (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010), thus

enhancing cooperation and coordination between these parties, it can also do the opposite for their relationships with gossip targets, encouraging ostracism and bullying (Shallcross et al., 2011). To illustrate, a study by psychologists found that the friendship-building effects of gossip were strongest when gossip was negative (Bosson et al., 2006). This finding suggests that gossip can build *positive* relationships between gossipers and recipients by reinforcing *negative* relationships between those individuals and targets—a phenomenon summarized in the proverb: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Culture and climate

Gossip is entwined with organizational culture and climate. Organizational culture can be defined as the set of learned assumptions, including beliefs, norms, and values, that the members of an organization share (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Ehrhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2014). Organizational climate can be defined as the shared attitudes and emotions that organizational members develop through their experiences of workplace events, policies, practices, and procedures (Ehrhart et al., 2014). Many facets of organizational culture and climate can be classed as part of the informal organization because they emerge through people’s experiences of the organization (Bittner, 1965; Ehrhart et al., 2014). Indeed, scholars often view the emergent nature of cultures and climates as among their defining characteristics (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Ashforth, 1985). Researchers have long sought to understand the emergence of organizational cultures and climates because these phenomena have substantive implications for firm performance and employee wellbeing (Barney, 1986; Schneider, 1972). We propose that studying gossip can shed light on how cultures and climates emerge because gossip acts as a vehicle for their transmission and reinforcement (van Iterson et al., 2011).

As depicted in Figure 1, the information function of gossip shapes both culture and climate. Starting with culture, gossip provides information about social and cultural groups,

thus enabling cultural learning (Baumeister et al., 2004). We already discussed how gossip enables cultural learning through the transmission of sociocultural norms. To reiterate briefly, gossip informs recipients about culturally specific norms by communicating positive evaluations of those who adhere to norms and negative evaluations of people who violate them. Values are another facet of culture that people learn about and maintain through gossip (Gluckman, 1963). For example, gossip about an organizational leader's behavior may reveal information about that person's values. Research suggests that leaders' personal values, in turn, shape the values of the entire organization (Berson, Oreg, & Dvir, 2008; Schein, 1983). Thus, positive gossip about an organization's CEO acting kindly toward lower-level staff signals that benevolence is an important value in that organization.

Gossip can also shape emergent climates through its information function. Specifically, gossip provides information about the valenced meanings that individuals ascribe to the behavior of other organizational members (Bai et al., 2020; Fan & Dawson, 2021), thus enabling the development of the shared attitudes and emotions which underpin climate. Gossip's role in social comparisons is crucial in this respect (Brady et al., 2017; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Gossiping allows individuals to compare their opinions and emotions toward gossip targets with those of others in the workplace. For instance, a subordinate could tell a same-level peer about their negative opinion toward a supervisor and gauge the peer's reaction to either validate or invalidate the negative opinion (Brady et al., 2017). Gossip is a relatively low-risk way of comparing such negative opinions and emotions because it necessarily takes place off-record (Wert & Salovey, 2004). However, gossiping could also serve to validate positive opinions and emotions. Accordingly, gossip may shape climate in either positive or negative ways by validating attitudes and emotions toward other organizational members. For example, if multiple subordinates in a workgroup have their

negative views of a supervisor validated through gossip, a cynical climate may develop in that workgroup (Kuo et al., 2015).

Organizational cultures and climates are associated with a vast array of positive and negative outcomes (Ehrhart et al., 2014). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to enumerate all such outcomes. Instead, we suggest examples of outcomes that draw attention to the impact of gossip on emergent cultures and climates. Starting with culture, gossip can transmit and reinforce both productive and counterproductive values and norms. For example, positive gossip about a workgroup member who continually proposes new ideas for improving work systems suggests that innovation is valued in that workgroup. On the other hand, negative gossip about the same employee's behavior indicates that the workgroup has a culture of devaluing innovation. Similarly, positive gossip about a helpful coworker signals that cooperative behaviors are the norm in a workplace culture, whereas negative gossip about the same behavior tells recipients that the norm is to behave uncooperatively. Turning to climate, gossip can shape the emergent climates of workgroups, departments, and organizations either positively or negatively. To a large extent, gossip's effects on climate depend on the valence of the opinions and emotions it serves to validate. For example, by validating negative views of a departmental manager who just launched a new health and safety initiative, gossip may serve to establish a cynical health and safety climate in that department (Arizon Peretz, Luria, Kalish, & Zohar, 2021; Kuo et al., 2015). Conversely, positive gossip about the same manager's initiative could support a proactive health and safety climate.

Power and status dynamics

Gossip plays an important role in the development and regulation of unofficial power and status dynamics. Power is the ability to influence other people's behavior (French & Raven, 1959); status is a person's relative social standing in a group or organization (Lamertz

& Aquino, 2004). While power and status dynamics are often embedded in formal organizational structures (e.g., in hierarchical positions and official performance rankings; Reif et al., 1973), power and status differences also exist at an unofficial level. For example, it is possible for a subordinate to wield greater social power than their supervisor despite not having the same level of official authority (French & Raven, 1959). It is also possible for employees to acquire social status that is not formally recognized by their organization (Lamertz & Aquino, 2004).

The influence function of gossip makes it an important means for shaping unofficial power and status dynamics. Relevant to power dynamics, gossip enhances both group- and individual-level influence. At the group-level, gossip functions as a form of social control over the behavior of individual group members (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, 2010). Thus, gossip may be used to exert social control over individuals who hold official authority, constraining their unofficial social power. This notion is consistent with anthropological research showing that negative gossip functions as a sanction against political “upstarts”—individuals who usurp too much power, status, or resources for themselves (Boehm, 1999, p. 43). At the individual level, gossip offers a means to acquire social power regardless of one’s official position (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). For example, negative gossip can enhance gossipers’ coercive power over recipients by signaling that gossipers are willing to punish disobedient targets with reputational damage (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Nevertheless, some research suggests there are limits to using gossip—especially negative gossip—as a means for acquiring individual social power. One study found that high-frequency negative gossipers were perceived as holding the lowest levels of social power in their workplace (Farley, 2011).

Gossip also influences status dynamics in organizations. Gossip yields information about coworkers that is not available through an organization’s formal communication channels (Mills, 2010). As such, gossip is integral to the unofficial reputations that underpin

social status in the workplace (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Zinko et al., 2017). For instance, gossip may provide information about the achievements of a colleague who has not received official recognition from management. Gossip also influences status dynamics when organizational members use it to raise or lower the social standing of coworkers relative to their own (Ellwardt et al., 2012b). For example, an envious gossip may undermine the informal social status of a perceived rival by telling others that this target only received a promotion for ticking the right demographic boxes.

We suggest gossip engenders both positive and negative outcomes by shaping power and status dynamics. Starting with power dynamics, gossip may serve to balance the informal power of individuals who exploit their official positions of authority. It is in an organization's interests to prevent officially powerful members from engaging in behaviors such as sexual harassment, bullying, and mispending company funds. Acting as a form of social control, gossip provides an informal means of preventing high power individuals from engaging in such behaviors. For example, gossiping about a supervisor who bullied a junior staff member damages that supervisor's reputation (Decoster et al., 2013; Huang, Wang, & Jun, 2014), undermining their informal social power over subordinates. Organizations are likely to view such power balancing as a positive outcome if informal measures prove more effective than formal measures for deterring bullying. Conversely, gossip may shape power dynamics in ways that are damaging to the organization. For example, gossip may serve to destabilize the power of leaders who act in their organization's best interests. Thus, gossip is a potential means of upward bullying (Wallace, Johnston, & Trenberth, 2010), whereby lower ranked employees gang up on a leader for malicious reasons (Shallcross et al., 2011).

As with power dynamics, gossip is likely to engender varied outcomes by shaping status dynamics. On the positive side, gossip may foster productive forms of interpersonal competition, leading to increased work effort. For example, positive gossip about the

unofficial achievements of a coworker may provoke social comparisons in the gossip recipient (e.g., “How does my own performance compare to the performance of this high-achieving gossip target?”). Subsequently, the recipient may be motivated to work harder to achieve a similar social status to the gossip target (Baumann, Eggers, & Stieglitz, 2019; Stark & Hyll, 2011). On the other hand, gossip may incite destructive forms of interpersonal competition and engender status-related victimization. If the recipient of gossip about a high-achieving coworker reacts with malicious envy—a type of envy characterized by a desire to harm one’s rival (Andiappan & Dufour, 2020)—this recipient may attempt to even out perceived status differences by bringing down the high-achieving coworker, rather than aiming to match that person’s achievements through increased work effort. Relatedly, research findings imply that gossip can be used as a weapon against individuals with high formal status (Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014 ; McAndrew et al., 2007; Reynolds et al., 2018). Organizational researchers report that high formal status employees tend to experience more covert forms of victimization than those of low formal status (Jensen et al., 2014), while studies by psychologists show that gossip can serve as a covert verbal weapon to reduce the informal social standing of perceived competitors (McAndrew et al., 2007; Reynolds et al., 2018). Combined, these findings imply that gossip may serve to victimize perceived workplace competitors who enjoy high formal status.

FUTURE RESEARCH

A growing body of research suggests gossip fulfils important social functions in the workplace and, by extension, engenders a range of positive and negative outcomes (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 2015; Waddington, 2016). However, scholars are yet to demonstrate (a) how the functions of gossip are interrelated and interdependent and (b) how the same functions of gossip can engender both positive and negative outcomes in different circumstances. The integrative framework we develop in this paper provides an important

step toward redressing these gaps in understanding. Specifically, we demonstrate that the influence and bonding functions of gossip depend on its overarching information function. Furthermore, we develop a framework that illustrates how the interdependent functions of gossip shape elements of the informal organization in both positive and negative ways, thus providing a novel explanation for how and why workplace gossip produces varied outcomes across diverse contexts.

Nevertheless, our conceptual paper relies on piecing together scattered evidence from across disciplines. Much of our argument is based on the assumption that gossip serves similar functions across diverse social environments. As such, the paper raises empirical questions that should be explored in the specific context of the workplace. In this section, we suggest four specific questions that would extend understanding of the role and impact of gossip in organizations.

How Do Organizational Members Interpret Gossip?

In our framework, the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information. As already discussed, gossip communicates three types of social information that, collectively, underpin gossip's influence and bonding functions: information about targets, information about gossipers, and sociocultural information. Information processing scholars have long understood that any form of information is open to multiple interpretations (Daft & Weick, 1984; Taylor & Fiske, 1981) and that individuals' interpretations of information are critical to its behavioral and relational outcomes (Gioia & Manz, 1985). However, researchers know very little about (a) how organizational members interpret gossip and (b) how interpretations of gossip affect relationships and behavior in organizations. We therefore encourage research that directly addresses the following questions: (1) How do organizational members interpret gossip as a source of social information? (2) How do organizational members' interpretations of gossip affect their relationships and behavior?

Addressing these questions would advance an interdependent view of the functions of gossip by showing *how* the information transmitted by gossip gets translated into relational outcomes (via gossip's bonding function) and behavioral outcomes (via gossip's influence function).

Understanding how organizational members interpret gossip requires that scholars pay more attention to the under-researched perspective of the gossip recipient. As the person who receives gossip, the recipient is the member of the triad who interprets the social information communicated. Moreover, the recipient's psychological and behavioral responses to gossip may be critical to its broader, ensuing outcomes (Bai et al., 2020; Lee & Barnes, 2021). Even so, researchers have only recently begun to acknowledge the pivotal role of the recipient in the workplace gossip triad (Bai et al., 2020; Kuo et al., 2018; Lee & Barnes, 2021). Consequently, many questions remain unanswered regarding how recipients interpret and respond to workplace gossip. For example, how do recipients determine which type (or types) of social information gossip communicates? Moreover, what factors shape this interpretive process? Do recipients interpret gossip from close colleagues differently than they interpret gossip from mere acquaintances? Is gossip from leaders interpreted differently than gossip from peers? Do recipients who are established organizational members interpret gossip differently than newcomers? And how do such differing interpretations shape recipients' psychological and behavioral responses to gossip?

How Does Gossip Shape Interpersonal Relationships?

As already demonstrated, there is widespread evidence that gossip is associated with interpersonal relationships, especially relationships between gossipers and recipients (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Grosser et al., 2010). However, scholars know relatively little about *how* gossip shapes relationships via its social bonding function. Stated differently, researchers are yet to develop a clear understanding of the psychological mechanisms and

processes whereby gossiping either brings people together or pushes them apart. While this paper has focused on the positive relational outcomes of gossip—outcomes that can be attributed to gossip’s bonding function—alternative evidence implies that gossip can also have negative effects on gossipers-recipient relationships, suggesting an *anti*-bonding function. For example, certain studies indicate that employees rate high-frequency negative gossipers as their least likeable coworkers (Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011). These findings suggest that such gossipers would struggle to develop close relationships with others in their workplace. Furthermore, another study demonstrates that while *positive* gossip is associated with the development of leader-member exchange relationships, *negative* gossip does not support the development of such relationships (Kuo et al., 2018). Therefore, we suggest that future research should explore *how* gossip shapes gossipers-recipient relationships as a way of reconciling such mixed findings on the relational outcomes of gossip. Given that negative gossip is linked to *negative* relational outcomes in some studies (Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011; Kuo et al., 2018) yet to *positive* outcomes in others (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010), researchers would do well to focus on gossip valence as an important variable in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip.

We also encourage research investigating how gossip shapes recipient-*target* relationships. While a considerable body of research has investigated the relational outcomes of gossip for recipient-gossiper relationships, scarcely any research has considered gossip’s potential to affect recipients’ relationships with targets (Burt & Knez, 1993). This lack of attention is surprising given that gossip is a critical source of social information about targets, which has the potential to affect recipients’ views of, and trust in, those individuals (Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Researching the relational outcomes of gossip vis-à-vis recipient-target relationships would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gossip shapes relationships *across the gossip triad*. For example, can a single instance of gossip

simultaneously affect the recipient's relationship with both the gossip and gossip target? As this question implies, further research into how gossip shapes interpersonal relationships would benefit from taking the perspective of the gossip recipient.

How Does Gossip Shape Organizational Socialization Processes?

Our paper links workplace gossip to two key aspects of organizational socialization processes—social integration and sociocultural learning (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2019; Korte, 2010; Liu, Bamberger, Wang, Shi, & Bacharach, 2020a; Liu, Wang, Bamberger, Shi, & Bacharach, 2015). As demonstrated earlier, gossip supports the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships via its bonding function, potentially facilitating social integration. Via its information function, gossip also enables learning by informing recipients about the norms and values of a specific sociocultural environment. Nonetheless, we are aware of no research that has explicitly addressed the role of gossip in organizational socialization. As such, future research might explore questions regarding how gossip facilitates or hinders organizational socialization and learning processes. For instance, to what extent does involvement in gossip indicate social integration of a newcomer? Do newcomers learn about group- and organization-level norms through gossip? And, if so, how? Such research would extend studies investigating the key proximal outcomes of newcomer adjustment, such as understanding and social integration (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2019). For instance, in line with anthropologists' viewing receipt of gossip as an indicator of inclusion (Boehm, 1999; Sapolsky, 2017), could involvement in gossip become a measure of newcomer social integration?

How Does an Organization's Environment Affect Gossip?

The final research question we propose for future research suggests quite a different direction than the three preceding questions. While those questions focus on how the gossip behavior of organizational members' shapes the informal workplace social environment, our

final question asks how the workplace environment—whether social or physical and formal or informal—affects the gossip behavior of organizational members. As such, our final question is the broadest yet—though arguably the most important. In their seminal call-to-arms, Noon and Delbridge (1993, p. 35) suggested a number of questions relating to how organizational environments shape gossip behavior: “Are some organizations more prone to gossip than others? Is there a link between gossip and types of work process or occupational group?” They also wondered whether formal organizational structures and interventions could influence how employees gossip (Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p. 35): “Can the gossip process be managed? Could it become, or is it a system of managerial control? Could it be manipulated as a change agent?” Nevertheless, researchers still know very little about how the organizational environment affects gossip behavior. We therefore encourage research that explores this broad topic. To make the topic more manageable for future researchers, we subdivide it into three specific questions.

How does the physical work environment affect gossip?

People often consider coffee rooms and water coolers to be hotbeds for office gossip—but where is the evidence to support such claims? Scholars know little about how the physical work environment affects gossip, so we encourage research exploring this topic. Do workers gossip more in individual offices due to the privacy offices afford, and less in open plan spaces? Are informal relationships more likely to develop between employees whose physical proximity or seclusion gives them the opportunity to gossip frequently? Empirical studies could test such questions and, in doing so, extend research exploring how the physical workplace shapes relationships and other employee behaviors (Ashkanazy, Ayoko, & Jehn, 2014; Khazanchi, Sprinkle, Masterson, & Tong, 2018; Morrison & Macky, 2017; Morrison & Stahlmann-Brown, 2021).

How does digital communication affect gossip?

A related direction is to investigate the effects of digital communication on gossip. Employees increasingly work remotely or in virtual teams—a trend that restricts opportunities for informal face-to-face communication between colleagues. At the same time, social media platforms, including those developed exclusively for the employees of single organizations (Cummings & Dennis, 2018), encourage more frequent written and visual communication with a greater number of people than ever before. How do these trends affect workplace gossip? To what extent does workplace gossip take place via digital communication? Does digital communication affect the social bonding effects of face-to-face gossip? If so, how? Do virtual colleagues experience constrained opportunities for informal coordination of their activities due to the restricted opportunities to gossip in person? Do social media sites encourage different types of workplace gossip than face-to-face encounters? Consider, for example, the uninhibited comments people leave under YouTube videos compared to the comments they typically make face-to-face.

How do the structures of the formal organization affect gossip?

Throughout this paper, we have focused almost exclusively on how gossip shapes the social structures embedded in the *informal* organization. However, there is already some evidence that the structures of the *formal* organization may influence gossip (Hallett, Eder, & Harger, 2009; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Mills, 2010). For instance, certain research findings challenge the assumption that gossip can truly be separated from official forms of workplace communication, implying instead that gossip is inherently embedded in the formal organizational contexts in which it occurs (Hallett et al., 2009; Mills, 2010). Consequently, future research could fruitfully explore interactions between gossip and formal organizational structures. By investigating these interactions, researchers would respond to the questions posed by Noon and Delbridge (1993) regarding the extent to which workplace gossip is manageable. Based on our framework and on extant research, two features of formal social

structures appear particularly important for shaping gossip behavior: interdependence and hierarchy. Initial findings imply that when workgroups are designed to be interdependent (e.g., through group-level rewards), they may encourage gossip that functions as a means of social control (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, 2010). As discussed earlier, gossip provides social control by inflicting reputational damage on those who freeride, thus encouraging the members of interdependent groups to contribute their fair share to cooperative tasks. Future research could test this notion by comparing how gossip functions in workgroups with high versus low levels of interdependence. Hierarchies embedded in formal social structures may also influence gossip behavior. Some evidence implies that gossip provides a way for lower-ranked employees to balance the power of higher-ranked individuals in organizations with relatively steep formal hierarchies (Mau, 2020; Waddington, 2016). Thus, how does an organization's formal hierarchy influence its members' gossip behavior? The formally entrenched power differences between doctors and nurses suggest that hospitals and other healthcare organizations may provide an apt setting for exploring this question (Waddington, 2016), as do the steep hierarchies of commercial kitchens and military operations.

CONCLUSION

Is workplace gossip functional or dysfunctional for organizations? Recent research has implicitly positioned this question front and center in the workplace gossip literature. However, our paper renders the question obsolete by developing a framework that shows how the same functions of gossip can engender both positive and negative outcomes for organizations. Our contention that gossip serves three interdependent social functions, which, in turn, shape key elements of the organization, paves the way for a more integrative and balanced understanding of the role and impact of this ubiquitous workplace behavior.

Chapter 3/ Manuscript 2 - The Good, the Bad, and the Authentic: How Gossip Shapes Interpersonal Relationships at Work

PREFACE

This manuscript focuses on how workplace gossip shapes one key element of the informal organization: informal interpersonal relationships. Informal relationships can be positive (e.g., friendships), negative (e.g., enmities), indifferent, or ambivalent (Methot et al., 2017; Morrison & Wright, 2009). Informal relationships can also be part of broader, multiplex relationships, which have both informal and formal elements (Methot et al., 2016). While I was most interested in the informal relationships that constitute the informal organization in Manuscript 2, I also investigated the effects of gossip on formal (or professional) relationships. Consequently, I use the terms *interpersonal relationships* or just *relationships* to describe relationships that may have formal and informal elements, and I use the term *informal relationships* to describe purely unofficial relationships such as friendships. The predominant purpose of this Preface is to link Manuscript 2 to the rest of the thesis, so I mainly discuss why I focused on informal relationships in the manuscript. Importantly, however, the empirical study investigates how gossip shapes interpersonal relationships more broadly.

I focus on informal relationships—as opposed to other elements of the informal organization—for four reasons. First, as discussed in Manuscript 1, informal relationships are integral to the informal organization because they are the building blocks of social capital and underlie many important outcomes (Bittner, 1965; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Methot et al., 2016; Methot et al., 2018; Morrison, 2004; Oh et al., 2004; Reif et al., 1973; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Venkataramani et al., 2013). Indeed, without informal relationships, the “company behind the charts” would arguably not exist (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993, p. 105). Second, as

signaled in Manuscript 1 and explained in detail in the literature review of the present manuscript, it remains unclear from prior research *how* workplace gossip shapes informal relationships. Some evidence suggests that workplace gossip supports the development and maintenance of close informal relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010), whereas other evidence implies that gossip can hinder informal relationship development (Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011). Thus, while extant research indicates that complex psychological processes are at play in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip, it does not clarify what these processes are. Additionally, extant research focuses almost exclusively on how workplace gossip shapes recipient-*gossiper* relationships, ignoring gossip's potential to affect relationships between recipients and *targets* (Burt & Knez, 1993). The third reason I focus on informal relationships in this manuscript is that it enables me to take the perspective of the gossip recipient and, in doing so, advance knowledge on how the recipients' interpretations of the social information communicated by gossip shape the bonding function of gossip. In turn, this aspect of the manuscript addresses overarching aims 2 and 3 of my thesis—that is, to elaborate interdependencies between the social functions of gossip (Aim 2) and to illuminate the recipient's perspective (Aim 3). Finally, I focus on informal relationships in this manuscript for pragmatic reasons that I discuss further in the reflections that accompany this Preface and in the Final Reflections section that concludes Chapter 6.

The Research Design and Methods section of the present manuscript details the specific methods I used to collect and analyze data in my empirical study. Due to journal article word limits, however, the manuscript does not explicitly address how my methodological and philosophical assumptions inform the design and execution of the study. For this reason, I use the remainder of this Preface to expand on this important aspect of qualitative research design.

As noted in my Introduction chapter, I situate my research in the *interpretive social science* paradigm (Gephart, 2018). Interpretive social science research aims to generate theory about the nature of social reality, which privileges and preserves the commonsense meanings that research participants use to describe and explain their own experiences of social reality (Gephart, 2018). As such, my predominant empirical purpose in the present manuscript is to understand how participants' experiences of receiving workplace gossip shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets.

This purpose implies that an important concern in the study is to provide credible and trustworthy accounts of participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility and trustworthiness are widely viewed as key criteria for assessing the quality of interpretive research (Beuving & de Vries, 2015; Cope, 2014; Eldh, Årestedt, & Berterö, 2020; Harley & Cornelissen, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As already discussed, the overarching concern of interpretive research is to privilege and preserve the meanings that participants themselves ascribe to their experiences of social reality (Bhattacharya, 2008; Gephart, 2004). Therefore, it is important for interpretive researchers to demonstrate *how* their research privileges and preserves participants' own meanings of the social phenomenon under investigation, as doing so provides confidence to readers that findings are credible and trustworthy representations of participants' experiences.

I note the specific ways in which I address such concerns for credibility and trustworthiness throughout the Research Design and Methods section of the present manuscript. However, for the sake of accessibility and clarity—that is, to have all the information in one place—here is a summary of the actions I took to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my qualitative findings: (1) I kept detailed records—an audit trail—of the decisions that informed my data collection and analysis processes (Carcary, 2009); (2) I used interviews to check that my initial interpretations of incident report data matched

participants' interpretations of how they experienced gossip incidents (Cope, 2014); (3) I arranged with my primary supervisor to independently code subsets of the raw data, thus enhancing the confirmability and dependability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); (4) I report my data collection and analysis processes in detail (Carcary, 2009); and (5) I use extensive verbatim quotes to provide confidence to readers that findings are faithful representations of participants' data (Creswell, 2012; Eldh et al., 2020).

Another key aspect of enhancing credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research is practicing reflexivity. As discussed briefly in Chapter 1, reflexivity is particularly important for qualitative research adopting an interpretive approach because such research explicitly acknowledges the role of the researcher in interpreting data and generating knowledge (Henwood, Dicks, & Housley, 2019). Reflexivity is about how researchers position themselves relative to (a) the subject matter of their research and (b) the participants of the research (Berger, 2015). The goal of reflexivity is not to overcome bias in research and generate objective conclusions. Rather, it is to acknowledge to the extent to which the researcher's own positionality—which includes their biases and preconceptions concerning whatever they are researching—may shape the outcomes and conclusions of research (Berger, 2015; Corlett & Mavin, 2018).

To this end, I next offer a series of personal “reflections” for readers to keep in mind when considering the empirical research reported in Manuscript 2.

Reflection 1: How my Focus Evolved Over Time.

The research question I address in the present manuscript is: *How do gossip recipients' responses to workplace gossip affect their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets?* Before detailing how I address this question in the manuscript itself, it is worth noting how the empirical focus of my research evolved over time. Initially, in the early stages of my PhD research, I was going to focus on *gossip about leaders*. Specifically, I was

interested in how gossip about leaders affected leader-follower relationships and dynamics. However, for ethical and practical reasons that I describe in my Final Reflections (see Chapter 6), I switched my focus to the role of the recipient in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip. In brief, this shift in focus was due to: (a) ethical restrictions on my ability to get paired data from both leaders and followers in the same workgroups; (b) personal concerns that gossip about leaders was too specific a focus and that I would struggle to gather sufficient qualitative data on the topic; and (c) my recognition that, based on the state of the literature at the time, I would be able to make a broader contribution by focusing on the perspective of the recipient⁴. Once I switched focus to the perspective of the recipient, my idea was initially to concentrate on how receiving gossip affects recipients' *trust* in both gossipers and gossip targets. Thus, I gained ethics approval for a study entitled "Exploring the relationship between workplace gossip and interpersonal trust" (see Appendix A). Nevertheless, on the advice of my supervisors, I decided that I should keep my empirical focus relatively broad at the data collection stage to permit alternative foci to emerge from the data. In practical terms, this meant adding broader questions to my data collection protocols regarding how gossip affected recipients' personal and professional *relationships* with gossipers and gossip targets (see Appendix D). Later, during data collection and the initial stages of data analysis, it became clear that trust was only one aspect of the interpersonal relationships between recipients, gossipers, and targets that were affected by gossip incidents. Consequently, I broadened my research question to acknowledge this expanded focus.

Reflection 2: A Gossip Insider and Outsider, but More of an Outsider

⁴ Importantly, recent papers that focus specifically on the perspective of the gossip recipient were either not published (Bai et al., 2019; Lee & Barnes, 2020) or only recently published (Kuo et al., 2018) at the time I was making these decisions—that is, between November 2018 and January 2019.

As a researcher, I position myself as both a gossip insider and outsider. By a gossip insider, I mean someone who actively participates in gossip. By a gossip outsider, I mean someone who knows that while gossip is going on, they are generally not included in it. I have experienced both these roles, though I think of myself more as an outsider. I remember times when I was working in hospitality and became part of very tight cliques. Probably the biggest thing that drew us together in these cliques was gossiping about coworkers, especially in a negative way. Gossiping negatively about coworkers was a way to not only keep gossip targets as outsiders, but also to ensure we remained insiders.

Over time, I gradually shifted into the role of feeling like a perpetual gossip outsider. Not only was I not receiving any gossip, I also suspected that I was the target of it. Once you feel like an outsider in a very tightknit workplace—the sort of workplace that is all too common in hospitality—it is hard to reenter that sacred inner gossip circle. I knew from experience that the sanctity of the inner gossip circle was maintained by excluding outsiders. Thus, I resigned myself to being an outsider.

My experiences as both a gossip insider and outsider were valuable for conducting empirical research on gossip. Yet they also posed challenges in terms of how to position myself relative to my research subject and participants. As a researcher, I found myself in an almost paradoxical position relative to the workplace gossip incidents I was studying. I was clearly an outsider in the sense that I was not involved in the specific gossip incidents I was investigating, yet by asking participants to share their experiences of these incidents with me, I was seemingly on the verge of becoming an insider. In other words, I was asking participants to gossip to me about the other people involved in the gossip incidents under investigation. Therefore, it was to some extent necessary to suspend my identity as a perpetual gossip outsider—and to remember what it was like to be a gossip insider—to fully comprehend participants' experiences.

Reflection 3: The Ethics of Becoming an Honorary Gossip Insider

By researching gossip incidents, I became a sort of “honorary gossip insider”—someone who was not part of participants’ workplaces, but who nevertheless had access to the inside word on other people in those workplaces. This honorary position raised some interesting ethical challenges for me as a researcher. A good way of understanding these challenges is by distinguishing between *procedural ethics* and *ethics in practice* (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). *Procedural ethics* are the formally defined procedures that researchers must go through to have their research legitimized by a university ethics committee. *Ethics in practice* refers to how researchers actually behave (or do not behave) in an ethical manner while conducting their real-world research, even in the face of unexpected yet ethically important events. For example, while procedural ethics may provide formal approval for a researcher to interview workers about their new 20-floor office building, this formal approval says nothing about what to do in practice if, during an interview, one of the workers mentions that they sometimes think about jumping from the top of the new building. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that to overcome such challenges and conduct truly ethical research, researchers must practice reflexivity—the act of deliberately reflecting on and questioning the ethicality of one’s behavior as a researcher.

Fortunately for me, my own research involved no moments as ethically challenging as the one in the hypothetical example above. Nonetheless, becoming an honorary gossip insider did pose some ethical challenges that necessitated reflection and critical self-evaluation. The main challenge was how to keep quiet about my participants’ gossip. As I said earlier, my research effectively involved asking participants to “gossip” to me about others in their workplace. Participants were sharing such gossip with me in confidence. The procedural ethics forms I had completed said that I would honor their confidence in me by keeping their data confidential and by maintaining strict anonymity—that is, always using pseudonyms to

refer to participants. Yet procedural ethics said little about the more subtle ways in which I could unwittingly breach participants' confidence.

I recruited most of my participants through personal networks. My sisters, aunty, and certain friends all helped me find people to participate in my study. Inevitably, I would catch up with these personal contacts on the odd occasion and, as people do, they would ask me how my research was going. From an ethics-in-practice perspective, such moments were ethically challenging because they provided an opportunity for me illustrate my general conclusions about the functions of workplace gossip with specific examples from my study—or, in less euphemistic terms, to talk about some of the juicier gossip incidents my research had captured. Given that my interlocutors potentially knew the participants involved in these incidents, however, I could easily breach confidentiality without mentioning any names; simply adding a revealing detail about a participant's workplace could be enough to give away that participant's identity. Therefore, in my position as an honorary gossip insider, it was critical to remain tight-lipped about how my study was going, even when catching up with the people whose assistance enabled me to conduct the study. Maintaining this stance would not have been possible without practicing some level of reflexivity.

Reflection 4: Trying to Deflect Gossip's Bad Reputation

One challenge of studying gossip is its bad reputation (Adkins, 2017). When most people hear the word gossip, it brings to mind a form of communication that is not necessarily consistent with the definitions used by researchers (Bloom, 2004). Therefore, I had to be careful that my participants and I were on the same page regarding what I was studying. To ensure we were on the same page, I explained the focus of my study to each prospective participant using the words “informal and evaluative talk” during an initial phone conversation. I also used a definition of workplace gossip—instead of the word gossip itself—in all documents that participants would read, and I used the phrase *evaluative talk* to

refer to gossip during interviews. It was particularly important to implement these measures given that I recruited most of my participants through personal networks, and my personal contact may have initially told prospective participants that I was doing a doctorate on workplace gossip.

Reflection 5: Acknowledging the Limits of One-off Interviews

I started my doctorate with some prior experience as a qualitative researcher. For my master's degree, I interviewed entrepreneurs about their experiences of starting new businesses. Thanks to this experience, I went into my PhD study with an awareness of the limits of one-off interviews. When conducting qualitative studies, researchers are typically reliant for data on people's willingness to offer their time for free. Therefore, unless we can guarantee we will end up with very generous and enthusiastic participants, it is risky to assume people will give up more than an hour or so of their time. (Admittedly, this approximate one-hour time limit may only exist in my own mind). When I interviewed entrepreneurs, I found that this hour or so went by in a flash. It felt like the participant was just starting to comprehend the focus of my research, and suddenly time was up. To ensure this did not happen again, I designed my PhD study to be less reliant on one-off interviews. Specifically, I used written incident reports as my key data source. However, being somewhat averse to "admin" myself, I did not assume that all participants would provide rich data in their written reports, and added follow-up interviews as a sort of backstop, ensuring I would get the rich data I needed. In the end, this dual-pronged approach worked well to gather rich data from each participant. But ironically, it also made it challenging to find participants who would both start and complete the study, given that doing so now required a more substantial time commitment than a simple one-hour interview!

ABSTRACT

Although preliminary research implies a tantalizing association between workplace gossip and interpersonal relationships, little is known about *how* gossip shapes relationships at work. Given that relationships are integral to employee wellbeing and to outcomes including firm performance and competitive advantage, it appears vital to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the processes linking gossip and workplace relationships. To this end, we induce theory from qualitative evidence regarding the processes whereby workplace gossip shapes relational outcomes. Taking the under-researched perspective of the gossip recipient, our study draws on multi-source data to explore how recipients' responses to gossip incidents affect their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. We find that recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions—good, bad, or genuine—initiate three distinct processes that engender a range of relational outcomes. In describing these nuanced processes, we provide insights that extend and enrich theory and challenge conventional assumptions about workplace gossip.

Keywords: Workplace gossip; interpersonal relationships; interpersonal trust; gossip triad; gossip recipient; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace gossip, defined as informal and evaluative talk about another organizational member who is not present (Brady et al., 2017; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), is a pervasive yet widely misconstrued phenomenon. Although management scholars and practitioners traditionally viewed gossip as an unproductive or even deviant workplace behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2009; Lipman, 2016), an emerging body of research suggests gossip fulfils multiple roles in organizations—some positive, others negative, and others still that defy simple classification as either positive or negative (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016). Recently, researchers have begun to explore the role of gossip in shaping workplace relationships, either directly or indirectly (Brady et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018; Martinescu et al., 2019b). However, these preliminary efforts have produced mixed findings. For instance, while some studies indicate that gossip supports the development and maintenance of trusting relationships between coworkers (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010), others imply that gossip—especially negative gossip—undermines such relationships (Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011).

We propose that the mixed findings reported in extant research stem from an inadequate understanding of *how* gossip shapes relationships in the workplace. Stated differently, we maintain that scholars cannot explain why gossip builds relationships in some instances (e.g., Ellwardt et al., 2012a) yet undermines them in others (e.g., Farley, 2011) because we currently lack a comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes that underpin the relational outcomes of gossip. Illuminating these processes appears vital for appreciating the full extent of gossip's role in organizations given that interpersonal

relationships are crucial to employee wellbeing (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007) and form the building blocks of social capital (Methot et al., 2018; Oh et al., 2004), which translates into outcomes that enhance firm performance and competitive advantage (Barney & Wright, 1998; Chenhall & Langfield-Smith, 2007; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

Accordingly, the purpose of our paper is to build and enrich theory on the processes whereby gossip shapes workplace relationships. We do so via a qualitative study that, in contrast to existing quantitative (Martinescu et al., 2019b) and conceptual (Lee & Barnes, 2021) research, provides insight into how individuals experience the relational outcomes of gossip in real-world organizational contexts. Our study takes the perspective of the gossip recipient—a crucial actor in the gossip triad whose role remains under-researched. The triad consists of the gossipers, who initiates gossip, the recipient, who receives it, and the target, whom gossip is about. To date, most empirical research has examined the relational outcomes of gossip from the perspective of the gossipers (Brady et al., 2017; Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b). However, we contend that the recipient's perspective may be even more important for illuminating such outcomes because recipients' responses to gossip shape their relationships with not only gossipers (Lee & Barnes, 2021), but also with *targets*. Therefore, we gather and analyze detailed, *in situ* data from gossip recipients to address the research question: *How do recipients' responses to workplace gossip incidents shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets?*

Our paper makes three substantive contributions to the literature. First, we induce theory from data on how gossip shapes workplace relationships. We thus provide an empirical basis for a nuanced, fine-grained understanding of the psychological process that underpin the relational outcomes of gossip. Our qualitative, inductive study builds on and enriches extant conceptual research (e.g., Lee & Barnes, 2021) and provides insights that

enable the reconciliation of mixed findings reported in large sample, quantitative studies (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Farley, 2011; Kuo et al., 2018).

Second, we provide a comprehensive account of how workplace gossip shapes relationships *across* the triad. By investigating the relational outcomes of gossip vis-à-vis both recipient-gossiper and recipient-target relationships, we take a novel step toward understanding gossip as an inherently relational form of communication—one that takes place within a complex web of interpersonal relationships (Michelson et al., 2010). This step is important given that prior research has focused almost exclusively on how gossip affects relationships between recipients and gossipers (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Martinescu et al., 2019b).

Third, we spotlight the role of the gossip recipient in shaping the outcomes of workplace gossip. Gossip communicates social information (Baumeister et al., 2004; Foster, 2004) and the recipient is the member of the triad who interprets and responds to that information (Lee & Barnes, 2021). However, most studies to date have examined workplace gossip from the perspective of the gossiper (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Grosser et al., 2010; Tassiello et al., 2018) or the gossip target (e.g., Ellwardt et al., 2012b; Wu et al., 2018a). By examining the recipient's perspective, we move toward a better understanding of how the social information conveyed via gossip gets translated into outcomes.

WORKPLACE GOSSIP AND RELATIONSHIPS: AN EQUIVOCAL PICTURE

Over the past decade, researchers have begun to explore the role of gossip in developing and maintaining workplace relationships, yet with mixed findings (Brady et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018). Some evidence suggests that gossip helps build and maintain trust-based interpersonal bonds between gossipers and gossip recipients (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). For example, Grosser et al. (2010) and

Ellwardt et al. (2012c) found that sharing negative gossip indicated close, trust-based ties between colleagues, while Ellwardt et al. (2012a) found that gossiping together increased the likelihood of two colleagues becoming friends over time. Additionally, Kuo et al. (2018) reported that receiving positive gossip from supervisors supported the development of supervisor-subordinate relationships. On the other hand, there is evidence that gossiping can damage an individual's chances of developing close interpersonal connections at work. Farley (2011) and Farley et al. (2010) found that participants rated high-frequency negative gossipers as their least likeable coworkers, implying that such gossipers would struggle to develop close interpersonal connections with colleagues.

Taken together, extant findings paint an equivocal picture of how gossip shapes relationships in the workplace. Scholars know that gossip can lead to both positive and negative relational outcomes, as demonstrated above (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018), yet they lack a comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes that engender such varied outcomes. Moreover, as stated earlier, research to date has focused almost entirely on the relational outcomes of gossip for gossip-recipient relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018). Consequently, scholars have barely scratched the surface of possible knowledge regarding how gossip shapes relationships between recipients and targets (Burt & Knez, 1993). In this paper, we empirically investigate recipients' responses to gossip to elaborate a richer, more nuanced understanding of how gossip affects relationships across the gossip triad. We thus generate insights into why workplace gossip engenders such varied relational outcomes, contributing to several existing conversations in the gossip literature. In the brief review that follows, we divide these conversations into those that concern recipient-gossiper relationships and those that concern recipient-target relationships. We also note other conversations to which our paper contributes.

Recipient-Gossiper Relationships: The Exchange Perspective

The dominant theoretical perspective on how gossip affects recipient-gossiper relationships is the exchange perspective (Brady et al., 2017; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Martinescu et al., 2019b). Rooted in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), this perspective views gossip as a social resource—a source of insider information—that coworkers exchange for influence, social support, and/or reciprocated information (Martinescu et al., 2019b). Thus, the exchange perspective asserts that gossip shapes recipient-gossiper relationships by facilitating exchanges of social resources between coworkers.

Importantly, evidence supporting the exchange perspective comes largely from employees' self-reported motivations to gossip (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2019b). For instance, Martinescu et al. (2019b) found that participants gossiped to same-level peers in the expectation of receiving information and social support in return. While such motivations undoubtedly play a role in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip, we contend that these outcomes cannot be explained solely by understanding gossipers' motivations because motivations necessarily interact with recipients' *responses* to gossip. To illustrate, an employee's motivation to gossip may be to receive social resources from a recipient coworker (Martinescu et al., 2019b), but if the recipient does not respond by providing such resources, an exchange-based relationship is unlikely to develop.

Recipient-Target Relationships: The Reputational Information Perspective

The most prominent theory about how gossip shapes recipient-target relationships is the reputational information perspective. Rooted in evolutionary theory (Dunbar, 2004; Enquist & Leimar, 1993), this perspective holds that individuals primarily use gossip to communicate evaluative information about other group members (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012). Such information, in turn, influences how gossip recipients view

and subsequently interact with gossip targets. For instance, negative information about a target's previous behavior may influence the likelihood of a recipient trusting that person in a task involving cooperation (Wu et al., 2016a). While evidence from experimental simulations supports the reputational information perspective (Feinberg et al., 2012; Fonseca & Peters, 2018; Wu et al., 2016a; Wu et al., 2016b), barely any empirical research has investigated how gossip shapes relationships between recipients and targets in the specific social context of the workplace (Burt & Knez, 1993).

Other Conversations on Gossip

Gossip valence

An important focus throughout the workplace gossip literature is gossip valence—that is, whether gossip conveys positive or negative information about its target. Many scholars have focused on valence as a key variable when studying the diverse outcomes of workplace gossip (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 2018). However, as our review of the literature reveals, the associations between gossip valence and *relational* outcomes are far from straightforward. To illustrate, Kuo et al.'s (2018) finding that only positive—and not negative—gossip from supervisors supports supervisor-subordinate relationships contradicts the findings of other scholars, which suggest negative gossip helps maintain peer-to-peer relationships at work (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). Moreover, Ellwardt et al.'s (2012a) longitudinal study, which documented gossip's role in friendship development, did not specify whether the gossip that supported friendship development was positive or negative. Consequently, it remains unclear how valence interacts with nuanced psychological factors to shape the relational outcomes of gossip.

Gossip and emotions

Some research suggests that an important function of workplace gossip is to express and validate individuals' emotions. Waddington and Fletcher (2005) found that nurses used

gossip to express emotions such as frustration, enabling them to “let off steam” (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005, p. 385). In a similar vein, Brady et al. (2017) discovered that individuals use gossip to validate their emotions toward specific colleagues. For instance, an employee might gossip about how much they admire a manager and then gauge the gossip recipient’s reaction as a way of validating (or invalidating) their feelings of admiration. Importantly, these existing studies examined the intersection of gossip and emotions from the perspective of gossipers. Consequently, it remains unclear how recipients *respond* to gossip as a form of emotional expression or how such responses shape relationships between recipients, gossipers, and targets.

Recipient Responses to Gossip

As the foregoing review of the literature reveals, extant theory and research imply that recipient responses are pivotal in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip. Nonetheless, to our knowledge, only two articles have explicitly addressed the role of such responses in shaping workplace relationships (Kuo et al., 2018; Lee & Barnes, 2021). First, as already discussed, Kuo et al. (2018) examined how receiving positive versus negative gossip from supervisors affected the development of supervisor-subordinate relationships. They found that receiving positive (but not negative) gossip from supervisors supported the development of such relationships. Kuo et al. (2018) explained this finding using regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1998). Specifically, they argued that receiving positive gossip from a supervisor triggered a promotion focus in subordinates, leading them to view gossip as an opportunity for supervisor-subordinate relationship development, whereas receiving negative gossip triggered a prevention focus, leading subordinates to ignore the opportunity for supervisor-subordinate relationship development and focus instead on the potential for losing standing in the eyes of supervisors. Second, Lee and Barnes’ (2021) conceptual paper presented a typology of workplace gossip which they linked to recipients’ attributions of

gossipers' motives. In particular, Lee and Barnes (2021) conjectured that the valence (positive or negative) and content (work-related or personal) of gossip informs how recipients construe the motives of gossipers. For example, if gossip is negative and about the target's personal life, the recipient is likely to attribute a "derogation-based" motive to the gossiper. Subsequently, the recipient is less likely to trust the gossiper and more likely to socially undermine them.

While these two studies underscore the importance of recipient responses, we maintain that more research is needed to enrich and extend understanding of how such responses shape relationships across the gossip triad. Kuo et al.'s (2018) empirical study is specific to subordinate-supervisor relationships and, therefore, cannot explain why negative gossip is associated with close peer-to-peer relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). Meanwhile, Lee and Barnes' (2021) model is purely conceptual. Moreover, neither study addresses the potential of gossip to shape recipient-target relationships. As such, we contend that developing a more comprehensive understanding of how gossip shapes relationships across the gossip triad requires further empirical investigation of recipient responses to workplace gossip.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Rationale and Overview

The purpose of our study is to build and enrich theory regarding the processes whereby gossip recipients' responses to workplace gossip shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. For this reason, we used a qualitative, inductive design to examine our research question. Qualitative data were appropriate because they enabled us to get inside the heads of gossip recipients, furnishing rich details of their subjective thoughts and emotions (Gephart, 2004, 2018). Inductive analysis was suitable for building and enriching theory because it enabled us to explore gossip beyond the lens of *a priori*

theoretical frameworks (Woo, O'Boyle, & Spector, 2017). Our level of analysis was the individual gossip incident (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Flanagan, 1954). Exploring recipient responses at this level enabled the induction of theory that was firmly grounded in participants' experiences of workplace gossip in a real-world context (Gephart, 2004). Throughout the research process, we employed strategies to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of our findings (Beuving & de Vries, 2015; Harley & Cornelissen, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies included keeping an in-depth audit trail of ethics, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis protocols, which enabled us to provide the detailed description of our research process that we present next.

Ethical Considerations and Participants

Workplace gossip is a sensitive topic and, consequently, requires a heightened awareness of the ethical implications of researching the phenomenon (Michelson et al., 2010). Gossip provides personal—and potentially damaging—information about specific individuals, their coworkers, and their organizations. As such, we designed our study to ensure the anonymity of all these parties. In particular, we: (1) Used non-identifiable descriptors for all participants; (2) asked participants to always refer to their coworkers using pseudonyms, so we would not know the identities of these individuals; (3) did not report identifiable details about participants' organizations in findings; and (4) provided participants with the opportunity to review transcripts and remove any details they were uncomfortable sharing before analysis commenced⁵.

Ethical considerations also informed our sampling strategy. We recruited participants through personal networks. To avoid the possibility of unintentionally divulging sensitive information to participants' coworkers (i.e., spreading gossip within the same workplace), we

⁵ Two participants asked us to redact information that could potentially be linked to their specific organizations.

drew each participant from a separate organization⁶. Rather than targeting specific industries, we selected participants based on the type of environment in which they worked. In particular, we selected participants who worked in physical environments that permitted regular informal interactions because these types of interactions are known to provide a context for both gossip (Waddington, 2005) and informal relationship development (Ashkanazy et al., 2014; Oh et al., 2004). The first author assessed the suitability of participants based on this criterion during an initial phone conversation. Our recruitment approach resulted in a final sample of 20 participants, nine of whom worked in office environments, three in healthcare clinics or hospitals, three in hospitality outlets, three in outdoor team environments (construction, packaging, and environmental science), and two in schools. The diverse range of industries represented in our sample enhances the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The age range of participants was 21 to 55 years (average age = 32); their current organizational tenures were between 6 months and 12 years (average tenure = 3.5 years); and three-quarters of participants were female.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between March 2019 and September 2020. We collected two types of data from each participant: written incident reports and follow-up interviews. In combination, such qualitative data provided “thick, detailed descriptions” of (a) how gossip recipients responded to both positive and negative workplace gossip and (b) how these responses affected recipients’ relationships with gossipers and gossip targets (Gephart, 2004, p. 455)

⁶ It is worth noting that, due to restrictions imposed by our university’s ethics committee, we could only gain ethics approval for the research if our sample consisted of individuals who worked in separate organisations.

Written incident reports

We collected written reports about workplace gossip incidents in which the participant was the gossip recipient. Each participant supplied three such reports, recording them on a structured reporting document provided by the research team (see Appendix D at the end of the thesis). The instructions on this document specified that one report should describe an impactful workplace gossip incident that took place at any point during the participant's working career, while the other two incidents—one positive and one negative—were to be recorded during a period lasting approximately two weeks⁷ at the participant's current workplace. Participants were instructed to record these latter incidents as soon as possible after they happened. This immediate approach to recording incidents, often used in diary studies, has been recommended by other researchers for capturing the fleeting nature of gossip (Michelson et al., 2010; Waddington, 2005). Thus, in combination, the three incident reports supplied by each participant captured data on both the long- and short-term relational outcomes of gossip incidents.

The structured reporting document for each incident report consisted of 17 open-ended questions. Example questions were: "Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person?" and "Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?" Notably, the instructions indicating the type of incidents that participants were to record did not use the word gossip. Instead, participants were asked to record incidents in which a colleague talked to them "informally and evaluatively about a coworker (or coworkers) who is not present." We also gave examples of the type of incidents that would be suitable to report on, based on items from the workplace gossip scale developed by Brady et al. (2017). The reason for using a description and examples of gossip

⁷ Some participants took up to six weeks to supply their reports.

in the instructions, as opposed to the word gossip itself, was to minimize the chance of gossip's pejorative connotations influencing the type of incidents reported (Brady et al., 2017).

Follow-up interviews

Once participants had completed written incident reports, the first author conducted follow-up interviews with each participant. Interviews served a threefold purpose. First, they provided an opportunity to clarify details about the workplace gossip incidents recorded in reports, thus enriching this written data. For instance, in response to the question, "Did this incident affect your relationship with the source? If so, how?", one participant wrote, "Brought us closer." Interviews enabled us to enrich such brief written responses by asking questions like, "You've written that the incident brought you closer to the source. Can you expand on *how* it brought you closer?"

Second, interviews allowed for deeper questioning about how participants perceived their own responses to workplace gossip and how these responses affected their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. This aspect of interviews became particularly important later in the data collection process, as by that time, certain themes and patterns were emerging from analysis of earlier data. For example, an unexpected, emergent theme suggested that recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions might be more important in shaping relational outcomes than gossip valence or content *per se*. Thus, in later interviews, we could further explore this theme by asking questions such as, "Can you think of any instances where a coworker told you something *positive* about another coworker and that had a *negative* impact on your relationship with the person telling you?"

Finally, interviews enhanced the credibility of findings by enabling the research team to ensure that our interpretations of written incident reports aligned with participants' own interpretations of the same incidents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For instance, we asked one

participant: “So what I took from that answer is that [negative gossip] can have a positive impact [on your relationship with the gossiper] if it’s said to you in confidence and it has these socially constructive intentions behind it, would that be fair?” Such questioning ensured that we were preserving the meanings that participants themselves ascribed to their experiences of workplace gossip (Gephart, 2004).

Interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and were digitally recorded. The first author transcribed all interviews verbatim and sent transcripts to participants for checking before beginning data analysis. The final dataset consisted of 60 written incident reports and 20 interview transcripts, totaling approximately 400 pages of textual data.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using template analysis (King, 2012). Template analysis reveals themes about how people experience phenomena in real-world contexts (King, 2012), making the technique well suited to uncovering patterns in individuals’ responses to gossip. Template analysis has been recommended by gossip researchers for studies incorporating multi-source data (Waddington, 2005; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Researchers may choose template analysis over other common qualitative analysis techniques, such as grounded theory and more generic forms of thematic analysis, for a variety of reasons (King, 2012). King (2012) suggests that interpretivist researchers typically choose template analysis over grounded theory due to the ongoing associations between grounded theory and positivist research, as well as because template analysis is less prescriptive than grounded theory. Further, King (2012) holds that template analysis may be preferred over more generic forms of thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006) because the former is more flexible in terms of the number of coding levels it permits and because the structure provided by the initial template facilitates the incorporation of multisource textual data.

In practical terms, template analysis involves the development of a coding manual, or template, which is applied iteratively to textual data (King, 2012). The researcher develops an initial coding template based on research aims, a preliminary scanning of data, and/or *a priori* themes from background literature. This initial template is applied to a subset of the data, revised, reapplied to another subset of the data, revised, and so on, until the template encompasses all relevant data, and no new themes emerge.

Developing the template and open coding

To develop the initial template, we familiarized ourselves with the first subset of our data (approximately one-fifth of our final dataset) by reading through the incident reports and interview transcripts multiple times. This familiarization process enabled the development of an initial template based on nine broad or “open” coding categories (Saldaña, 2016), all of which reflected the gossip recipient’s perspective of gossip incidents: *Relationships with gossipers*, *Relationships with targets*, *Work-related gossip*, *Personal gossip*, *Analytical responses*, *Intuitive responses*, *Behavioral responses*, *Effects on relationships with gossipers*, and *Effects on relationships with targets*. These open codes in the template served to fracture the extensive data typical of qualitative studies into categories of particular significance to the research question (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Thus, open coding represented a crucial first step in moving from the concrete to the abstract during analysis, enabling the recognition of broad patterns that may have been hard to recognize amid dense evidence (Richards, 2009).

Starting with our nine open coding categories, we used the software program Nvivo to code data in subsets, each of which consisted of written incident reports and interview transcripts from between four and six participants. We analyzed data in subsets because this practice is standard for template analysis (King, 2012) and permitted data collection and analysis to take place concurrently. As noted earlier, this approach enabled us to adjust our

interview questions to focus on themes that emerged later in the data collection process (Spradley, 1979). In contrast, the incident reporting document remained the same throughout data collection. The first and second authors both participated in coding, acting as primary and secondary coder, respectively. To enhance the dependability and confirmability of our coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), these authors met for discussion after coding the first three sub-sets of the data independently. Meeting in this way enabled us to share interpretations of the data and revise our coding as necessary.

Fine-grained coding

Once we had open-coded the data, we undertook more fine-grained coding, as illustrated in Tables 2-4, Appendix E. We began with first-order codes that revealed the rich detail of participants' experiences. For example, within the open coding category of "Intuitive responses", we coded participants' statements about gossipers' perceived expressions of frustration and anger as "Venting frustration or anger." As the table shows, first-order codes were highly specific and grounded in raw data. We then clustered first-order codes into conceptually broader, second-order codes (Saldaña, 2016). To illustrate, we clustered the first-order codes "Venting frustration or anger," "Genuine emotional display," and "Expressing appreciation or admiration" into the second-order code "Expressions of emotion".

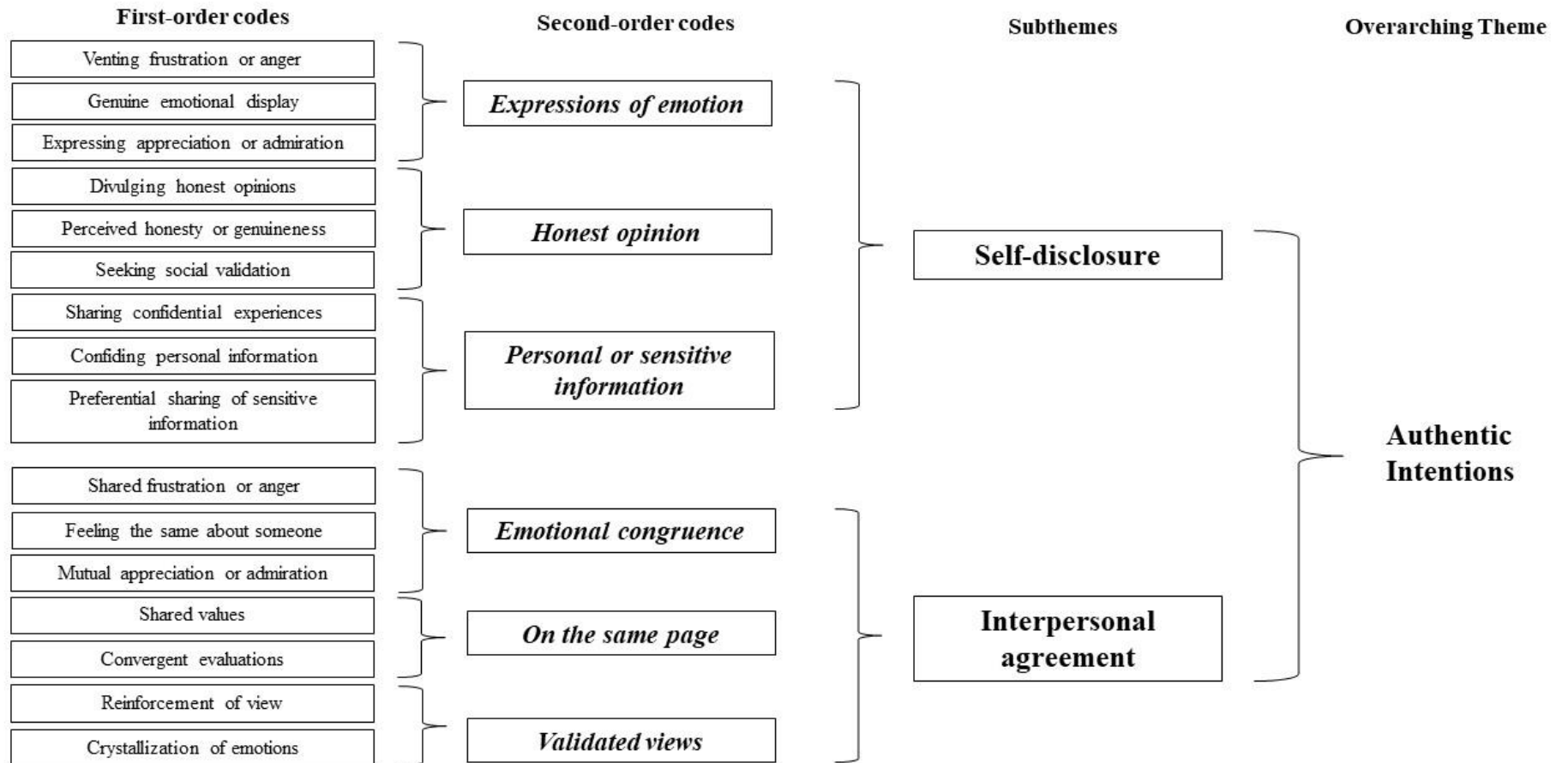
Subthemes and themes

The next step in analysis was to explore coded data for possible themes. We began by looking for conceptual similarities among second-order codes and thus identified subthemes. Subthemes coalesced into patterns that we report as overarching themes, the highest level of abstraction from the data. To help identify overarching themes, we prepared a summary table of the 60 gossip incidents captured in the data (see Appendix F); such tables aid data analysis by enabling researchers to see big picture patterns in thick and detailed datasets (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). We worked back and forth between this table and our first-order codes, second-order codes, and subthemes, seeking broad patterns that occurred across multiple incidents. Figure 2⁸ depicts the emergence of an overarching theme, described in detail in the findings section below, via our analytical process. To support overarching themes further, we drew on statements participants made during interviews regarding their typical responses to workplace gossip.

⁸ Figures that illustrate the emergence of the overarching themes *good intentions* and *bad intentions* appear in Appendix G of the thesis.

Figure 2: Illustration of the process whereby we moved from first- and second-order codes to subthemes and overarching themes



FINDINGS

I think intent comes into play ... I think you can pick up when people are talking about other people whether it's for good reasons or bad reasons, and I think their intention makes a difference. You know, if they're just there wanting to rant about that person, you're probably going to look as to whether they're being honest or whether they're just making a big deal out of nothing, or if it's for a positive reason. (Office worker 2, Human resources, interview)

How do recipients' responses to workplace gossip incidents affect their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets? As the participant quote above suggests, analysis of 60 written incident reports and 20 interview transcripts revealed that recipients' interpretations of gossipers' *intentions* were key to addressing this research question. Analysis revealed three overarching themes that reflect such interpretations of intentions—*authentic intentions*, *good intentions*, and *bad intentions*—each of which initiated a distinct process whereby gossip incidents shaped both recipient-gossiper and recipient-target relationships. Figure 3 provides a graphic depiction of the three processes, demonstrating how recipients' interpretations of intentions influenced the relational outcomes of gossip incidents. Table 1 illustrates the criteria used to code recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions as good, bad, or authentic. It is worth noting that good intentions and authentic intentions are not mutually exclusive categories. For example, a recipient could perceive a gossip as simultaneously intending to make a self-disclosure (indicating authentic intentions) and to provide prosocial information about a target (indicating good intentions). Overall, however, there were sufficient differences between recipients' perceptions of good versus authentic intentions to warrant treating them as qualitatively distinct.

In the following subsections, we explain the three processes our analysis revealed and illustrate them with evidence from our dataset. We also provide an overview of what our data say about (a) the methods recipients used to interpret gossipers' intentions and (b) the

interplay between interpretations of intentions and recipients' relationships with gossipers and targets.

Figure 3: How gossip incidents shape recipients' relationships with gossipers and gossip targets

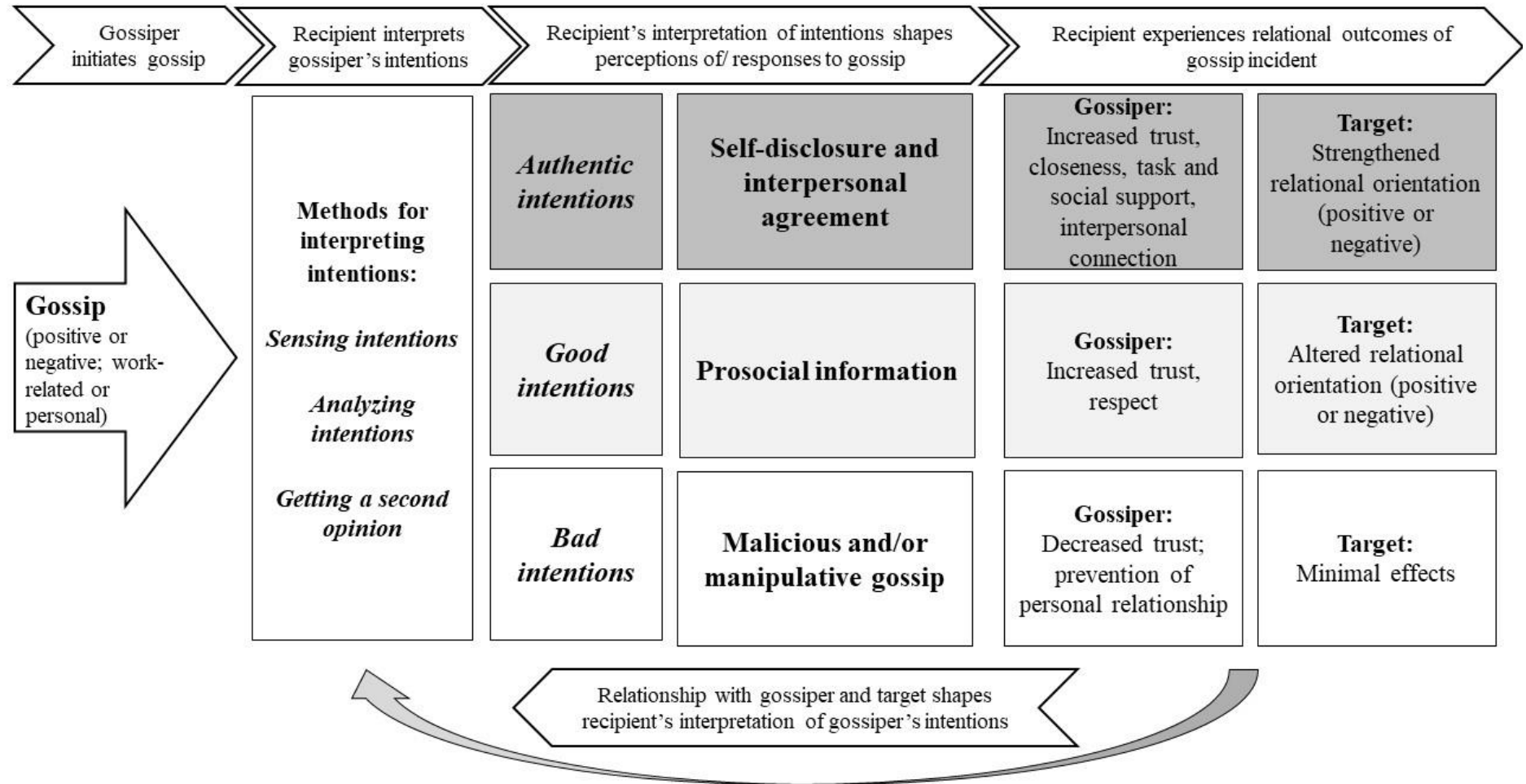


Table 1: Definitions of themes

Name of theme	Definition of theme	Examples
<i>Authentic intentions</i>	<i>Intending to disclose authentic information about oneself or to express one's authentic emotions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-disclosures about one's attitudes or values • Expressions of emotion
<i>Good intentions</i>	<i>Intending to provide information about a gossip target for prosocial or socially constructive purposes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warning a recipient about antisocial behavior by a target • Building team morale or indirectly facilitating positive relationships by providing positive information about a target
<i>Bad intentions</i>	<i>Intending to advance one's selfish interests by manipulating a recipient or gratuitously damaging a target's reputation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concealing one's true motives • Spreading false or exaggerated information about a target • Attacking a target's reputation without justification

Process 1: Authentic Intentions

Recipients perceived *authentic intentions* when they sensed that gossipers were motivated by an authentic desire to disclose something important about themselves to gossip recipients. Perceptions of such *self-disclosures* set the stage for the other key recipient response in the *authentic intentions* process, which we label *interpersonal agreement*. As shown in Figure 3 and explained in the following subsections, perceptions of *self-disclosures* and *interpersonal agreement* with gossip shaped relational outcomes in important ways.

Self-disclosure

Recipients construed gossip as a form of *self-disclosure* from gossipers. Self-disclosures included *expressions of emotion* (“I believe [his motivation] was to get it off his chest, as he is getting sick and tired of the same thing happening with the target”), *honest opinions* (“I believe she was giving her honest opinion on this person”), and *personal or sensitive information* based on gossipers’ experiences of gossip targets (“[The source’s] motivation? ... just to share her experience with me”). Recipients typically interpreted self-disclosures as a means for gossipers to seek social support and/or validate their emotions and opinions toward targets. A participant captured this notion when she said,

[One of the sources] started the conversation, but she didn’t want to just criticize [the target], she wanted to share her thoughts and feelings with work peers and friends to see if they had the same problem. After the three of them realized they were in the same situation, I think they kept going because they were feeling supported and relieved, as if they suddenly got rid of heavy personal demands. They also wanted to show the other two people in the group (including myself) what the real situation was to explain why sometimes they’re overworked or stressed while managing us as well. (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)

Interpersonal agreement

By disclosing their honest emotions and opinions to recipients, gossipers set the stage for the other key recipient response within the *authentic intentions* process: *interpersonal agreement*. Interpersonal agreement occurred when recipients agreed with gossipers’ subjective evaluations of targets. Such agreement could be based on *emotional congruence*

with gossipers, or on perceptions of being *on the same page* as gossipers. To illustrate, recipients experienced *emotional congruence* when they shared gossipers' specific emotions toward targets (e.g., "my feelings of frustration are shared") or their general emotional orientations toward targets (e.g., "I often feel the same as her toward [the target]"). Recipients perceived they were *on the same page* as gossipers when gossip indicated shared values and behavioral expectations between themselves and gossipers (e.g., "It just solidified that we were on the same page and were both looking out for good work") or when gossip indicated convergent evaluations of targets (e.g., "I agree with the source and think [the target] is a good person and teacher").

Relational outcomes

As shown in Figure 3, the *authentic intentions* process generally strengthened recipient-gossiper relationships, engendering greater levels of trust, closeness, social support, and interpersonal connection between the two parties. This process also strengthened recipients' relational orientations toward targets, whether those orientations were positive or negative. Our data reveal three interrelated mechanisms whereby recipients' responses to authentic gossip engendered such relational outcomes.

First, perceived *self-disclosures* strengthened recipient-gossiper relationships through reciprocation of trust. Typically, when recipients interpreted gossip as a form of self-disclosure, gossip incidents made them feel closer and more trusting toward gossipers. For example, one participant said, "I think [the gossip incident] strengthened our relationship because I was trusted with this information and the source's feelings in a matter which was obviously quite stressful for her." Similarly, another participant reported, "[The gossip incident] made me feel closer to the source as he was able to vent and share his true feelings and frustrations with me." Our data suggest that these perceptions of gossip engendered reciprocation of trust: If the gossipers were willing to share important personal information

with the recipient, it implied the gossipier trusted the recipient. In return, the recipient was more inclined to trust the gossipier with their own personal information. Participants reported that this open sharing of personal information signaled the development of a close and trusting interpersonal bond between themselves and gossipers. For example,

I think [my manger] told me [this negative information about a coworker] because she could trust me and needed to share it with someone who would understand her and support her...The fact that [my manager] felt she could trust me in sharing this incident with me made me trust her even more as well. I felt more close to her and felt like I could share more problems with her without being judged, as we had a close trusting relationship. (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)

The reciprocation of trust mechanism was especially strong when self-disclosures revealed strongly negative information about gossipers' emotional experiences of targets. For instance, one participant received gossip about a "raw and vicious example" of bullying behavior that the gossipier had experienced at the hands of the target. This participant described how receiving this gossip affected her trust in the gossipier:

If anything, this incident made me trust the source even more. I didn't think that was possible as she already had my entire trust, however this [incident] revealed another layer of friendship and vulnerability to her. (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)

As this quote suggests, revealing vulnerabilities through disclosures of strongly negative emotions was particularly important for building trust and closeness. Other quotes that illustrated this pattern include:

And just the fact that she was kind of vulnerable, and then came to me to kind of vent or whatever, I suppose that just naturally – it might also be a female thing, right, where we've shared a moment – she was pretty upset – and so then naturally you're probably more ... I mean I think then you've got to know someone a bit better because you've seen them when they're a bit vulnerable or upset, so it's a stronger bond than if it was just the normal everyday "G'day, how are you going?" (Office worker, Project management, interview)

Thus, our findings imply that negative gossip, by revealing negative emotions and opinions, may engender stronger *positive* outcomes for recipient-gossiper relationships than positive gossip, provided recipients interpret gossipers' intentions as authentic.

Second, interpersonal agreement with gossip typically strengthened recipients' relationships with gossipers by engendering increased support and feelings of interpersonal connection. To illustrate, recipients who experienced *emotional congruence* with gossipers (a subtype of interpersonal agreement) subsequently felt more supported by those individuals:

The people at work saw it, felt it, were there when times got tough—like they truly understand. So it's kind of nice to have a little, um, community, for want of a better word, for when you feel like having a bitch there are people who actually get it. (Office worker 1, Marketing, interview)

On the other hand, *emotional congruence* also encouraged recipients to offer increased task and social support to gossipers:

[Since the incident] I try to help [the source] more with her job whenever I can because I feel that she's having a hard time dealing with [the target]. I also acknowledge her effort at work and her hardworking attitude. (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)

[After the incident] I really stepped up and actively supported [the source] more than I normally would have. For example, when she was heading to meetings with the target I would proactively make sure she was okay afterwards. The source and I would have lunch and coffee dates much more regularly together, to enable us to check in and see how each other was doing. (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)

It is worth mentioning that of all the discrete emotions that engendered *emotional congruence* between recipients and gossipers, frustration stood out as the most prevalent in our study. As noted earlier, recipients interpreted gossip as a means for gossipers to “vent” their frustrations toward targets. Curiously, however, our findings suggest that when such frustrations were shared between recipients and gossipers (signaling emotional congruence), gossip served less as an *outlet* for frustration and more as a means of validating and therefore *reinforcing* this negative emotion.

Within the *interpersonal agreement* subtheme of the *authentic intentions* process, perceptions of being *on the same page* as gossipers strengthened recipients' relationships with those individuals by providing a point of interpersonal connection that facilitated greater interpersonal trust and cooperation. For instance, one participant received gossip about how a

target had behaved selfishly and deceitfully toward the gossip. This recipient could relate to the gossip's experience because she (the recipient) had been the victim of similar behavior from the target herself. In describing how this gossip incident affected her relationship with the gossip, the recipient wrote, "[After the incident] we became closer. More trust and kind of on the same page. We had similar opinions and wanted a positive team."

Finally, as depicted in Figure 3, the *authentic intentions* process shaped recipients' relationships with *targets*. Specifically, interpersonal agreement with gossip strengthened recipients' positive or negative relational orientations toward targets. It did so by signaling that other members of the workplace shared recipients' opinions of targets, thus validating their preexisting or emerging views of those individuals. To illustrate, participants reported that evaluative information from a coworker "confirmed," "solidified," "reinforced," or "strengthened" their existing opinion of a gossip target. These existing opinions could be positive—"I already knew that the target did a good job and this just solidifies that"—or negative—"This incident reinforced my frustration for the target." As the preceding quotation suggests, gossip validated views by crystallizing emotions that recipients were already feeling toward targets. Such crystallized emotions, in turn, shaped recipients' interactions with targets by reinforcing a negative or positive relational orientation toward those individuals. For instance, one participant stated, "[The gossip] doesn't affect my trust [in the target], but it helps to confirm the annoyance I was already feeling and the need to distance myself from her as much as I can." These findings again support the counterintuitive idea that "venting" negative emotions through gossip may reinforce such emotions, rather than providing an outlet for them to dissipate.

Importantly, the relational outcomes of interpersonal agreement were strongest when recipients had preexisting or at least emerging views of targets. A participant captured this notion when she said,

The trust level [in the gossip] goes up even more when the same thing happens to me, and if I know the [target] then it makes, like, me and my colleague we are a team and we know that - like, we have proof that the person who's not present and whatever was said about them, like the opinion [toward that person] becomes stronger.

Thus, the *validated views* mechanism was most common in scenarios where the members of the gossip triad had existing relationships or were relatively familiar with one another.

Process 2: Good Intentions

The second key process through which gossip shaped recipients' relationships with gossipers and targets was *good intentions*. Like *authentic intentions*, perceptions of *good intentions* generally led to positive relational outcomes vis-à-vis gossipers, such as increased interpersonal trust and respect. The good intentions process also shaped recipients' relational orientations toward targets.

Prosocial information

Recipients who interpreted gossipers' intentions as "good" typically perceived gossip as a form of *prosocial information*. By prosocial information, we mean information about a gossip target—whether positive or negative—that benefits people other than the gossipers. Examples of prosocial information included praise of deserving coworkers (e.g., "this conversation was more a general appreciation amongst the team of what a good person the target was and how we were lucky to have him") and warnings about antisocial or untrustworthy coworkers (e.g., "I think he was warning me of her as I was beginning to discover a few things she had told me which weren't true and that had surprised me"). Genuine praise constituted prosocial information because it contributed to team building, while warnings about untrustworthy individuals were prosocial because they encouraged recipients to be more cautious in their interactions with those people. Although recipients in our study interpreted both positive and negative gossip as *prosocial information*, they more

commonly interpreted positive gossip in this way. The following quote suggests this was because recipients more readily associated positive gossip with prosocial intentions:

I actually noticed that the source is the kind of guy that only really says positive things about people... That's why I think I began to trust him: because he didn't—because he doesn't run people down too much. (Outdoor team worker, Packaging, interview)

Relational outcomes

Receiving prosocial information from gossipers typically strengthened recipients' relationships with those individuals. We found that these positive relational outcomes stemmed from recipients' perceptions that sharing prosocial information signaled a *prosocial orientation*. A perceived prosocial orientation suggested gossipers would be (1) *trustworthy social partners* and (2) *reliable sources of information*. First, as illustrated in the following quote, recipients saw gossipers who showed a concern for the interests of other people as trustworthy social partners:

I thought it was very kind of [the source] to praise a teammate's good work while she was not there, and it made me trust [the source] even more in that she would also recognize my successes and try to defend me if something happens provided I work well. (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)

Second, because recipients perceived prosocial information as accurate and reliable, receiving such information made them feel they could trust prosocial gossipers for the inside word on other colleagues. This pattern was evident in participant quotes such as, "I trust [the source] more and feel more comfortable asking her anything that happened around work when I am not around because I know she is telling the truth." Being able to depend on gossipers for reliable information was particularly important for those in a management position, who were not necessarily privy to shop-floor gossip:

Now in my role [as a manager], I'm a little bit more out of the loop of the more everyday sort of gossipy things. I'm not often working downstairs side-by-side with new people, so it's hard to know [what the new people are like] sometimes, and it does take a long time to sort of build a bit of a relationship [with new people] ... So I think [receiving information about those people] is certainly positive because I think it helps in some way get to know someone a wee bit better, even if it is sort of in a third

person setting ... I've worked with several of my colleagues for years, so we have that – I have that trust in the working relationship – but also on a friendship basis as well, so when it comes to what they relay to me, I kind of know that that's reliable, coming from a reliable source, and I feel confident in what they're telling me is right. (Healthcare clinic manager, interview)

As the preceding quote suggests, the perceived accuracy and reliability of *prosocial information* meant that it also shaped recipients' relationships with targets. Essentially, prosocial information about gossip targets “colored” the way recipients perceived those individuals. Such colored perceptions, in turn, shaped recipients' relational orientations toward targets. As one would expect, positive information usually improved recipients' perceptions of targets, engendering higher levels of trust and respect and facilitating more positive recipient-target relationships:

A colleague was describing another colleague who I had not met yet as she was new to the job. [The source] described [the target] as someone you want to be around and chat to because she is very relaxed and lovely. She also thought she had common sense and could therefore be trusted in the job...[This positive evaluation] made [my] working relationship [with the target] better as I felt like I could trust her... [It also] made me more inclined to get to know her personally. (Midwife, incident report)

Conversely, negative information that recipients perceived as prosocial had largely negative impacts on recipient-target relationships:

I had no experience with either [target 1] or [target 2] really, so I couldn't say either way [whether I trusted them or not]... [After the gossip incident] I definitely didn't want to go out of my way to work with either [target 1] or [target 2]. I found all the information made me a little intimidated by them, actually, so I tried to stay away as much as I could. (Teacher 2, incident report)

Gossip colored recipients' views of targets most strongly when recipients (a) perceived gossip as containing subjectively important information about targets and (b) had weak or non-existent relationships with targets.

Within the *good intentions* process, we found that gossip valence influenced the *type* of recipient-target relationships that were shaped by gossip incidents. Typically, recipients reported that negatively altered perceptions of gossip targets influenced their *personal* (or non-professional) relationships with those individuals. Thus, participants stated: “[The

gossip] prevented any potential personal relationship from developing [between myself and the target]” and “[The target and I] don’t have a personal relationship and this probably confirms for me that I don’t want one.” However, because recipients saw negative gossip as an unsanctioned form of communication, they felt they could not allow it to influence their professional interactions with targets. Consequently, they reported maintaining expedient professional relationships with targets despite negative information about them: “I remained professional [toward the target] in work but never had a relationship outside work”; “[Since the incident] I only act professional toward [the target] and avoid any personal conversation with him. I tend not to talk to him if I don’t need to.” When gossip conveyed positive information about targets, in contrast, it usually improved recipients’ personal *and* professional relationships with targets: “[Following the incident] I found it easier to deal with [the target] after looking at him more positively”; “As well as professional respect, it increased my personal respect for the target. As someone I don’t know as well, it also showed me more of the target’s personality and values.”

Process 3: Bad Intentions

The final overarching pattern that emerged from our analysis was *bad intentions*. Bad intentions could be malicious, such as deliberately damaging a target’s reputation, or manipulative, such as advancing a hidden agenda. Effectively, “*manipulative intentions*” is a more abstract way of saying that someone appeared to be concealing a hidden agenda, such as boosting their own status or trying to gain something. In contrast to the two processes reported above—i.e., *authentic intentions* and *good intentions*—*bad intentions* damaged recipient-gossiper relationships and had minimal effects on recipient-target relationships, as shown in Figure 3.

Malicious or manipulative intentions

Recipients in multiple incidents interpreted gossipers' intentions as malicious and/or manipulative. Malicious intentions usually manifested as a deliberate attack on the target's reputation: "[The source said this] to damage the target's reputation and cause drama in the workplace"; "[The source] said it out of frustration and to attempt to boost his reputation amongst staff by bringing down another colleague"; "I think the source told me this because he is jealous of the target and insecure about his job. He is spreading the word of the target being an incompetent worker out of spite." As the two latter quotes suggest, recipients sometimes inferred that such reputational attacks were simultaneously motivated by manipulative intentions—that is, by a *hidden agenda*. A hidden agenda could be a desire to advance the gossipers' own reputation and status by denigrating a rival colleague (e.g., "I think the source wanted to make herself look knowledgeable and [like] someone who people ask for help"), or an attempt to manipulate the recipient into divulging personal opinions and information that could subsequently be used against the recipient:

I have learned that even if somebody comes and says something positive to me about somebody, maybe they have a hidden agenda: They say something good [about the other person] for me to say, "Actually that person is not good," and I open up to them and talk about negative stuff about the other person. (Office manager, Human resources, interview)

According to written incident report data, recipients more readily associated negative gossip with hidden agendas. However, four participants stated in interviews that they sometimes also interpreted positive gossip as reflecting a hidden agenda, as illustrated by the above quote from an office manager, as well as by the following response from a construction manager, who was asked whether gossip valence was decisive in shaping his interpretation of a gossipers' agenda:

I think it can go both ways—there can be a personal agenda because, especially with my position [as a manager], I think people can come and, like, suck up to me a little bit, so they might have a positive thing to say [about a coworker] like that—and that could sound like negative thinking from me, but it definitely happens, and it's new guys, and especially if they think that getting close to me and impressing me is going to help them keep their job.

Relational outcomes

Perceptions of malicious and/or manipulative intentions undermined recipients' relationships with gossipers because such intentions signaled an *antisocial orientation*. Recipients saw an antisocial orientation as an indication that gossipers were untrustworthy social partners. The following quotes illustrate this pattern:

My trust towards [the source] was affected, because I could see she's not impartial or objective in her judgements but they're affected by her personal preferences and feelings toward other colleagues. (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)

This behavior [i.e., "spreading the word of the target being an incompetent worker out of spite"] has me wondering how much I can trust [the source]... I notice little things now, snarky comments he makes and just how he seems less willing to work together with people. (Construction manager, incident report)

A commonly cited reason for recipients' loss of trust in antisocial gossipers can be summarized as: *What would they say about me?* Stated differently, recipients who perceived manipulative and/or malicious intentions lost trust in gossipers because they feared becoming targets of negative gossip from those individuals themselves:

I thought it was really unprofessional to gossip about someone in his team to someone lower in the work hierarchy. I figured that if he was going to do that to a close colleague, what would stop him speaking ill of me to other staff. (Teacher 1, incident report)

After listening to him gossiping about another waitress, I felt very uncomfortable. I was afraid of him saying negative things about me if I make mistakes. (Hospitality worker, incident report)

In turn, this undermining of trust made recipients hesitant to share personal information with gossipers, and their relationships never became close or personal:

After this [negative gossip] incident, our overall relationship didn't change (still casual conversations), but it did make me think that [the source] wasn't a person that I wanted to open up to about personal matters at all. (Optometrist, incident report)

Table 2: Recipients' methods for interpreting gossipers' intentions

Method	Definition of method	Descriptive examples	Illustrative quotes
<i>Sensing intentions</i>	Gossip recipient relies on intuition, feelings, and/or non-verbal information to determine the gossipers' intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceiving a genuine emotional display • Reading non-verbal information • Relying on intuition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I could see how my colleague was upset and was really mad at the target.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, incident report) • “I feel like you [depend on] eye contact and things like that – it’s trying to figure out if people are having a bitch or if there’s actually something going wrong.” (Hospitality manager, interview) • “You could simply tell she was being honest.” (Office worker, Hospitality, incident report)
<i>Analyzing intentions</i>	Gossip recipient relies on analytical reasoning and perceived gossip accuracy to determine the gossipers' intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gauging gossip accuracy by thinking about how it aligns with own observations, experience, and/or knowledge • Analyzing gossipers' relationships with others in the workplace to understand motives • Analyzing motives to infer a hidden agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I did believe what I had been told by the source as I had previously witnessed a similar reaction from the target to a client.” (Medical clinic manager, incident report) • “[The source] might be a bit biased because she misses [an absent colleague]. (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report) • “I think the source told me this because he is jealous of the target and insecure about his job.” (Construction manager, incident report)
<i>Getting a second opinion</i>	Gossip recipient considers the view of another coworker, or coworkers, to determine the gossipers' intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking a trusted source for their view on the matter • Taking into consideration what others have said about the target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes I try and like verify it through maybe someone else that I trust, who knows them better, or get their side of the story.” (Midwife, interview) • “[A]s I keep hearing more incidents of conflict with this Project Manager I tend to trust those that are providing their accounts.” (Office worker, Project management, incident report)

Interpretations of Intentions and Relationships: A Dynamic Interplay

Our findings indicate an important and dynamic interplay between recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions and recipients' relationships with both gossipers and gossip targets. As depicted in Figure 2, we found that recipients relied on three key methods for interpreting gossipers' intentions: *sensing intentions*, *analyzing intentions*, and *getting a second opinion*. Table 2 defines these methods and illustrates them with descriptive examples and participant quotes from our dataset. Importantly, most of the responses described in Table 2 were shaped by recipients' existing relationships—or lack of existing relationships—with the other members of the gossip triad. When *sensing intentions*, recipients frequently relied on their existing feelings of trust and closeness toward gossipers. This pattern was evident in statements such as: “I trust [the source] as I work many years with her, and I believe she has no intention to deliver inaccurate or wrong information to me”; “I believed the source as we have a close relationship and I know it takes a lot to rattle this person”; and “If I 100% trust the source, I listen to them faster without doing my own analysis—I give them some credit for the trust that I have.” In a related vein, participants reported that a lack of closeness made it harder to read gossipers' intentions:

I think it's hard to know, really, but I think [the source] maybe just said it out of frustration and possibly to make himself feel more powerful or something – yeah, I guess it's hard to know because I don't have a close working relationship with him. (Teacher 1, interview)

Recipients' existing relationships with gossipers and targets also informed how they *analyzed intentions*. For instance, recipients who had positive relationships with targets were more likely to interpret negative gossip about those individuals as being motivated by manipulative and/or malicious intentions:

During a job that I was supervising, colleague A, who was a new employee that I had only just started working with, communicated to me about colleague B, who he thought lacked the ability to do the job properly and efficiently. Basically, colleague A said colleague B was a useless worker. This immediately made me feel that I could not trust colleague A [the source]. The reason for this was I had worked with

colleague B [the target] for a long period of time and I trusted him and his ability to do the job properly and efficiently. (Construction manager, incident report)

Finally, when recipients did not have established relationships with either gossipers or gossip targets, they often relied on the views of trusted colleagues to gauge intentions.

Participant statements that revealed this pattern included: “I spoke to close workmates that I trusted and asked if it was true because I was curious” and “Yeah, sometimes I try and like verify [what I’ve been told] through someone else that I trust, who knows them better, or get their side of the story.”

In sum, our data imply a dynamic interplay between recipients’ interpretations of gossipers’ intentions and their relationships with the gossip and the target. Gossip incidents could shape both recipient-gossiper and recipient-target relationships in positive or negative ways, depending on how recipients interpreted intentions. Yet recipients’ interpretations of intentions were also shaped by their existing relationships—or lack thereof—with gossipers and gossip targets.

Taken together, our findings reveal three processes whereby recipients’ responses to gossip incidents shaped their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. We also identified a cyclical interaction between recipients’ relationships with gossipers and targets and their interpretations of intentions. As shown in Figure 3, the processes whereby gossip shaped relationships held true regardless of whether gossip was positive or negative and work-related or personal. In saying that, gossip valence did shape interpretations of intentions and relational outcomes in ways reported in the detailed findings above, some of which were surprising when juxtaposed to existing research and conventional wisdom. We return to our surprising findings on the interplay between gossip valence and relational outcomes in the Discussion. Figure 3 also depicts the dynamic, cyclical interaction between recipients’ relationships with gossipers and targets and their interpretations of gossipers’ intentions. Specifically, the right-to-left arrow at the bottom of the figure shows how the relational

outcomes of gossip incidents fed back into recipients' interpretations of intentions, shaping recipients' relationships with gossipers and targets and, by extension, their interpretations of gossipers' intentions in future gossip incidents.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to build and enrich theory on the processes whereby gossip shapes workplace relationships. While existing quantitative research suggests an association between gossip and relationships, scholars are yet to identify the psychological processes that underpin the mixed relational outcomes of workplace gossip. Therefore, we explored the following research question to reveal processes whereby gossip shaped workplace relationships: *How do gossip recipients' responses to workplace gossip incidents shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets?*

Findings revealed that recipients' responses to gossip shaped their relationships with the other members of the gossip triad via three distinct processes, as depicted in Figure 3. All three processes emanated from recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions—good, bad, or authentic. The surprising finding that negative gossip frequently produced stronger positive relational outcomes than positive gossip highlights the importance of understanding these nuanced processes. Thus, our study has important implications for research and theory on workplace gossip.

Implications for Research and Theory

Information about gossipers

Findings on the importance of gossipers' perceived intentions indicate that recipients' initial response to gossip was to ask themselves: What does this gossip reveal about the person gossiping to me? As such, our study implies that gossip shapes relationships not only by revealing information about gossip targets, but also by revealing information about *gossipers*. We contend that the importance recipients ascribed to information about gossipers

has implications for theory regarding how gossip affects both recipient-gossiper and recipient-target relationships.

First, this finding suggests an alternative exchange process whereby gossip builds recipient-gossiper relationships. As noted earlier, most prior research has examined how gossip shapes recipient-gossiper relationships from an exchange perspective. This perspective views gossip as a source of inside information—a social resource—that coworkers exchange for influence, social support, and information (Brady et al., 2017; Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b). However, prior research largely assumes that the inside information coworkers exchange through gossip was either about others in the workplace (i.e., gossip targets) (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2019b) or about group norms (Grosser et al., 2010). In contrast, our findings imply that gossip builds relationships by enabling exchanges of information about oneself (i.e., the gossiper). Recipients frequently interpreted gossip as a means whereby gossipers disclosed information about their own emotions, opinions, and experiences of gossip targets. Further, participants typically reported that receiving such information engendered increased trust and closeness toward gossipers. Consequently, future research could elaborate and test how gossip builds (or potentially undermines) recipient-gossiper relationships through exchanges of information about gossipers themselves. A longitudinal design drawing on paired data from workplace dyads may be particularly appropriate for examining such a research question.

Additionally, the inferences recipients made about gossipers—based on information about gossipers themselves—influenced the extent to which gossip from those individuals shaped recipients' relationships with *targets*. When recipients inferred that gossipers had good intentions, information from those individuals colored the ways recipients saw targets. In contrast, information from gossipers whose behavior betrayed an antisocial orientation was dismissed by recipients as manipulative or malicious. Consequently, such gossip had minimal

effects on recipients' relational orientations toward targets. Thus, our findings have implications for the reputational information perspective (Feinberg et al., 2012; Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Specifically, we suggest that gossip's efficacy as a source of reputational information hinges on the extent to which recipients trust the source of that information. As discussed in Findings, our study reveals three methods that recipients relied on to assess the trustworthiness of gossipers: *sensing intentions*, *analyzing intentions*, and *getting a second opinion*. We therefore suggest that future research could use these exploratory findings as a starting point for investigating how recipients appraise the trustworthiness of workplace gossipers.

Gossip valence

Our findings on the importance of perceived intentions also have implications for understanding how *valence* shapes the relational outcomes of workplace gossip. As we noted at the outset of the paper, extant research paints an equivocal picture of how gossip valence affects relational outcomes (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018). Some studies suggest that positive gossip builds and maintains recipient-gossiper relationships while negative gossip does not (Farley et al., 2010; Farley, 2011; Kuo et al., 2018). However, other studies imply that negative gossip may also play a role in maintaining recipient-gossiper relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). Our study suggests a way of reconciling these mixed and seemingly contradictory findings. Unexpectedly, we found that both positive and negative gossip could engender positive relational outcomes, and that both positive and negative gossip could engender negative relational outcomes. The crux was how recipients interpreted gossipers' intentions. Although valence was a factor in how recipients interpreted gossipers' intentions, as discussed in Findings, it was far from being the only factor. Other factors included recipients' pre-existing relationships with gossipers and targets; recipients' construal

of gossipers' body language and tone; the received opinions of other colleagues; and the relative position of gossipers versus recipients in the work hierarchy.

As such, our findings imply that the highly subjective, multifaceted nature of recipients' responses to gossip may explain mixed findings on the relational outcomes of gossip valence reported in prior research (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018). For example, the finding of Kuo et al. (2018)—that receiving positive (but not negative) gossip from supervisors supported the development of supervisor-subordinate relationships—may be attributable to recipients responding differently to negative gossip from organizational superiors versus negative gossip from same level peers. In illustration, one of our participants stated, “I thought it was really unprofessional to gossip [negatively] about someone in his team *to someone lower in the work hierarchy*” [emphasis added]. Therefore, future research could further explore how contextual and relational factors shape recipients' responses to positive versus negative gossip. For example, how do cultural norms pertaining to gossiping across hierarchical levels shape recipients' responses to positive versus negative gossip? Research drawing on data from organizations with diverse cultures may be particularly valuable for addressing such questions.

The *authentic intentions* process we identified also offers novel insight into the interplay between gossip valence and relational outcomes. As already noted, we found that recipients readily interpreted both positive and negative gossip as being motivated by authentic intentions. Surprisingly, however, we found that the mechanisms whereby authentic gossip engendered positive relational outcomes were strengthened when gossip was *negative*. Specifically, disclosing negative views of gossip targets implied a higher level of trust in recipients than did the disclosure of positive views, leading to higher levels of reciprocated trust from recipients toward gossipers. Moreover, disclosing negative emotions and negative experiences of targets (compared to positive emotions and positive experiences) encouraged

higher levels of task and social support between recipients and gossipers. Thus, our findings illustrate how, in certain circumstances, negative workplace gossip builds stronger recipient-gossiper relationships than positive gossip, echoing findings in the psychology literature on non-work friendships (Bosson et al., 2006).

Gossip and emotions

Findings on the relational outcomes of emotional congruence between recipients and gossipers have implications for the study of gossip and emotions in organizations (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2019a; Waddington, 2012; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Interpersonal connections and social support between recipients and gossipers were strengthened when both experienced emotional congruence toward targets, based on shared frustration, anger, appreciation, or admiration. Moreover, emotional congruence strengthened a positive or negative relational orientation toward targets. These findings have implications for the social-functions-of-emotions perspective (Keltner & Haidt, 1999), which scholars have used to understand interpersonal relationships at work (Methot et al., 2017). Specifically, our findings uphold this perspective's contention that the most important functions of emotions are *interpersonal* as opposed to *intrapersonal* (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Gossip is a means of communicating emotions at the interpersonal level (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005), and our study provides evidence that the extent to which recipients share the same emotions as gossipers affects their relationships with both gossipers and targets. Thus, our study suggests possibilities for using the social-functions-of-emotions perspective as a lens to understand the intersection of gossip, emotions, and relationships in organizations. For instance, future research could explore how and when gossip functions to spread emotions through networks of interpersonal relationships, in line with the notion of emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002).

Findings on emotional congruence also suggest a counterintuitive take on the workplace phenomenon of “venting.” Venting involves expressing negative emotions about coworkers, such as frustration and anger (Brady et al., 2017). Scholars usually assume that venting, as the term itself suggests, serves as an outlet through which organizational members can “let off steam” (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005, p. 385). The implication of such language is that venting enables the dissipation of negative emotions. However, our findings suggest an alternative perspective on the phenomenon. Specifically, we found that venting often reinforced negative emotions at the dyadic level through emotional congruence. When recipients and gossipers both experienced the same negative emotions toward targets, such emotional congruence strengthened recipients’ negative relational orientations toward targets. Thus, rather than serving to dissipate frustration and anger, venting functioned to spread these emotions from gossipers to recipients through a process of social validation.

We suggest two intriguing implications of this finding. First, extrapolating from our data, we conjecture that the reason it feels good to vent about colleagues is not because venting enables the dissipation of negative emotions, but because venting can prompt social support from recipients who understand and share one’s emotions. While we only have evidence of recipients’ emotional responses to venting, future research could explore whether *gossipers’* negative emotions are dissipated or reinforced when they vent. For instance, does venting still feel good when the recipient explicitly disagrees with one’s emotions? Second, our findings on venting—and on the importance of emotional congruence more generally—have implications for the reputational information perspective of gossip (Enquist & Leimar, 1993; Feinberg et al., 2012; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2016b). This perspective holds that gossip shapes recipient-target relationships by providing *novel information* about the behavior of targets (Feinberg et al., 2012; Sommerfeld et al., 2007). However, we found that when recipients were relatively familiar with targets, gossip often shaped their relational

orientations toward those individuals by validating or crystallizing preexisting emotions. Thus, present findings imply that (a) the communication of emotion is inherently linked to how reputational information shapes recipient-target relationships and that (b) such information does not need to be novel to shape future interactions between recipients and targets. Taking up the latter idea, researchers could explore the extent to which reputational information shapes recipient-target relationships in workplace contexts with high interpersonal familiarity (e.g., commercial kitchens) versus those characterized by low familiarity (e.g., remote work teams).

Limitations

All research has limitations, and the present study is no exception. First, the design of our study captured recipients' responses to a gossip incident at one point in time. While this design provided evidence reflecting a clear focus on a particular incident of gossip, it did not allow us to isolate responses to gossip as the sole factor shaping recipients' relationships with gossipers and targets. For instance, participants reported that their responses to gossip increased trust in gossipers, yet they also reported that their existing level of trust in gossipers shaped their responses to gossip. Consequently, it is difficult to disentangle the full implications for trust from the single gossip incident. To overcome this limitation, we suggest future research that implements a longitudinal design, exploring the interplay between gossip and trust over time. For example, researchers could longitudinally follow a sample of new employees—that is, individuals who do not have established relationships with others in their workplace—and examine how their subjective responses to gossip affect their trust in coworkers, as well as how their emerging levels of trust in coworkers affect their responses to gossip from those individuals.

Second, our data came from single participants reporting on how gossip shaped their relationships with others in the workplace. We implemented this design to meet the ethics

requirements of the university's institutional review board. However, the design meant that we only captured one person's perspective on the relational outcomes of gossip incidents. Given that interpersonal relationships necessarily involve multiple individuals—and that individual perspectives on the same relationship may differ—it would be interesting to draw on paired or even network data to understand more about how different people perceive the relational outcomes of the same gossip incident. For instance, do gossipers and recipients typically perceive gossip incidents as having the same outcomes for their relationship with each other? And to what extent are targets aware of gossip about them affecting recipients' relationships with them?

Third, we note that the gender split among participants was uneven: 15 out of 20 were women. Although our study is intended to generalize to theory (Yin, 2003) not to a population, it is worth noting this imbalance given existing research indicates gender differences in gossip behavior (Watson, 2012). The imbalance cautions readers to view findings as exploratory and invites future research exploring the extent to which gender differences shape responses to gossip. For example, are men more likely to perceive negative gossip as a reputational attack given that men's gossip is typically more concerned with individual status differences (Watson, 2012)? Are women more likely to interpret gossip as a means of seeking social support given that women more readily associate emotional expressions with such support (Flaherty & Richman, 1989; Matud, Ibañez, Bethencourt, Marrero, & Carballeira, 2003)? Studies drawing on samples with an even split of men and women would be suitable for addressing such questions.

In conclusion, this study reveals three processes whereby recipients' responses to gossip shape their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. Key to these responses were recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions—good, bad, or authentic. Taken together, the nuanced processes we revealed provide the basis for a fine-grained

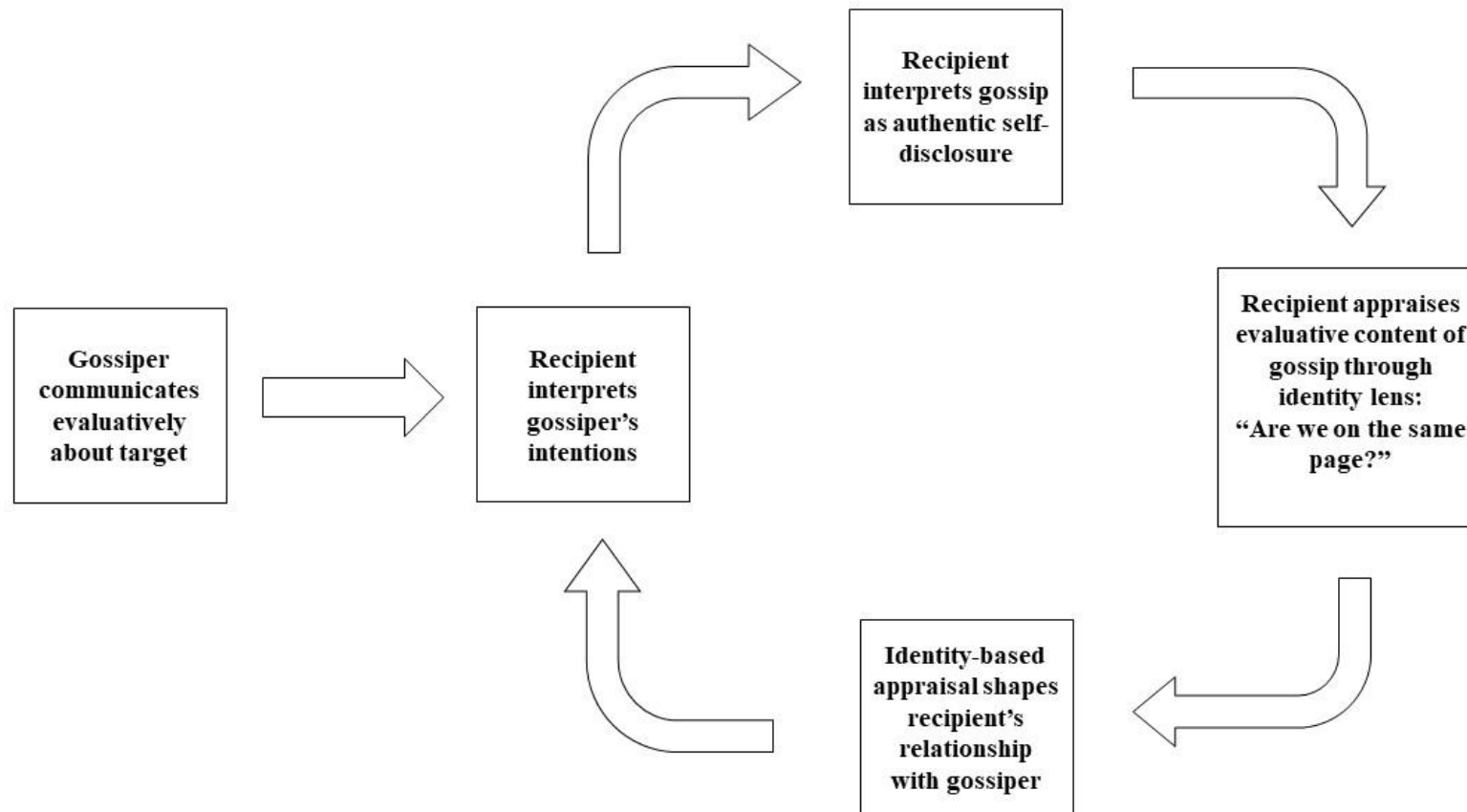
understanding of how gossip shapes relationships in organizations, enabling the reconciliation of contradictory empirical findings from prior studies and the revision, enrichment, and extension of extant theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 4 / Manuscript 3 - How Interpretations of Gossip Shape Relationships and Behavior in Organizations: An Identity Perspective

PREFACE

This manuscript develops a theoretical model of how recipients' identity-based interpretations of workplace gossip shape their relationships and behavior. The theoretical propositions in the model are extrapolated from the empirical findings in Manuscript 2. To illustrate the process of moving from empirical findings in Manuscript 2 to the theoretical model in Manuscript 3, I developed Figure 4. This figure is based on the *authentic intentions* theme from findings in Manuscript 2. Starting on the left, the figure shows that when a gossip communicates evaluatively about a target, the recipient of this communication first interprets the gossip's intentions. Importantly, because the figure is based on the *authentic intentions* theme, it assumes that the recipient interprets the gossip's intentions as authentic and their gossip as a means of self-disclosure. In the next step of the figure, the recipient appraises the evaluative content of gossip through an identity lens. I use the metaphor of an identity lens for two reasons. First, as a form of informal and discretionary communication, gossip is an important source of authentic, identity-relevant information about who a gossip is (Fan & Dawson, 2021). Second, individuals' values are typically embedded in their identities (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Thus, it makes sense that recipients would interpret the *evaluative* content of gossip through the lens of their identities.

Figure 4: An Intermediate Model Illustrating How I Moved from Empirical Findings to the Theoretical Model in Manuscript 3



The far-right box in Figure 4 implies that appraising the evaluative content of gossip through an identity lens is equivalent to asking a question: “Are we on the same page?” This question is a reference to the code labelled “on the same page” in Manuscript 2. That code was about whether the recipient *agreed* with the gossipers’ evaluation of the target. Being *on the same page* was a subtype of *interpersonal agreement*—a subtheme within the overarching theme of *authentic intentions*. Findings showed that when recipients agreed with evaluations of targets, they felt like they were *on the same page* as gossipers, and this feeling, in turn, brought recipients and gossipers closer together. In line with this finding, Figure 4 shows that the recipient’s identity-based appraisal of the evaluative content of gossip shapes their relationship with the gossipers. In turn, the recipient’s relationship with the gossipers shapes the recipients’ interpretation of gossipers’ intentions in future gossip incidents.

In Manuscript 3, I extrapolate from Figure 4 to develop a more sophisticated identity process model of how recipients’ interpretations of gossip shape their relationships and behavior. In doing so, I translate the code *on the same page*, which captures an important aspect of participants’ commonsense experiences of workplace gossip, into a more abstract concept which I label *evaluative (dis)agreement*. I define evaluative (dis)agreement as *agreement (or disagreement) with the evaluative content of gossip*. By evaluative content, I mean the positive or negative evaluation that the gossipers explicitly or implicitly communicates about the gossip target. Importantly, in Manuscript 3, I honor my empirical findings from Manuscript 2 by contending that recipients’ evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip is crucial in shaping the relational outcomes of workplace gossip. However, I draw on additional theory and research to contend that evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip also shapes recipients’ *behavior*. Moreover, I argue that evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip occurs when recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their *identities*.

As such, I broaden the utility of the knowledge acquired in Manuscript 2 by integrating my empirical findings with extant theory and research on identities in organizations. In Manuscript 2, I found that evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip was crucial for shaping the relational outcomes of gossip incidents from the perspective of recipients. However, I did not pinpoint the *source* of recipients' evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip—that is, why recipients agreed with some evaluations of targets while disagreeing with others. In the present manuscript, I speculate that recipients' identities may be the source of evaluative (dis)agreement because, as already discussed, identities frequently encapsulate individuals' values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations. For example, as part of their professional identity, a doctor may: (a) place a high value on doing no harm to patients; (b) have a negative attitude toward colleagues who disrespect this value by harming patients; and (c) expect other doctors to uphold the value of doing no harm in their medical practice. In turn, such values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations are likely to influence whether a doctor agrees with the evaluative content of negative gossip about a colleague who harmed a patient through negligence. Therefore, I argue that when recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their identities, this interpretive process influences whether recipients reach evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip and that such (dis)agreement, in turn, shapes the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip.

In developing this argument, the present manuscript addresses overarching aims 2 and 3 of my thesis. Specifically, it demonstrates how recipients' identity-based interpretations of the social *information* communicated by gossip shape their relationships (via the *bonding* function of gossip) and behavior (via the *influence* function of gossip). Thus, the paper elaborates interdependencies between the functions of gossip (Aim 2) while also elucidating the recipient's role as an interpreter of information (Aim 3).

ABSTRACT

Scholars recognize workplace gossip as a rich source of social information yet lack a comprehensive understanding of how organizational members interpret such information. Moreover, while researchers allude to mechanisms whereby the interpretation of gossip shapes relationships and behavior in organizations, these mechanisms remain unspecified in existing research. We develop a conceptual model demonstrating (a) how organizational members' identities function as lenses through which they interpret gossip and (b) how such identity-based interpretations of gossip shape organizational members' relationships and behavior. Taking the view of gossip recipients, the model proposes that the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations embedded in recipients' identities influence the extent to which they agree (or disagree) with the evaluative content of gossip. Such evaluative (dis)agreement, in turn, increases or decreases the extent of recipients' personal, relational, and/or social identifications with gossipers and gossipers' social collectives. These changes in identification, we contend, are immediate antecedents of the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip. Accordingly, our paper provides novel insight into how gossip shapes the informal social structures of organizations.

Keywords: Workplace gossip; information interpretation; gossip recipient; identities; identification; relationships; behavioral influence.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace gossip, an informal means of communicating evaluative information about other organizational members, has garnered increasing attention from scholars in the past two decades (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010). Although managers and researchers frequently dismiss gossip as idle or malicious talk (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Lipman, 2016), a growing body of evidence suggests gossip fulfils important social functions in organizations. For example, gossip provides information about coworkers (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Mills, 2010); enables groups and individuals to influence the behavior of others (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016); and serves as a means of social bonding (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Grosser et al., 2010). Consequently, scholars increasingly recognize workplace gossip as a unique source of social information that produces important behavioral and relational outcomes (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2019b).

However, researchers are yet to develop a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the psychological processes that link the information-sharing function of gossip to its relational and behavioral outcomes. The scant research exploring such links reflects an exchange perspective, positioning gossip as a source of insider information—a valuable social resource—that organizational members exchange for influence and social support (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Martinescu et al., 2019b). This perspective implies that recipients focus predominantly on the social utility of gossip’s informative content. Thus, if an organizational member receives useful information through gossip, they may reciprocate by offering the gossipier their own inside information, increased social support, or greater influence over their behavior (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Martinescu et al., 2019b).

While applicable in some instances, the notion that gossip recipients focus predominantly on gossip's utility does not capture two crucial aspects of gossip as a source of social information. First, as information, gossip is potentially open to multiple interpretations (Daft & Weick, 1984; Taylor & Fiske, 1981). Second, recipients' interpretations of gossip are likely to affect ensuing relational and behavioral outcomes (Gioia & Manz, 1985; Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014). Therefore, we extend understanding of gossip as information by theorizing how organizational members interpret gossip beyond simple exchange. We draw on identity research to inform this theoretical perspective. Identities encapsulate the ways employees define themselves as individuals (personally), as part of interpersonal relationships (relationally), and as members of broader social collectives (socially) (Ashforth et al., 2008; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Scholars recognize such identities as providing "perceptual lenses" through which individuals interpret work-related information (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 372). Thus, our overarching thesis is that employees' identities affect how they interpret the social information communicated by gossip.

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical model showing how gossip recipients' identities shape their interpretations of gossip and, by extension, how gossip shapes their relationships and behavior. More specifically, our model integrates identity and gossip research to propose that, when gossip recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their identities, the interpretation engenders agreement or disagreement with the evaluative content of gossip. Such evaluative (dis)agreement, in turn, shapes recipients' workplace relationships and behavior by increasing or decreasing the extent to which they identify with gossipers and/or gossipers' wider social groups.

As such, our paper's principal contribution is to extend knowledge regarding how gossip provides social information in the workplace. Our novel framework depicts a process

whereby organizational members' identities serve as mechanisms for interpreting gossip and demonstrates how ensuing interpretations engender relational and behavioral outcomes. The framework thus helps explain *how* the outcomes of gossip, documented in existing studies (e.g., Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Ellwardt et al., 2012a), may actually unfold. Research to date enumerates outcomes of gossip but has less to say about how gossip is interpreted and translated into outcomes. An additional contribution is to draw attention to the role of the recipient in the workplace gossip triad. Most existing research examines the effects of workplace gossip from the perspective of the gossiper (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Tassiello et al., 2018) or the gossip target (Ellwardt et al., 2012b; Wu et al., 2018a; Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma, 2018b). In contrast, our model demonstrates that the recipient also plays a pivotal role in shaping the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip. Finally, we contribute by merging two previously unconnected bodies of literature: that on workplace gossip and that on identities in organizations. Researchers have independently proposed that both gossip (Grosser et al., 2010) and identities (Methot et al., 2018) are integral to the informal social structures of organizations. We argue that gossip and identities are conceptually entwined because they both have a strong evaluative element: Identities shape how employees evaluate others' behavior, while gossip communicates evaluative information about other employees. By merging these hitherto disparate research streams, our theorizing paves the way for empirical testing of how gossip and identities interact to influence informal social structures.

WORKPLACE GOSSIP AND IDENTITIES

Workplace Gossip

Scholarly definitions of workplace gossip typically specify four key features (Brady et al., 2017; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Wu et al., 2018a). First, workplace gossip is informal, taking place outside the official channels of organizational

communication. Second, gossip is evaluative: It necessarily communicates some sort of positive or negative judgement about its target, either explicitly or implicitly. Third, gossip is about another person or persons, as opposed to objects or events. Fourth, the person(s) gossip is about (i.e., the gossip target) is not involved in the communication. Based on these features, we adopt the following definition of workplace gossip: *informal and evaluative communication about another organizational member(s) who is not directly involved in the communication.*

Gossip as information

Across disciplines, scholars recognize the communication of social information as an overarching function of gossip (Foster, 2004). More specifically, the wider literature indicates that gossip communicates three predominant types of social information. First, and most directly, gossip communicates evaluative information about gossip targets, including details on their personalities, achievements, and misdemeanors (Feinberg et al., 2012; Mills, 2010; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Second, gossip conveys personal information about gossipers themselves (Bai et al., 2020; Bosson et al., 2006). For example, by gossiping positively about a colleague who often stays late at work, an employee communicates that they value self-sacrifice and approve of colleagues who willingly give up their time for the organization. Third, gossip communicates normative information about the social groups to which gossipers belong (Baumeister et al., 2004), especially when gossipers are seen as representatives of their wider social group or collective. Thus, a workgroup leader who gossips negatively about an employee who made a sexist joke communicates a prohibitive norm against offensive forms of workplace humor.

Relational and behavioral outcomes of workplace gossip.

Research indicates associations between workplace gossip and relational and behavioral outcomes. To start, gossip is associated with the maintenance and development of

close, trust-based interpersonal relationships (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). Some authors report that employees typically share negative gossip with only their closest, most trusted coworkers (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010), while others find that gossiping together increases the likelihood of workplace dyads developing close, trusting relationships over time (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Kuo et al., 2018). Gossiping is also associated with both individual and collective influence, indicating it is an effective means of shaping others' behavior. Individuals who gossip can influence others by enhancing their own perceived social power and status (Brady et al., 2017; Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b) and by communicating their behavioral expectations to others (Bai et al., 2020). Groups that gossip can indirectly influence their members' behavior through reputational information sharing—that is, communicating negative information about individuals who behave antisocially and positive information about those who behave in a prosocial manner—thus creating social pressures to adhere to group norms (Feinberg et al., 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016).

Linking the information function of gossip to outcomes

As noted, scholars have established that an overarching function of gossip is to communicate three types of social information, and that such information is associated with relational and behavioral outcomes. However, we maintain that scholars lack a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the psychological processes whereby the information function of gossip is linked to these outcomes. The limited work that has explored such links reflects a perspective grounded in social exchange theory (Martinescu et al., 2019b). The underlying logic of this perspective is that employees are self-interested social actors who engage in gossip with the expectation of receiving something in return. Thus, as a source of valuable social information, gossip is traded for enhanced influence,

social support, or further social information (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Martinescu et al., 2019b).

While the exchange perspective provides valuable insight into workplace gossip, we present a complementary perspective that extends understanding of gossip's information function. Our perspective positions gossip as a rich source of social information that is open to multiple interpretations and, consequently, shapes relationships and behavior via mechanisms beyond simple exchange. Specifically, we focus on interpretations of gossip that signal shared or conflicting values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations between gossipers and gossip recipients. As such, we offer a novel explanation for empirical findings that are difficult to align with a straightforward exchange perspective. For example, our perspective is consistent with research showing that gossip increases interpersonal closeness by signaling shared negative attitudes toward a third person (Bosson et al., 2006) and that gossip influences behavior by engendering the internalization of group norms and person-specific behavioral expectations (Bai et al., 2020; Baumeister et al., 2004).

In sum, we contend that a more comprehensive understanding of gossip as information requires further exploration of how organizational members interpret gossip. Our paper addresses this need by developing a conceptual model emphasizing the role of interpretive processes in shaping the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip. Scholars have long recognized that individuals' interpretations of social information are crucial to their cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to that information (Baumeister, Maranges, & Vohs, 2018; Daft & Weick, 1984; Gioia & Manz, 1985; Taylor & Fiske, 1981). We argue that, as a rich source of social information, workplace gossip is subject to similar interpretive processes.

Interpreting Gossip: The Role of the Recipient

Workplace gossip involves a triad of actors: the gossip (the person who sends the gossip message), the recipient (the person who receives the message), and the target (the person the message is about) (Wu et al., 2018a). Of these actors, we focus on the gossip recipient. The recipient is the person who interprets gossip and, as such, plays a pivotal role in shaping gossip's effects on relationships and behavior. To illustrate this point, imagine that a manager gossips negatively to a new employee about another workgroup member who is frequently absent without justification. The manager's motive in relating this gossip may be to warn the new employee against engaging in unjustified absenteeism. However, if the new employee instead interprets the gossip as a personal attack on the gossip target, this interpretation is likely to influence how the gossip affects the recipient's relationship with, and behavior toward, both the gossip (the manager) and the gossip target (the frequently absent colleague). Thus, recipients' interpretations of the information inherent in gossip are decisive in shaping its relational and behavioral outcomes. We draw on identity research to theorize how gossip recipients' personal, relational, and social identities serve as important lenses in the interpretation of gossip.

Identities and Interpretations of Gossip

Identities

An identity is a "self-referential description that provides contextually relevant answers to the question 'Who am I?' or 'Who are we?'" (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 327). Scholars typically differentiate three levels of identities in organizations: personal, relational, and social (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016; Brickson, 2000; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Personal identities specify the characteristics, values, and attitudes that organizational members use to define themselves as individuals (Ashforth et al., 2016) (e.g., "I am conscientious, I value hard work, and I like it when my colleagues do a good job of things"). Relational identities are how organizational

members define themselves as part of role-based, interpersonal relationships (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). These identities, which can be generalized (“I am a mentor of junior colleagues”) or person-specific (“I am Jason’s mentor”), are typically based on specific behavioral expectations of the relational partner (Brickson, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) (e.g. “As Jason’s mentor, I expect him to follow my professional advice”). Finally, social identities define the broader social collectives to which individuals belong (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). In workplaces, social identities can be based on membership in formal collectives such as professions, organizations, and departments (“I am an employee of Google—a Googler”) or informal collectives such as cultural or political groups (“I am a feminist”). By indicating membership in a collective, social identities specify the prototypical characteristics, values, and attitudinal and behavioral norms that individuals embody as members of that collective (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Brickson, 2000; Hogg & Reid, 2006) (e.g., “As a Googler, I am inventive, I value innovative solutions to problems, and I always try to think outside the box”).

The three levels of identity—personal, relational, and social—all contribute to an individual’s sense of self, or self-identity (Mills & Pawson, 2012). Importantly, the way individuals define themselves in a given moment may incorporate various levels of identity, and these levels may be consistent or conflicting in relation to one another. For example, I could think of myself as a highly creative person, and this aspect of my personal identity would be consistent with my social identity as a member of an organization that values innovation. However, I could just as easily think of myself as uncreative, which would conflict with my social identity as a member of the same organization. Self-identities are thus composite identities which emerge from the interplay between one’s personal self-concept and one’s self-concept as part of relationships and wider social groups.

Interpreting gossip: Why identities matter

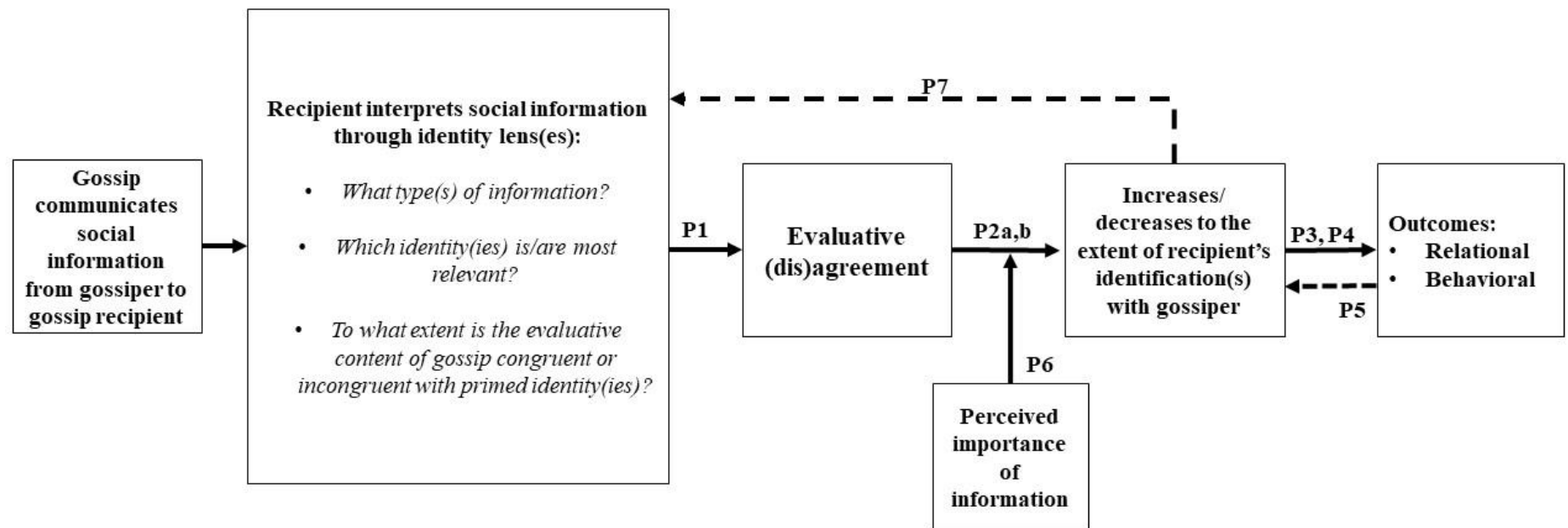
Extant research demonstrates that identities are central to organizational members' attitudes, values, and behavioral expectations (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2016; Brickson, 2000; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and that identities provide perceptual lenses for interpreting information (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020; Stets & Burke, 2014). Given that gossip communicates information about the attitudes, values, and behavioral expectations of other people and collectives (Bai et al., 2020; Baumeister et al., 2004; Bosson et al., 2006; Wert & Salovey, 2004), we propose that the ways organizational members define themselves personally, relationally, and socially are likely to affect how they interpret gossip. For example, someone who defines herself as a feminist is likely to interpret gossip about a manager making a sexist joke differently than an individual who defines herself as an opponent of political correctness.

From perceived utility to evaluative agreement

The exchange perspective holds that gossip affects relationships and behavior via its perceived utility—that is, whether the recipient perceives the information communicated by gossip as socially useful (Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b). To complement this perspective and enrich scholars' understanding of gossip as information, we contend that an equally important factor in determining gossip's relational and behavioral outcomes is whether recipients agree (or disagree) with the evaluative content of gossip. As described in detail later, such evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip is crucial in shaping the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip because it indicates (dis)similarities between recipients and gossipers. These (dis)similarities, which are embedded in personal, relational, and/or social identities, manifest as shared or conflicting values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations between the two parties. Prior research shows that perceived similarities are key to the development of both social relationships (Sias & Cahill, 1998; Van Rijswijk, Haslam, &

Ellemers, 2006) and behavioral outcomes including interpersonal cooperation and group-level conformity (Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Graupensperger, Benson, & Evans, 2018).

Figure 5: An identity process model of how interpretations of gossip shape relationships and behavior



HOW INTERPRETATIONS OF GOSSIP SHAPE RELATIONSHIPS AND BEHAVIOR: AN IDENTITY PROCESS MODEL

How do gossip recipients interpret the information gossip conveys? And how do such interpretations affect recipients' workplace relationships and behavior? Figure 4 depicts an identity process model that addresses these questions. As already explained, gossip communicates three types of social information from gossipers to gossip recipients. Our model shows: (a) how recipients interpret such information through the lens of their personal, relational, and social identities; (b) how this interpretive process results in varying degrees of evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip; and (c) how such (dis)agreement shapes recipients' relationships and behavior by increasing or decreasing the extent to which they identify with gossipers and gossipers' broader social collectives. The model also describes a moderator of the association between evaluative (dis)agreement and increased or decreased identification with gossipers—that is, the perceived importance of information conveyed by gossip. Finally, the model shows how increases and decreases in identification can alter recipients' identities and, in turn, shape their subsequent interpretations of gossip.

Interpreting Gossip through Identity Lenses

Starting on the left, Figure 4 shows that gossip communicates social information from the gossipers to the gossip recipient. As depicted in the large box appearing second from left in the figure, the recipient interprets and appraises this information through identity lenses. We propose that this identity-based process of interpretation involves three “steps,” which we summarize and describe as three questions.

What type of information is this?

The first step in interpreting gossip through an identity lens is to determine which type (or types) of information gossip communicates. As outlined earlier, gossip can communicate three types of value-laden information from gossipers to recipients: evaluative information

about targets, personal information about gossipers, and normative social information (Bai et al., 2020; Baumeister et al., 2004; Brady et al., 2017). Multiple factors may influence the recipient's interpretation of the type(s) of information a specific instance of gossip conveys. For example, if the gossipers' language suggests they are speaking on behalf of a broader social collective, as opposed to as an individual, the recipient is more likely to construe gossip as communicating normative social information than personal information about the gossipers (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). Moreover, recipients may interpret certain instances of gossip as communicating two or even three types of information simultaneously. To illustrate, if an established member of a sales department shares positive gossip with a newcomer about the department manager who develops client relationships by drinking heavily with them (Liu et al., 2015), the newcomer could interpret this gossip as communicating the following pieces of information: (1) The manager will do whatever it takes to win new clients (positive information about the target); (2) the gossipers like this manager and approve of their behavior (personal information about the gossipers); (3) the departmental norm is to drink heavily to build client relationships (normative social information).

Which identity is most relevant?

The next step in interpreting gossip through an identity lens is to determine which of the recipient's identities is (or are) most relevant for appraising the information. Employees have multiple levels of identities—personal, relational, and social (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010)—and they can also have multiple identities within those different levels. For instance, an employee's gestalt social identity may encompass the following self-descriptions: “employee of Deloitte,” “management consultant,” “immigrant worker,” and “member of the yoga club at Deloitte's London office.”

As such, determining which identity(ies) is most relevant for appraising gossip involves interpreting the information it conveys in a way that primes identity orientation and salience. Identity orientation is the extent to which an individual identifies on a personal, relational, or social level in a certain situation (Brickson, 2000); identity salience is the primacy an individual confers on a specific identity (whether personal, relational, or social) based on contextual cues (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). Thus, if a recipient construes gossip as communicating normative social information, this construal is likely to prime a social identity orientation, because such information is most relevant to behavioral expectations at the collective level (as opposed to the personal or interpersonal level). If the specific normative social information is relevant to the recipient's identity as a member of a particular department (as opposed to an organization, for instance), it is likely to prime the recipient's departmental social identity (as opposed to their organizational social identity).

To what extent is this information (in)congruent with my identity(ies)?

Within the wider process of interpreting gossip, the final and most consequential step is to interpret its evaluative content through the lens of the specific identity (or identities) primed in the two previous steps. As already demonstrated, all identities have at their core certain values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2016; Brickson, 2000; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Consequently, the crucial step for recipients in our model is to determine the extent to which the evaluative content of gossip is congruent with the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations embedded in their primed identities. We propose that when recipients interpret the evaluative content of gossip as congruent with their identities, they are more likely to reach evaluative agreement with gossip. Conversely, when they appraise gossip as incongruent with their identities, they are more likely to reach evaluative *disagreement* with

it. Thus, as a psychological construct, evaluative (dis)agreement captures a perceived (mis)alignment between the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations of the gossip recipient and the gossipier, based on the gossipier's implicit or explicit evaluation of the gossip target.

Given that gossip may prime multiple identities simultaneously—and that these identities can themselves be interrelated in a complex, Russian-doll-like fashion (Ashforth et al., 2016)—it is beyond the scope of this paper to specify the multifarious ways in which recipients interpret gossip through identity lenses. Nonetheless, we suggest three examples, based on the three predominant levels of identity in organizations (personal, relational, and social), to illustrate this step in the model. First, consider an instance where an employee receives negative gossip about a colleague who did a careless and incomplete job of an assigned task. If the recipient's personal identity includes the self-description "I am conscientious," they are likely to view the gossip target's behavior as unacceptable and, therefore, interpret this negative evaluation as congruent with the values embedded in their personal identity. Second, imagine that an employee receives positive gossip about the courageous way their professional mentor spoke during a senior leadership meeting. If this recipient identifies relationally with the mentor, it indicates that they have positive expectations of the mentor's behavior (Brickson, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Therefore, as a gossip recipient, the mentee is more likely to construe positive information about the mentor's behavior as congruent with their relational identity. Finally, an established sales department member may receive negative gossip about how her manager went out on a big night of drinking with prospective clients. However, if drinking with clients is the norm for sales department members (i.e., it is expected of them) (Liu et al., 2015), this recipient is likely to interpret a negative evaluation of her manager's drinking behavior as *incongruent* with the norm embedded in her departmental social identity (which views drinking with

clients as a positive behavior). Consequently, she is likely to disagree with the evaluative content of this negative information about her manager. In sum,

Proposition 1: Perceived identity congruence leads to evaluative agreement with gossip, while perceived identity incongruence leads to evaluative disagreement with gossip.

Evaluative (Dis)Agreement and Identification

We propose that recipients' evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip is associated with their personal, relational, and/or social identification with gossipers and gossipers' social collectives. Identification refers to the action of identifying with another person, relationship, or social collective—that is, with an identification target (Ashforth et al., 2016; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Identification is therefore something employees “do” to a greater or lesser extent (Ashforth et al., 2016; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). For example, if employees have high social identification with their organization, it means they identify strongly as members of that organization.

As a process that occurs in degrees, identifications can become stronger or weaker over time (Ashforth et al., 2008; Brickson, 2000). One way in which identifications strengthen or weaken is in response to information about identification targets (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). For instance, employees' identification with their organization can strengthen or weaken in response to media coverage of that organization, depending on the nature of the coverage and their interpretation of it (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Piening et al., 2020). Following this logic, a recipient's response to the social information conveyed by gossip can increase or decrease the extent of their personal, relational, and/or social identifications with gossipers. Personal identification reflects the extent to which individuals perceive their personal identities as aligned with those of other individuals (Ashforth et al., 2016). Relational identification is the extent to which individuals define themselves as part of an interpersonal relationship, whether generalized or person-

specific (Brickson, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Social identification is the extent to which people define themselves as belonging to a social collective (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). We suggest that gossip can alter the extent of recipients' identifications with gossipers on all these levels.

As noted, gossip communicates information about the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations of gossipers and their broader social collectives. Consequently, if the gossip recipient reaches evaluative agreement with gossip, it signals that the recipient shares values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations with the gossipier. Evaluative *disagreement*, on the other hand, indicates the opposite. Research shows that sharing values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations is integral to all three levels of identification (Albert et al., 2000; Ashforth et al., 2016; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). For instance, shared values and attitudes are a sign of perceived alignment between the identities of two individuals—the defining feature of personal identification (Ashforth et al., 2016). Shared behavioral expectations are crucial to both relational and social identification because they specify how the other party in a relationship, or the other members of a collective, ought to behave (Albert et al., 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, & Ashforth, 2012). Conversely, perceptions of conflicting values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations typically have a negative impact on the extent of individuals' identifications with others (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Piening et al., 2020; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Therefore,

Proposition 2a: The stronger the recipient's evaluative agreement with gossip, the more they will identify personally, relationally, and/or socially with the gossipier.

Proposition 2b: The stronger the recipient's evaluative disagreement with gossip, the less they will identify personally, relationally, and/or socially with the gossipier.

Outcomes of Workplace Gossip

As stated earlier, our model illustrates a process whereby the social information communicated by gossip affects the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip. Scholars

allude to such outcomes (Bai et al., 2020; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Kuo et al., 2018; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016), yet lack a comprehensive theoretical description of the psychological mechanisms whereby gossip shapes these outcomes. We thus propose increases or decreases to the extent of identification with gossipers as an immediate antecedent of the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip.

Relational outcomes

Relational outcomes of gossip include increased interpersonal closeness and trust between gossipers and recipients (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018). Personal identification with a colleague or manager is often associated with feelings of closeness toward that person (Ashforth et al., 2016). These feelings likely result from homophily—an attraction toward those who are perceived as similar to oneself (Zhang, Qi, & Liang, 2021). Relational identification implies that an individual has positive expectations of how the relational partner will behave (Brickson, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Such expectations, in turn, indicate trust in that person, because trust involves a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to the actions of another person (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). Social identification with a collective can increase feelings of both closeness and trust toward other members of that collective (Cruwys et al., 2021; Van Rijswijk et al., 2006). Feelings of closeness toward other members of a collective typically stem from homophily (Van Rijswijk et al., 2006), as defined earlier, while trust in other group members may arise from the expectation that they will adhere to collective norms of reciprocal, discretionary cooperation (Cruwys et al., 2021; Dukerich et al., 2002). Therefore, the following propositions summarize the association between recipients' identifications with gossipers and relational outcomes.

Proposition 3: Changes to the extent of recipient's identification(s) with the gossipers will commensurately increase or decrease the recipient's feelings of closeness and trust toward the gossipers and/or the gossipers' social collective.

Behavioral outcomes

Behavioral outcomes of gossip include adherence to person- and group-specific behavioral expectations (Bai et al., 2020; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016). Our model proposes that such outcomes are shaped by the extent to which recipients identify with gossipers on a personal, relational, and/or social level (see Figure 4). Personal identification with a coworker is associated with a proclivity to emulate that person's behavior (Ashforth et al., 2016). Relational identification involves the development of shared, positive behavioral expectations toward relational partners (Brickson, 2000), implying that strengthened relational identifications increase the chances of individuals fulfilling the perceived behavioral expectations of their relational partners. Finally, social identification involves the internalization of collective norms (Brickson, 2000; Hogg & Reid, 2006), which prescribe appropriate behaviors and proscribe inappropriate ones (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Consequently, we propose that gossip influences recipients' behavior by strengthening or weakening their identifications.

Proposition 4: Changes to the extent of the recipient's identification(s) with the gossipers will commensurately increase or decrease the likelihood of the recipient exhibiting the behavioral outcomes associated with personal, relational, and/or social identification.

Outcomes reinforce identifications

Our model proposes that the outcomes of increased or decreased identification(s) with gossipers will feedback to reinforce the extent of gossip recipients' identification(s) with that person and/or their social collective. The dotted line in Figure 4, running from the "outcomes" box to the "identification with gossipers" box, depicts this feedback mechanism. With respect to relational outcomes, scholars hold that interpersonal closeness can be both an

antecedent and consequence of high personal identification with a coworker (Ashforth et al., 2016). Meanwhile, feelings of closeness and trust can both stem from, and engender, greater relational or social identification with a relational partner or the other members of a social collective (Ashforth et al., 2008; Brickson, 2000; Francis, 2005; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Sluss et al., 2012). In terms of behavioral outcomes, research indicates that behavior consistent with a specific identity or identification tends to reinforce that identity or the extent of the identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; DeCelles & Aquino, 2020). Thus, emulating another person's behavior—an outcome of personal identification—is likely to reinforce a high degree of personal identification with the person being emulated (Ashforth et al., 2016). Conversely, behavioral divergence from a coworker is likely to reinforce low personal identification with that individual. For relational identification, fulfillment of the behavioral expectations embedded in a relationship is likely to reinforce identification with that relationship, and vice versa for disregard of relationship-based behavioral expectations (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Finally, adherence to, or divergence from, a collective's social norms are likely to reinforce high or low social identification with that collective, respectively (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Proposition 5: The proposed relational and behavioral outcomes of increased or decreased identification(s) with the gossipier will tend to reinforce the extent to which the gossip recipient identifies with the gossipier and/or their social collective.

Perceived Importance of Information as Moderator

We propose a moderator of the association between evaluative (dis)agreement and a recipient's identification with the gossipier—namely, the perceived importance of the information communicated by gossip (see Figure 1). Gossip can communicate both trivial and important forms of social information (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). For example, gossip can convey the idea that a gossipier dislikes colleagues who leave a mess in the staff cafeteria, yet it can also communicate the notion that a gossipier values honesty and integrity in

colleagues. We contend that the perceived importance of the information conveyed by gossip depends on the recipient's idiosyncratic values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations. Consequently, when recipients perceive the information conveyed by gossip as subjectively important, evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip will have stronger effects on their identifications with gossipers than will information perceived as less important.

Proposition 6: The perceived importance of the information communicated by gossip moderates the association between evaluative (dis)agreement and the recipient's identification with the gossip.

Increased or Decreased Identifications Shape Identity Lens(es)

As depicted in Figure 4, we propose an additional feedback loop within our process model, represented by the dotted line running from the "recipient's identification(s) with gossip" box back to the box representing identity lenses. Stated differently, we suggest changes to the extent of recipients' identifications with gossipers can bring about revisions to recipients' identities. Such revisions occur because, as the extent of identification increases or decreases, the focus (or target) of that identification becomes more or less central to individuals' core self-definitions—to their personal, relational, and social identities (Ashforth et al., 2008). For example, employees' social identification with their organization may be weakened by negative news coverage of that organization, sometimes to the point where employees become less likely to define themselves as members of the organization (Piening et al., 2020). We suggest that these revised identities, in turn, provide new or altered lenses for the interpretation of gossip. To illustrate, consider a recipient who, after reaching evaluative agreement with gossip from a gossip, develops strong relational identification with that person. If this person-specific relational identification becomes central to the recipient's relational identity at work, the resulting identity revision will alter the lens through which the recipient interprets subsequent instances of gossip from or about the relational partner.

Proposition 7: Changes to the extent of the recipient's personal, relational, and/or social identification with gossipers engender revisions to recipients personal, relational, and/or social identity(ies).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate a process whereby gossip recipients interpret the information conveyed by gossip through identity lenses. The process features evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip as a key step that increases or decreases the extent of recipients' identifications with the gossipers and, ultimately, shapes relational and behavioral outcomes. We see the proposed process model as a contribution to the literature because scholars currently lack a theoretical framework that: (a) explicitly acknowledges the richness of gossip as a source of social information; (b) theorizes how that information is interpreted; and (c) links the interpretation of gossip to important employee outcomes.

Our paper extends theoretical understandings of both gossip and identities, predominantly by linking these hitherto disparate phenomena at a conceptual level. We argue that identities and gossip are conceptually entwined because they both have a strong evaluative element. Identities shape how people interpret evaluative information; gossip communicates evaluative information about other people, both gossip targets and gossipers. As such, our paper has implications for both gossip and identity research and, by extension, the broader organizational literature.

Implications for Research.

The first implication of our paper is that gossip is a rich source of social information which, like all information, requires interpretation by individuals. Given that scholars in other disciplines have long recognized the importance of gossip as information (Ashforth et al., 2008; DeCelles & Aquino, 2020; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Gilmore, 1978; Hannerz, 1967; Rosnow, 2001; Szwed, 1966), it seems surprising that management

researchers have paid so little attention to how organizational members interpret gossip. Arguably, this lack of attention stems from traditional characterizations of gossip as idle or malicious talk—a genre of communication that does not merit serious investigation in the workplace (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). We propose that recipients’ identities provide interpretive lenses for the information that gossip conveys, thus complementing and extending the existing exchange perspective with its focus on gossip as socially useful information (Martinescu et al., 2019b). Nonetheless, it seems plausible that organizational members interpret gossip through multiple other lenses, beyond those of identity and exchange. Future research might therefore explore alternative lenses for the interpretation of gossip. One such lens could be the social-functions-of-emotions perspective (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Methot et al., 2017), which holds that individual emotions serve the crucial social function of bonding people through shared emotional orientations. Evidence suggests gossip is an important means of expressing and validating emotions about other people and their behavior (Brady et al., 2017; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Consequently, researchers could explore how organizational members’ emotions shape their interpretations of gossip, as well as how such emotionally colored interpretations affect relationships and behavior.

Second, our paper has implications for identity research—one of the deepest and broadest fields of inquiry in organizational behavior (Albert et al., 2000; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ashforth et al., 2016; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; DeCelles & Aquino, 2020; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Piening et al., 2020; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). We make the novel suggestion that gossip is involved in communicating, developing, and altering organizational members’ identities. As such, we contribute to scholarly understandings of the communicative and behavioral mechanisms that underpin identities in organizations. Given our focus on interpreting gossip as information,

we illuminate how organizational members' identities interact with their responses to gossip—that is, how they receive the identity relevant information inherent in gossip. Conversely, it seems equally plausible that organizational members use gossip to *send* identity relevant information to others, thus asserting and bolstering their workplace identities. Prior work suggests that employees engage in communicative acts such as bullshitting—a genre of misleading and meaningless talk—to signal membership in a speech community, as well as to bolster their identities as members of that community (Spicer, 2020). Is the same true of gossip? Do organizational members use gossip to assert and bolster their personal, relational, and social identities? Future studies could explore how identities interact with *motivations* to gossip and, in so doing, extend our identity perspective by switching focus to the role of the gossip. In a similar vein, researchers could fruitfully examine how gossip serves to communicate information about the identities of gossip *targets*. For instance, how and to what extent do lower-level employees use gossip as a form of sensemaking and sensegiving regarding the identities of organizational leaders (Humphreys, Ucbasaran, & Lockett, 2012)?

Third, our paper has implications for research on how exchange and identity processes interact to shape informal social structures in organizations. An emerging perspective suggests that informal relationships—the building blocks of social structures—are crucial to the work of organizations because they not only enable resource flows (à la social capital perspective), but because they also account for employees' sense of self—their identities (Methot et al., 2018). By positioning gossip as a form of communication involved in both exchange and identity processes, we contribute to this nascent field of inquiry. Our contention that gossip enables relationship development based on perceived similarities (which manifest in evaluative agreement) complements the view that gossip builds relationships via reciprocal exchanges of information and influence (Grosser et al., 2010;

Martinescu et al., 2019b). While we focus on such relationship development at the level of the dyad, one could easily extrapolate our model to understand the role of gossip in the development of wider social networks. For instance, if an employee receives gossip and then shares it with another colleague, the gossip recipient effectively becomes the gossipier and, in doing so, incorporates a new recipient into the gossip network. To better understand the relative importance of exchange versus identity processes for shaping gossip behavior in such networks, future research might explore the individual and contextual factors that lead organizational members to view gossip as either a social resource, a form of identity relevant information, or both.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our paper develops a conceptual model demonstrating how recipients' identities serve as lenses through which they interpret the social information communicated by gossip, linking gossip to important relational and behavioral outcomes. The paper thus provides a novel framework for theorizing how gossip and identities interact to shape informal organizational social structures. We intend our theoretical work to inspire future exploration of these consequential interactions.

Chapter 5: General Discussion

Across the three manuscripts of this thesis, I explore how workplace gossip shapes the informal organization. In doing so, I address my three overarching research aims: (1) *To advance knowledge on the specific ways in which workplace gossip shapes elements of the informal organization*; (2) *to identify and elaborate interdependencies between the key social functions of workplace gossip*; and (3) *to illuminate the recipient's perspective of workplace gossip*. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how the manuscripts address these aims, individually and collectively. In the following chapter, I tease out the implications of my findings for theory, practice, and future research.

MANUSCRIPTS AND OVERARCHING AIMS

Summary of Manuscripts

In Manuscript 1, I address the following overarching research question: *How does workplace gossip shape the informal organization?* In turn, this overarching question implies three subordinate research questions: (1) What are the social functions of workplace gossip? (2) What are the key elements of the informal organization? (3) How do the social functions of workplace gossip shape key elements of the informal organization? I employ an integrative review of the organizational and wider social science literature to address these research questions. This review enables the development of a conceptual framework that not only highlights interdependencies between the three predominant social functions of gossip—information, influence, and bonding—but also elaborates how these functions shape elements of the informal organization, including interpersonal relationships, culture and climate, and power and status dynamics.

In Manuscript 2, I empirically examine how workplace gossip shapes one key element of the informal organization—interpersonal relationships. The specific research question I investigate in Manuscript 2 is: *How do gossip recipients' responses to workplace gossip incidents affect their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets?* I explore this question through a qualitative study wherein I adopt the perspective of the gossip recipient and examine the relational outcomes of gossip at the level of the gossip incident. I find that recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions—whether good, bad, or authentic—are crucial for shaping the relational outcomes of gossip incidents vis-à-vis both recipient-gossip and recipient-target relationships. In brief, my findings reveal three distinct and nuanced processes whereby gossip engenders a range of positive and negative relational outcomes in the workplace.

In Manuscript 3, I address the following overarching research question: *How do recipients' interpretations of workplace gossip shape their relationships and behavior?* I adopt a novel, identity perspective to address this question, which, as discussed in the Preface to Manuscript 3, is based on findings from Manuscript 2. In turn, adopting an identity perspective necessitates that I address two subordinate research questions in Manuscript 3: (1) How do recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their personal, relational, and social identities? (2) How do identity-based interpretations of gossip shape recipients' relationships with, and behavior toward, gossipers and gossipers' wider social collectives? To address these questions, I integrate workplace gossip research with the literature on identities in organizations. The resultant process model shows: (a) how recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their personal, relational, and social identities; (b) how this interpretive process results in varying degrees of evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip; and (c) how such (dis)agreement shapes recipients' relationships and behavior by increasing or decreasing the extent to which recipients identify with gossipers and gossipers' broader social collectives.

Addressing Overarching Aims

How do my three manuscripts address the overarching aims of my thesis? In this subsection, I respond to this question by restating my overarching aims and then articulating the specific ways in which my manuscripts address each aim.

Aim 1

My first overarching aim is *to advance knowledge on the specific ways in which workplace gossip shapes elements of the informal organization*. I address this aim across the three manuscripts of the thesis. In Manuscript 1, I develop a conceptual framework for linking the interdependent social functions of gossip to elements of the informal organization. More specifically, my framework links the *information function* of gossip to emergent culture and climate, the *influence function* to power and status dynamics, and the *bonding function* to interpersonal relationships. As such, the proposed framework responds to my first overarching aim by synthesizing existing evidence on the links between specific functions of gossip and elements of the informal organization. While prior research implies such links (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), it does not elaborate on them in an explicit, comprehensive manner.

In Manuscript 2, I narrow my focus to the links between gossip and interpersonal relationships—a key element of the informal organization. Taking the perspective of the gossip recipient, I advance knowledge on how gossip shapes relationships at the level of the individual gossip incident. Specifically, I examine how recipients' responses to workplace gossip incidents affect their relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. I find that recipients' interpretations of the gossipers' intentions—good, bad, or authentic—initiate three distinct processes that engender a range of positive and negative relational outcomes. For instance, when recipients interpret gossipers' intentions as authentic, gossip increases recipients' feelings of closeness and trust toward gossipers through mechanisms including

self-disclosure and interpersonal agreement. On the other hand, when recipients interpret gossipers' intentions as bad, gossip undermines recipients' trust in gossipers by signaling an antisocial orientation. Thus, compared to prior research (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2018), my findings provide a more granular view of the psychological processes whereby gossip shapes interpersonal relationships both positively and negatively. Additionally, my study reveals how a single gossip incident can shape the recipient's relationship with both the gossipers and gossip target, thus providing fine-grained evidence of how gossip shapes interpersonal relationships *across* the gossip triad. In sum, Manuscript 2 provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how gossip influences the interpersonal relationships that, along with elements such as culture and climate and power and status dynamics, constitute the informal organization.

In Manuscript 3, I suggest a new direction for exploring the links between gossip and the informal organization. I do so by focusing on how recipients' identities affect their interpretations of gossip and, by extension, the behavioral and relational outcomes of gossip. Much like culture, identities are something that individuals, groups, and organizations construct socially through their individual and collective experiences of work and organizational membership (Ashforth et al., 2008; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). As such, identities are often embedded in the emergent social structures of the informal organization. I propose that recipients' identities interact with workplace gossip to shape these emergent social structures because identities encapsulate the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations that determine whether recipients agree with the evaluative content of gossip. In turn, evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip influences the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip, thus shaping elements of the informal organization. For example, a recipient's organizational identity may include the behavioral expectation that organizational members will drink heavily with new clients as a means of developing close

relationships with them (Liu et al., 2020a). Given that this behavioral expectation is not formally codified in the job description of organizational members, it can be classified as part of the informal organization (Bittner, 1965). As proposed in Manuscript 3, a recipient who holds this drinking-related behavioral expectation is likely to disagree with the evaluative content of negative gossip about organizational members who drink heavily, while agreeing with positive evaluations of those who drink heavily. Subsequently, evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip is likely to influence the recipient's relationship with, and behavior toward, the gossipers and the gossipers' collective. Thus, Manuscript 3 shows how identities shape recipients' interpretations of gossip and how these interpretations, in turn, shape recipients' relationships and behavior, thereby altering or reinforcing the emergent social structures of the informal organization.

Aim 2

My second aim is *to identify and elaborate interdependencies between the key social functions of workplace gossip*. I address this aim across my three manuscripts. I start in Manuscript 1 by reorganizing the three predominant social functions of gossip—information, influence, and bonding (Martinescu et al., 2019b)—into an interdependent hierarchy. Based on an integrative review of the social science literature, I position information as the overarching function of gossip and contend that this overarching information function is what enables the influence and bonding functions of gossip. To begin, I elaborate *how* gossip functions as information by enumerating the three predominant types of information that gossip communicates: information about targets, information about gossipers, and information about social and cultural groups. I then illustrate how the influence and bonding functions of gossip depend on the social information communicated by gossip. For example, I show that the group-level influence function of gossip depends on gossip's ability to provide information about group norms and information about targets' behavior because, in

combination, these types of information facilitate group-level social control through norm dissemination and enforcement. Overall, the hierarchical reorganization of gossip's social functions in Manuscript 1 contributes to a more explicit and comprehensive understanding of interdependencies between the social functions of gossip.

In Manuscript 2, I provide evidence of the interdependent links between the information and bonding functions of gossip. Specifically, I show that gossip transmits information about gossipers and gossip targets and that such information, in turn, shapes interpersonal bonds between not only recipients and gossipers, but also between recipients and targets. As such, my findings reveal novel insight into interdependencies between the information and bonding functions of gossip. To start, I find that gossip can either strengthen or weaken interpersonal bonds between recipients and gossipers, depending on how recipients interpret gossip as a source of information about gossipers. For instance, when recipients interpret gossip as a sign that gossipers have good intentions, gossip strengthens bonds between the two parties. Conversely, gossip weakens bonds between recipients and gossipers when recipients interpret gossip as an indication that gossipers' intentions are manipulative or malicious. Thus, findings suggest that gossip serves either a bonding or *anti*-bonding function depending on how recipients interpret the information it communicates about gossipers.

Additionally, findings from Manuscript 2 reveal that gossip serves an *indirect* bonding function by providing information about gossip targets. Recipients in my study frequently reported that valenced information about a gossip target reinforced or engendered a positive or negative relational orientation toward that person. In turn, these changes in relational orientations either facilitated or hindered the development of trusting relationships between recipients and targets, depending on whether the orientation was positive or negative. As such, findings from Manuscript 2 indicate that the information transmitted by

gossip enables not only direct bonding between recipients and gossipers, but also *indirect bonding* (or *antibonding*) between recipients and targets.

Manuscript 3 extends and enriches the arguments developed in Manuscripts 1 and 2. This conceptual paper continues two key arguments: (1) That the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information; and (2) that such information shapes the behavioral and relational outcomes of gossip via gossip's influence and bonding functions, respectively. In particular, Manuscript 3 provides a detailed explanation of how recipients' identity-based interpretations of gossip shape their relationships with, and behavior toward, gossipers and gossipers' wider social collectives. Importantly, however, Manuscript 3 goes a step further than either of the two preceding manuscripts by highlighting interdependencies between the influence and bonding functions of gossip. Specifically, the conceptual model I present in Manuscript 3 proposes that evaluative agreement with gossip not only increases the strength of recipients' bonds with gossipers and gossipers' wider social collectives (a relational outcome attributable to the bonding function of gossip) but simultaneously increases the likelihood of recipients conforming to the perceived behavioral expectations of gossipers and their collectives (a behavioral outcome attributable to gossip's influence function). The model suggests that the immediate antecedent of these relational and behavioral outcomes is identification with gossipers and gossipers' social collectives. Thus, the model offers an enhanced understanding of interdependencies between the functions of gossip by proposing that gossip's bonding and influence functions are mutually reinforcing insofar as they stem from recipients' increased identification with gossipers.

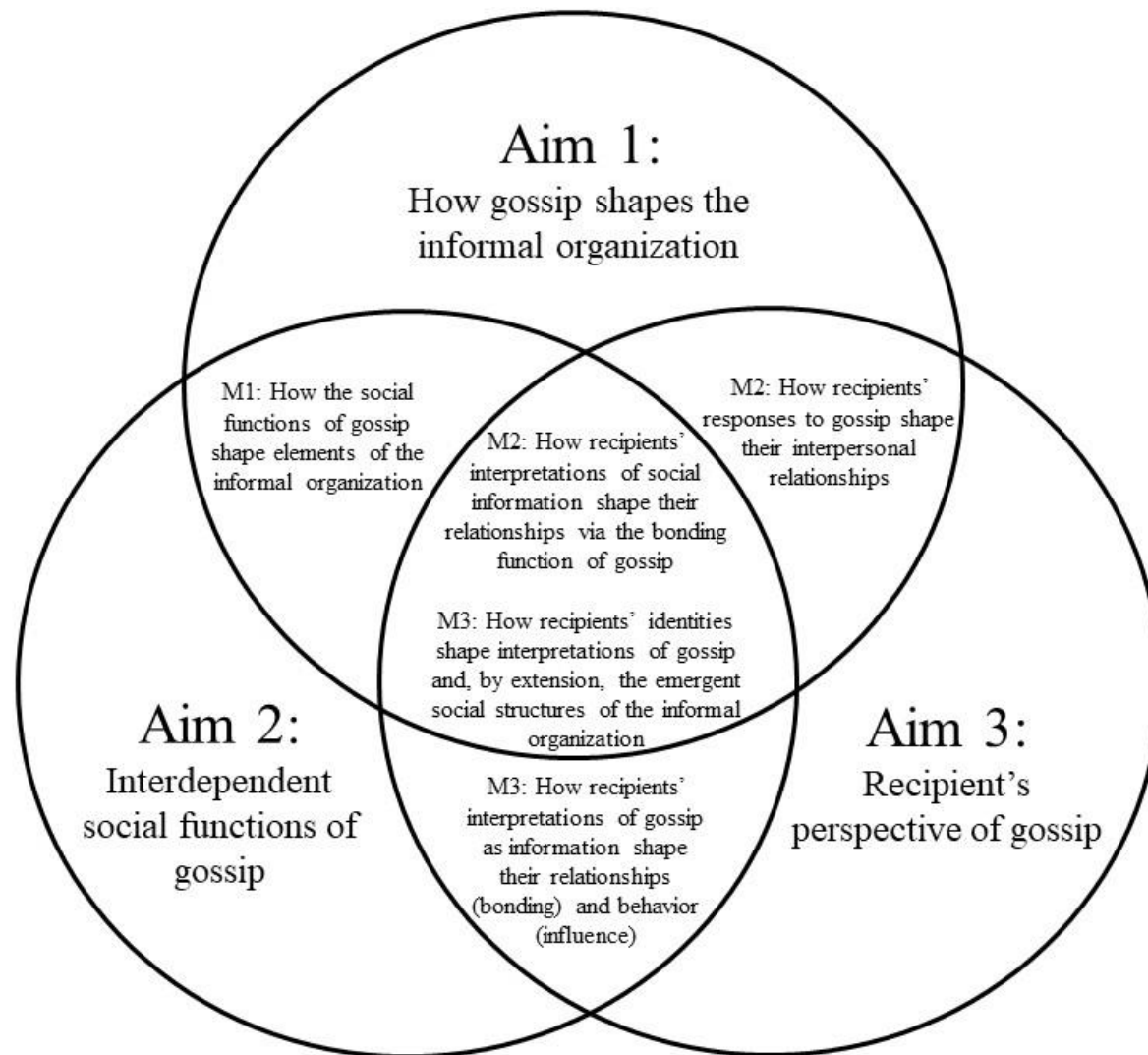
Aim 3

My third overarching aim is to illuminate the recipient's perspective of workplace gossip. While I signal the importance of this aim in Manuscript 1, I predominantly address the aim in Manuscripts 2 and 3. As already discussed, Manuscript 2 adopts the recipient's

perspective to explore how workplace gossip shapes interpersonal relationships. To the best of my knowledge, my study is the first instance of empirical research in which participants provide *in situ* qualitative data about their lived experiences as workplace gossip recipients. By collecting data on these experiences—and thus providing rich evidence regarding how recipients' responses to gossip shape their relationships with both gossipers and gossip targets—Manuscript 2 constitutes an important step toward recognizing the pivotal role of the recipient in shaping relationships across the gossip triad. In Manuscript 3, I shed further light on the recipient's perspective by highlighting their role as an interpreter of social information. The overarching argument of Manuscript 3 is that gossip provides social information and that recipients' interpretations of this information determine the relational and behavioral outcomes of gossip. I suggest that recipients' identities provide lenses for the interpretation of gossip, thus complementing the existing exchange perspective, which views gossip as a social resource (Martinescu et al., 2019b). As such, I extend understanding of (a) how recipients interpret gossip and (b) how such interpretations shape relationships and behavior in organizations.

Figure 6: Interconnections between the Overarching Aims of the Thesis

M1: Manuscript 1
M2: Manuscript 2
M3: Manuscript 3



In sum, I address my overarching aims across three manuscripts. Importantly, there are interconnections between these aims that lend coherence to my overall thesis. Figure 5 depicts these interconnections as overlaps between my three overarching aims. First, as depicted in the figure, I suggest that understanding how gossip shapes elements of the informal organization (Aim 1) requires enhanced knowledge of interdependencies between the information, influence, and bonding functions of gossip (Aim 2). For example, gossip shapes interpersonal relationships via its bonding function, which depends on the information that gossip communicates to recipients about gossipers and gossip targets. Second, I argue that understanding interdependencies between the functions of gossip (Aim 2) necessitates recognition of the recipient's perspective of workplace gossip (Aim 3). Specifically, I contend that the overarching function of gossip is to communicate social information and that the recipient's interpretation of this information shapes behavior (via the influence function of gossip) and relationships (via gossip's bonding function).

The figure also shows how each of my manuscripts fits within one or more of the overlaps between aims. To illustrate, Manuscript 1 fits within the two-way overlap between Aims 1 and 2 because it provides a framework that both highlights the interdependencies between the social functions of gossip (Aim 2) and links these interdependent functions to elements of the informal organizations (Aim 1). Manuscript 2 fits within two separate overlaps in the figure. To start, it fits within the two-way overlap between Aims 1 and 3 because it demonstrates how recipients' responses to gossip (Aim 3) shape their interpersonal relationships—a key element of the informal organization (Aim 1). Further, Manuscript 2 fits within the three-way overlap between Aims 1, 2, and 3 because it provides evidence that recipients' interpretations of the social information transmitted via gossip (Aim 3) enable the bonding function of gossip (Aim 2) and, in turn, shape recipients' interpersonal relationships with gossipers and targets (Aim 1). Like Manuscript 2, Manuscript 3 fits within the three-way

overlap between Aims 1, 2, and 3. Manuscript 3 fits within this overlap because it proposes that recipients' identity-based interpretations of gossip (Aim 3) are critical to both the bonding and influence functions of gossip (Aim 2), which, in turn, shape the emergent social structures of the informal organization (Aim 1). Additionally, Manuscript 3 fits within the two-way overlap between Aims 2 and 3 by highlighting how recipients' interpretations of gossip (Aim 3) shape their relationships (via the bonding function of gossip) and behavior (via the influence function of gossip) (Aim 2).

Chapter 6: Implications and Conclusion

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND THEORY

Across three manuscripts, this thesis advances knowledge on how gossip shapes the informal organization, with a focus on informal interpersonal relationships. It also elaborates interdependencies between the social functions of gossip and elucidates the role of the recipient in the workplace gossip triad. In this subsection, I discuss the implications of these contributions for research and theory on four interrelated foci of organizational research: workplace gossip, the informal organization, emotions, and identities.

Workplace Gossip

This thesis has substantive implications for the burgeoning literature on workplace gossip (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Michelson et al., 2010; Mills, 2010; Waddington, 2012; Xing et al., 2021). Above all, the thesis extends and enriches understanding of how gossip provides information in organizations (Bai et al., 2020; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Mills, 2010). Manuscript 1 develops an integrative framework for linking the specific types of social information communicated by gossip to the influence and bonding functions of gossip. Manuscript 2 provides evidence of how recipients interpret and respond to the information that gossip provides about gossipers and gossip targets, demonstrating how information about both these parties shapes the relational outcomes of gossip incidents. Manuscript 3 presents a novel perspective on how recipients' interpretations of gossip shape their relationships and behavior, suggesting that recipients' identities provide lenses for interpreting the three types of social information gossip communicates. Collectively, these findings and arguments have the potential to change the conversation around how gossip functions as a source of social information in the workplace.

My empirical findings emphasize the importance of subjective agreement with gossip. Existing research ascribes considerable weight to the *credibility* of the information communicated by workplace gossip—that is, the perceived accuracy of the gossip message (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Tassiello et al., 2018). From an exchange perspective, the accuracy of gossip is paramount for recipients because it determines the social utility of gossip as a source of information (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Martinescu et al., 2019b). Consequently, prior research implies that a crucial factor in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip is whether the recipient *believes* the gossip message is accurate (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Tassiello et al., 2018). In contrast, my empirical findings suggest that the relational outcomes of gossip are at least as strongly influenced by whether recipients *agree* with the subjective evaluations expressed in gossip. A participant in my qualitative study captured this notion when she said: “I believe [the source] believed what he was saying but I didn’t agree with him.” In other words, while the recipient in this incident found the gossip message credible in terms of what the gossiper believed, she did not agree with its evaluative content.

These findings have implications for understanding how workplace gossip provides information and, in turn, shapes relationships. First, they imply that subjective agreement with gossip holds similar weight to the credibility of gossip from the perspective of recipients. To illustrate why this implication matters, consider a scenario where an employee receives negative gossip about a coworker who allegedly used sick leave to go to a music concert. Conventional wisdom and extant theory suggest that the most important factor in determining the relational outcomes of this gossip is whether the recipient *believes* the message. If the recipient believes the message, it ought to alter their relationship with the gossiper by suggesting that person is a credible source of social information (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Martinescu et al., 2019b). In contrast, my findings imply

that the recipient could believe this gossip and yet experience the opposite relational outcome—that is, a damaged relationship with the gossiper—because they think attending a music concert is an acceptable use for sick leave and therefore disagree with the gossiper’s negative evaluation of the target. Future research could extend these ideas by investigating the relative importance that different recipients attribute to subjective agreement with gossip versus the perceived accuracy and credibility of gossip.

Findings on the importance of subjective agreement also imply that the outcomes of gossip for recipient-gossiper relationships hinge as much on the information gossip communicates about *gossipers* as on the information it contains regarding gossip targets. Importantly, the evaluative content of gossip provides information about gossipers’ emotions, values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations (Bai et al., 2020; Bosson et al., 2006; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). In Manuscript 2, I established that such information about gossipers was critical for shaping the relational outcomes of gossip incidents because it signaled interpersonal agreement (or disagreement) between recipients and gossipers. Additionally, gossip provided information about gossipers’ social value orientation (prosocial versus antisocial) (Rudnicki et al., 2019), which shaped relationships by indicating whether gossipers would be trustworthy or untrustworthy social partners. Taken together, these findings extend understanding of how gossip shapes relationships by providing information about gossipers. An interesting direction for future research on this topic would be to explore how information about gossipers affects recipient-gossiper relationships at different stages in the relationship. For instance, do perceptions of malicious intentions prevent a relationship developing when the recipient perceives them in the early stages of a relationship while having less of an impact once a strong bond is established with the gossiper?

Furthermore, my findings on the importance of gossipers’ perceived intentions have implications for future research. In my qualitative study, recipients’ interpretations of

gossipers' intentions were critical to the relational outcomes of gossip incidents because they initiated three distinct processes which, in turn, shaped recipient-gossiper and recipient-target relationships, either positively or negatively. Importantly, findings from this study also reveal three key *methods* that recipients used to interpret intentions—namely, sensing intentions, analyzing intentions, and getting a second opinion (see Table 2 in Manuscript 2). In this way, my research extends understanding of the methods that recipients rely on to discern gossipers' underlying motives (Lee & Barnes, 2021). As noted earlier, the perceived accuracy of gossip is seen as a crucial indication of a gossipers' motives (Lee & Barnes, 2021). Prior research by psychologists explores some of the heuristics that people rely on to assess the accuracy of gossip, such as the number of sources who provide the same information about a target (Hess & Hagen, 2006). However, my findings suggest that the perceived accuracy of gossip is only one of the factors that recipients consider when interpreting intentions and discerning motives. Other factors include non-verbal information, such as gossipers' tone of voice and body language, and recipients' existing relationships with both gossipers and gossip targets. As such, my exploratory findings on *how* recipients interpret intentions, as summarized in Table 2 of Manuscript 2, provide ideas for future research on the topic. For example, how do recipients' interpretations of intentions differ in scenarios where they can see gossipers face-to-face versus those in which the two parties communicate over the phone or via text message?

My findings also provide insights into how the information provided by gossip affects recipient-target relationships. Manuscript 2 shows that when gossip recipients interpreted gossipers' intentions as good or authentic, the information that gossipers shared about targets influenced recipients' relational orientations toward targets. As such, my findings reveal that gossip enables an *indirect* bonding function by providing information about targets. Importantly, however, the specific ways in which gossip served this indirect bonding function

depended on the recipient's existing level of familiarity with the target. When recipients were relatively *unfamiliar* with targets, gossip provided novel information about targets which engendered a new or revised relational orientation. For example, one participant reported that negative information about gossip targets engendered a negative relational orientation toward those individuals, predominantly because this recipient worked in a separate department from the targets and, therefore, had little opportunity to become familiar with them through interpersonal interactions and direct observation. On the other hand, when recipients were relatively familiar with targets (because they worked closely together in the same workgroup, for instance), gossip affected recipients' relational orientations toward targets via a social validation process—that is, gossip informed recipients that others in the workplace held the same opinions toward targets, thus validating and reinforcing recipients' existing relational orientations.

Consequently, my findings have implications for the reputational information perspective of gossip (Enquist & Leimar, 1993; Feinberg et al., 2012; Fonseca & Peters, 2018; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2016b). The reputational information perspective holds that gossip shapes recipient-target relationships by providing information about targets' behavior, which serves as an *alternative for direct observation* (Enquist & Leimar, 1993; Feinberg et al., 2012; Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Thus, if a recipient receives information about a target behaving in an untrustworthy fashion, it undermines the recipient's trust in that target. Crucially, my findings imply that this perspective only held true in situations where recipients were relatively *unfamiliar* with targets. When recipients were already familiar with targets, gossip served more as a means of socially validating recipient's observations of targets. Thus, the specific way in which gossip provides reputational information about targets depends on recipients' existing level of familiarity with targets. Future research could extend this implication by comparing how information about targets shapes relationships in

organizational contexts characterized by low versus high interpersonal familiarity. For example, how does information about targets affect relationships between the members of large, dispersed organizations (e.g., a multisite project management company) versus small, close-quartered organizations (e.g., a fine-dining restaurant)?

Finally, from a broader perspective, my findings imply that researchers would benefit from a better understanding of how organizational members interpret the different types of social information communicated by gossip. As demonstrated in the preceding paragraphs, recipients' interpretations of the information contained in gossip are critical to its relational outcomes. For instance, recipients' interpretations of gossip as a source of information about gossipers and targets shape their relationships with those individuals in important ways. In Manuscript 3, I tease out this implication to develop a novel perspective on how organizational members interpret gossip. Specifically, I conjecture about what happens when recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their personal, relational, and social identities. The identity perspective I develop complements the existing exchange perspective of gossip (Martinescu et al., 2019b) and extends the findings of my empirical research by linking the interpretation of gossip to both relational *and* behavioral outcomes. In doing so, it raises ideas to be explored in future research. For example, what contextual factors influence interpretations of gossip as a source of identity-relevant information? Is gossip from leaders more likely to be interpreted as most relevant to followers' relational identities (Kuo et al., 2018) or their organizational social identities? Moreover, are there individual differences in how recipients interpret gossip through an exchange versus identity lens? Do some people focus on what they gain from gossip (an exchange focus) while others concentrate on how their responses to gossip link to who they are (an identity focus)? Finally, what *other* lenses—beyond identity and exchange—exist for the interpretation of gossip in organizations?

The Informal Organization

My conceptual and empirical papers have implications for research on the informal organization. As already discussed, the informal organization is the set of emergent social structures in an organization that coexist alongside the formal organization (Bittner, 1965; Reif et al., 1973). It comprises elements including informal interpersonal relationships, emergent culture and climate, and unofficial power and status dynamics (Farris, 1981; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Reif et al., 1973). Scholars often acknowledge the importance of the informal organization, whether explicitly or implicitly. In explicit terms, they acknowledge that the informal organization enables flexible and dynamic forms of interpersonal cooperation and coordination which complement the top-down approaches of the formal organization (De Toni & Nonino, 2010; Gulati & Punaram, 2009). In implicit terms, scholars acknowledge the importance of the informal organization by linking its constituent elements, such as relationships and culture, to impactful outcomes including group effectiveness, organizational commitment, and citizenship behaviors (Ehrhart et al., 2014; Morrison, 2004; Oh et al., 2004). Even so, the literature remains relatively silent on how specific interpersonal behaviors shape and sustain the informal organization.

My thesis contributes to understanding how workplace gossip shapes and sustains the informal organization in three ways. First, in Manuscript 1, I develop a conceptual framework that links the functions of gossip to specific elements of the informal organization. This framework advances knowledge on how gossip shapes the informal organization by drawing explicit attention to links between the two phenomena that remain implicit in extant research (Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Specifically, the framework links the bonding function of gossip to interpersonal relationships, the information function to emergent culture and climate, and the influence function to unofficial power and status dynamics. Second, in Manuscript 2, I provide empirical evidence of how recipients'

lived experiences of workplace gossip shape their interpersonal relationships with gossipers and gossip targets. As noted earlier, scholars view interpersonal relationships as among the most important constituents of the informal organization (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Reif et al., 1973). Third, in Manuscript 3, I develop a model showing how workplace gossip interacts with organizational members' identities to shape gossip's relational and behavioral outcomes. This model suggests that recipients' identities serve as lenses for the interpretation of gossip, which, in turn, influence how recipients relate to and behave toward others in their workplace. Thus, Manuscript 3 implies that gossip and identities interact to shape the emergent social structures of the informal organization.

Taken together, the manuscripts in my thesis have two main implications for research investigating the role of gossip in the informal organization. First, I establish that qualitative research can provide a window into how elements of the informal organization emerge through people's experiences of workplace gossip. My qualitative research offers a fine-grained view of how gossip shapes workplace relationships from the perspective of gossip recipients, providing nuanced insights into how recipients' real-world experiences of positive and negative gossip shape their relationships with gossipers and targets. For example, my findings indicate that receiving negative gossip can bring recipients and gossipers closer together through mechanisms such as self-disclosure and interpersonal agreement, helping establish a positive relationship between the two parties. Yet negative gossip can also establish negative relationships between recipients and gossipers by indicating that the latter have bad intentions. These results emphasize that there are no straightforward associations between the valence of gossip and its relational outcomes. Additionally, my findings paint a complex picture of how gossip affects personal versus professional interpersonal relationships at work. While participants frequently stated that the negative relational outcomes of gossip were only relevant to their personal relationships with gossipers and

targets, they also reported that the positive relational outcomes of gossip translated into improvements for both their personal and professional relationships with both parties. For example, when gossip engendered closer personal bonds between recipients and gossipers, recipients were subsequently more inclined to provide task support to gossipers in their formal work roles. Thus, findings highlight potential links between gossip and *multiplex* interpersonal relationships—that is, relationships that straddle the divide between the informal and formal organization (Methot et al., 2016).

More broadly, my thesis provides a roadmap for investigating how the informal organization emerges through organizational members' subjective experiences of gossip. While the thesis only provides empirical evidence of how people's experiences of workplace gossip shape one element of the informal organization—interpersonal relationships—it will hopefully inspire research into how such experiences shape other elements. Moreover, the conceptual papers in the thesis offer specific ideas for how future research could address the links between experiences of gossip and other elements of the informal organization. For example, how do employees' experiences of gossip shape the emergent climates of their departments? To what extent do identity-based interpretations of gossip enable the transmission and reinforcement of organizational culture? And under what conditions do unofficial power and status dynamics manifest in experiences of gossip? Following other researchers (Waddington, 2005), I provide a model for implementing diary-style reporting methods in addressing such questions. However, I also suggest that the ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979) stands out as an excellent data collection method for examining how elements of the informal organization—especially organizational culture—emerge through experiences of gossip. Moreover, while the focus of my empirical paper is how *recipients'* experiences of gossip shape their relationships, understanding how *gossipers'* (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010; Tassiello et al., 2018) and *gossip targets'* (Wu et

al., 2018a; Xing et al., 2021) experiences shape elements of the informal organization may be equally revealing.

Emotions

The empirical findings of my thesis have implications for research on emotions in organizations. In Manuscript 2, I found that recipients frequently interpreted gossip as a means of expressing both positive and negative emotions such as appreciation, admiration, frustration, and anger. Additionally, I found that such emotional expressions via gossip shaped recipients' relationships with both gossipers and targets by engendering emotional congruence. Emotional congruence occurred when recipients related to gossipers' emotions toward targets based on their own emotional experiences of targets. Experiencing emotional congruence typically brought recipients closer to gossipers and crystallized or reinforced their emotions toward targets. As such, my findings extend research on the intersection of workplace gossip and emotions (Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2019a; Waddington, 2012; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005) and have implications for the wider literature on the interpersonal functions of emotions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Methot et al., 2017)

First, my findings support the view that gossip is an important means of expressing emotions in the workplace (Brady et al., 2017; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Prior research established this notion by assessing the motivations of *gossipers*, finding that individuals often use gossip to express and validate their emotions (Brady et al., 2017; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). My thesis corroborates this overall perspective by providing evidence that recipients interpret and respond to gossip as a means of emotional expression. My findings also extend this perspective by showing that gossip-based emotional expressions engender social support and reciprocated trust from gossip recipients, especially when gossip expresses strongly negative emotions with which the recipient agrees. However, my study challenges some of the assumptions around the outcomes of venting negative emotions via gossip. While

gossipers report that venting emotions such as frustration enables them to “let off steam” (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005, p. 385), I found that venting frustrations effectively spread and reinforced those emotions at a dyadic level when it led to emotional congruence. Therefore, an interesting direction for future research would be to test whether it is the act of verbally expressing negative emotions that engenders feelings of relief for gossipers, or whether such feelings stem from the social support that gossipers elicit when they express negative emotions to recipients.

Second, my research has implications for the wider literature on the interpersonal functions of emotions in organizations—that is, the social-functions-of-emotions perspective (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Methot et al., 2017; Peralta, Saldanha, & Lopes, 2020). This perspective holds that the primary functions of emotions are not *intrapersonal*, as commonly assumed, but *interpersonal*. Prior research adopting this perspective suggests that a critical social function of emotional expressions—and of emotions *per se*—is to shape interpersonal relationships (Methot et al., 2017; Peralta et al., 2020). My findings on the impact of emotional congruence with gossip uphold and extend this view. Emotional congruence with gossip not only brought recipients closer to gossipers, engendering greater social support and trust; it also crystallized and reinforced their emotions toward targets. Thus, the emotions expressed via gossip were crucial for shaping interpersonal relationships across the gossip triad. My findings on emotional congruence also imply that gossip is a means of *spreading* emotions from one organizational member to another, in line with the notion of emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002). While my findings only provide evidence of how gossip spreads emotions at the dyadic level, future research could explore whether gossip also serves to spread emotions through entire workplace social networks. For example, do expressions of frustration relating to a leader’s behavior diffuse through social networks via gossip? And if so, how does this process of emotional diffusion affect an organization’s climate?

Furthermore, how does gossip's role in expressing and spreading emotions relate to the group-level social control function of gossip? To illustrate, one can easily imagine how gossip-based expressions of anger about a specific behavior would create normative pressures for others to abstain from that behavior, and vice versa for expressions of appreciation regarding desired behaviors.

Identities

My thesis contributes to the rich literature on identities in organizations (Albert et al., 2000; Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2016; Brickson, 2000; Humphreys et al., 2012; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). As already discussed, my qualitative study reveals that subjective agreement with the evaluative content of gossip—which I translate into the construct called evaluative (dis)agreement in Manuscript 3—is critical for shaping the relational outcomes of gossip from the perspective of recipients. In Manuscript 3, I extrapolate from this finding to argue that evaluative (dis)agreement with gossip stems from a perceived (mis)alignment between the evaluative content of gossip and the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations embedded in recipients' identities. My model depicts a process wherein recipients interpret gossip through the lens of their identities, engendering either evaluative agreement or disagreement with gossip. In turn, evaluative (dis)agreement shapes recipients' relationships and behavior by increasing or decreasing the extent to which they identify with gossipers and gossipers' wider social collectives. As such, my research has implications for the organizational literature on identities.

First, my conceptual paper encourages research exploring how gossip primes distinct identities and how primed identities shape interpretations of gossip. My model in Manuscript 3 proposes that recipients interpret gossip differently depending on whether a gossip message primes their personal, relational, or social identities. Additionally, I contend that different gossip messages may prime distinct relational or social identities in the same recipient—for

instance, a departmental social identity versus an organizational social identity—depending on the circumstances in which the message is delivered. Future research could test these propositions through studies examining how contextual factors prime identities and, by extension, shape interpretations of gossip. For example, are newcomers more likely to interpret gossip as a source of identity-relevant information about the norms and culture of their organization compared to established employees (Louis, 1980)? Moreover, does newcomer status create social pressure for those individuals to agree with the evaluative content of gossip from established organizational members and leaders, even if that content conflicts with values embedded in recipients’ personal identities (Kammeyer-Mueller, Simon, & Rich, 2012)? Researchers could explore such questions by investigating newcomers’ experiences as gossip recipients, thus complementing recent research on newcomers’ experiences as perceived gossip targets (Xing et al., 2021).

Second, I make the novel suggestion that gossip is involved in communicating, developing, and altering organizational members’ identities. In this way, my thesis contributes to scholarly understandings of the specific forms of interpersonal communication that underpin identities in organizations (Scott, 2007). Given the focus of Manuscript 3 on interpreting gossip as information, I illuminate how organizational members’ identities interact with their responses to gossip—that is, how they receive the identity relevant information inherent in gossip. However, it seems equally plausible that organizational members use gossip to *send* identity relevant information to others, thus asserting and bolstering their workplace identities. Prior research suggests that employees engage in certain types of communication to signal and bolster their identities as members of a speech community (Spicer, 2020). Therefore, I encourage future studies that explore how identities interact with *motivations* to gossip. How and to what extent do organizational members use gossip to assert and bolster their personal, relational, and social identities? For example, are

the evaluations communicated by gossip a means of signaling one's allegiance to broad social collectives such as "feminists" or "social conservatives"? Addressing such questions would extend the identity perspective of gossip developed in Manuscript 3 by switching focus to the role of the gossiper. In a similar vein, researchers could fruitfully examine how gossip serves to communicate information about the identities of gossip *targets*. For instance, how and to what extent do lower-level employees use gossip as a form of sensemaking and sensegiving regarding the identities of organizational leaders (Humphreys et al., 2012; Mills, 2010)?

Third, my research has implications for how identity processes interact with exchange processes to shape informal social structures in organizations. An emerging perspective suggests that informal relationships—the building blocks of such social structures—are crucial to the work of organizations because they not only enable resource exchanges but because they also account for employees' sense of self—their identities (Methot et al., 2018). By positioning gossip as a form of interpersonal communication involved in both exchange and identity processes, my thesis contributes to this nascent field of inquiry. My empirical findings provide evidence that gossip enables relationship development through both reciprocation of trust and interpersonal agreement. I suggest that reciprocation of trust reflects an exchange process (Grosser et al., 2010; Martinescu et al., 2019b), while interpersonal agreement reflects an identity process. Thus, in combination, my empirical findings and conceptual arguments show how gossip enables relationship development through both exchange and identity processes. Importantly, while I focus on such relationship development at the level of the dyad, my findings and arguments may provide insights into the role of gossip in developing and shaping wider social networks (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Grosser et al., 2010). For instance, if an employee receives gossip and then shares it with another colleague, the gossip recipient effectively becomes the gossiper and, by gossiping, incorporates a new recipient into the gossip network (Grosser et al., 2010). To better

understand the relative importance of exchange versus identity processes for shaping gossip behavior in such networks, future research might explore the individual and contextual factors that lead organizational members to view gossip as a social resource, a form of identity relevant information, or both.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this subsection, I discuss the practical implications of my thesis—that is, what organizational members can learn from my research about the management of workplace gossip. Importantly, by “management of workplace gossip” I do not just mean what *managers* can do to influence gossip behavior; I am also referring to *self-management* of workplace gossip, or what organizational members can do to ensure their gossip behavior engenders favorable outcomes, both for themselves and the other members of their organizations.

Diversity and Inclusion

My thesis has practical implications regarding the role of gossip in facilitating or hindering diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Organizational researchers increasingly recognize the ethical and practical importance of promoting diverse workforces and inclusive working environments (Chen & Tang, 2018; Downey, Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015). However, my research suggests that gossip is a double-edged sword for workplace diversity and inclusion. On the one hand, empirical findings indicate that authentic and prosocial gossip can play a positive role in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships between gossipers and recipients, facilitating trust, social and task support, and feelings of interpersonal connection. Thus, my research implies that gossip provides a means of including recipients in relationships, enabling social integration. On the other hand, findings suggest that the positive outcomes of prosocial and authentic gossip are strongest for

recipient-gossiper relationships when the valence of such gossip is *negative*. As reported in Manuscript 2, recipients often feel closer and more trusting toward gossipers who express strongly negative emotions and opinions toward targets. Importantly, findings also show that such negative gossip typically engenders or reinforces negative relational orientations from recipients toward targets. Therefore, while prosocial and authentic negative gossip facilitates relational inclusion for those directly involved, it may do so by *excluding* gossip targets.

These findings raise questions around the ethical implications of using gossip to develop closer interpersonal relationships in the workplace. As noted in Manuscript 1, close workplace relationships are associated with favorable outcomes including job and social satisfaction, organizational commitment, and improved supervisor-rated job performance (Methot et al., 2016; Morrison, 2004; Venkataramani et al., 2013). Psychologists also recognize the fundamental importance of social relationships for human health and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloor, Uchino, Hicks, & Smith, 2004). Thus, *prima facie*, authentic and prosocial negative gossip might be recommended as a tool to enhance relational wellbeing and associated outcomes in organizations. However, in light of my findings that negative gossip only enhances positive relationships between recipients and gossipers when it simultaneously damages recipients' personal relationships with targets⁹, recommending the use of negative gossip—even authentic or prosocial negative gossip—appears questionable both ethically and from a diversity and inclusion perspective. It seems much safer to recommend positive gossip—especially authentic and prosocial positive gossip—as a means of enhancing both relational wellbeing and workplace inclusion. This recommendation is supported by my findings that positive gossip engenders positive relational outcomes for both

⁹ As a reminder, I found in Manuscript 2 that when recipients interpreted gossip as authentic or prosocial, it engendered or reinforced a positive or negative relational orientation from recipients toward targets. Consequently, when such gossip was negative, it necessarily damaged recipients' relationships with targets. When recipients interpreted negative gossip as malicious or manipulative, in contrast, it had minimal effects on their relationships with targets while damaging their relationships with gossipers.

recipient-gossiper *and* recipient-target relationships, provided recipients interpret the gossiper's intentions as authentic or prosocial.

Additionally, the identity process model developed in Manuscript 3 has implications for gossip's impact on diversity. One of the key propositions in the model is that evaluative agreement with gossip increases identification with gossipers and gossipers' social collectives, whereas evaluative disagreement does the opposite. In turn, changes to identification engender outcomes including (a) strengthened (or weakened) social bonds with gossipers and gossipers' collectives and (b) conformity (or nonconformity) to the perceived behavioral expectations of gossipers and their collectives. If these propositions hold true, the model has implications for diversity in organizations, especially diversity of opinion. As discussed in Manuscript 3, evaluative agreement with gossip stems from shared opinions about how to evaluate other people and their behavior. Thus, gossip may serve to reduce diversity of opinion in organizations by creating social pressures to conform to the attitudinal norms embodied in a specific identity. For example, suppose a newcomer receives negative gossip about a member of their new sales department who refuses to drink alcohol with clients. If the newcomer wants to identify as part of their new department, they may feel pressured to not only agree with this negative evaluation of the non-drinking team member (reducing diversity of opinion), but to indulge in drinking with clients to avoid becoming the target of similarly negative gossip (Liu et al., 2020a; Liu et al., 2015). Such gossip may also discourage people from remaining in the department if they come from cultural backgrounds in which alcohol consumption is forbidden, thus reducing cultural diversity.

Venting

Findings from Manuscript 2 have implications for the communicative phenomenon known as *venting*. Venting involves expressing negative emotions such as frustration and anger toward another person (Brady et al., 2017). A popular assumption is that venting serves

as an *outlet* for negative emotions, enabling organizational members to “let off steam” (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005, p. 385). The implication of such language is that venting enables the dissipation of negative emotions. However, my findings suggest an alternative perspective on the phenomenon. Specifically, in Manuscript 2, I found that venting often *reinforces* negative emotions at the dyadic level through emotional congruence. When recipients and gossipers both experience the same negative emotions toward targets, such emotional congruence strengthens recipients’ negative relational orientations toward targets. Thus, rather than serving to dissipate frustration and anger, venting functions to solidify these emotions through a process of social validation.

These findings have practical implications for organizational members who wish to self-manage their own venting behavior. In particular, the findings suggest that venting may not relieve negative emotions but reinforce them through social validation. While my data only provide evidence of recipients’ emotional responses to venting, prior research supports the notion that venting aggravates negative emotions in those who express them (Baer et al., 2018). Therefore, I suggest that organizational members should use venting with caution. Before expressing negative emotions toward a gossip target, people might reflect on what the target did to elicit those emotions. Was it something trivial like leaving a dirty cup in the lunchroom sink? Or was it something serious like a violation of trust? Also, prospective venters would do well to monitor how their own mood influences their emotional reactions toward targets. Finally, organizational members should perhaps consider that if negative emotions are worth expressing to a gossip recipient, they may also be worth voicing to the person who triggered them (Peralta et al., 2020).

Gossip and the Work Environment

My research has practical implications regarding how gossip functions as information in different work environments. Findings from Manuscript 2 suggest that gossip affects

relationships differently depending on recipients' existing relationships and level of familiarity with both gossipers and targets. When recipients had established relationships with gossipers—or were at least relatively familiar with them—they found it easier to read gossipers' intentions. Additionally, recipients frequently relied on non-verbal cues such as body language and tone of voice to interpret intentions. Given that recipients' interpretations of gossipers' intentions were critical in determining the relational outcomes of gossip incidents, these findings have intriguing implications for how gossip functions as a means of bonding across different work environments. For instance, the findings suggest that gossiping may be interpreted differently—and engender distinct relational outcomes—in work environments characterized by high versus low interpersonal familiarity. Thus, it may be riskier for members of remote or virtual teams to engage in gossip as a means of bonding with coworkers because recipients could easily misinterpret such gossipers' intentions due to a lack of non-verbal cues and familiarity with gossipers.

Findings also suggest that recipients respond differently to information about targets in environments characterized by high versus low familiarity. Specifically, when familiarity was high—as in tightly knit work teams—gossip affected recipient-target relationships through a process of social validation. In contrast, when familiarity was low—as in large organizations with employees spread across departments—gossip affected these relationships by providing novel information about targets. These findings suggest that the nature and design of work environments may affect *how* gossip shapes recipient-target relationships. Specifically, gossip is likely to function predominantly as a means of socially validating views of targets in face-to-face work teams and close-knit organizations, while serving more as novel reputational information about those individuals in remote teams and organizations with large, dispersed workforces. In practical terms, these findings imply that positive prosocial gossip may be particularly useful for indirectly establishing trust between the

members of remote and dispersed workforces (Burt & Knez, 1993). On the other hand, negative prosocial gossip may serve to warn others against targets who violate norms or perpetrate other forms of antisocial behavior in remote workforces (Vaidyanathan et al., 2016). These implications appear increasingly important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced many organizations to adopt remote and dispersed working arrangements.

CONCLUSION: FINAL REFLECTIONS

Researching and writing this thesis has taken me on a multiyear journey, so it seems only fitting that I conclude with some final reflections. At the very beginning of the thesis, I related an anecdote about my personal experiences when trying to justify my decision to spend three years of my life studying a topic as apparently trifling as workplace gossip. Now, I want to share another recurring conversation that I had with people about my research. Generally, once I revealed to people that I was doing a PhD on workplace gossip—and once they realized this revelation was not a joke—they would ask me a few roundabout questions pertaining to things like the *angle* of my thesis, how I was planning to *measure* gossip, whether I was taking a *business or psychological perspective*, and so on. But effectively, the main thing almost everyone wanted to know was my answer to a simple question: “Is workplace gossip good or bad?”

I started this thesis wondering the same thing myself. As I said at in the Introduction, my interest in workplace gossip arose during my career in the hospitality industry, where I worked for many years as a chef, waiter, or kitchen hand. Throughout that time, gossip was a pervasive feature of the cafés and restaurants in which I worked, and I started to dislike gossip, even if I was inevitably involved in it at times. This dislike came largely from my perception that gossip’s negative impacts outweighed its positive ones. I also frequently perceived myself as a target of negative gossip—not a nice feeling. Even so, the latent

researcher in me could not help noticing how insatiably people engaged in gossip and therefore thinking: “Surely all this gossip must serve some purpose?” Hence, to cut a long story short, I embarked on the journey to research and write the thesis you have just about finished reading.

As I approach the end of this journey, I still do not have an answer to the question “Is workplace gossip good or bad?” Scientists often say that the more knowledge you acquire on a topic, the more you recognize your own ignorance of it. I feel the same about gossip. It would be nice to have a clear-cut answer to offer people when they ask me whether workplace gossip is good or bad. But now more than ever, I feel obliged to reply, “It depends.”

One thing I *have* learned over the course of my doctorate is that studying gossip in a rigorous manner poses many challenges for researchers, especially those taking a qualitative approach. Qualitative research remains comparatively underrepresented in the workplace gossip literature (for exceptions, see Fan & Dawson, 2021; Farley et al., 2010; Hafen, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Mills, 2010; Shallcross et al., 2011; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Most of the empirical studies cited in this thesis employ quantitative designs and draw on survey or experimental data (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Burt & Knez, 1993; Decoster et al., 2013; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012b; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Farley, 2011; Grosser et al., 2010; Guo et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019; Kuo et al., 2015; Kuo et al., 2018; Liu, Wu, Yang, & Jia, 2020b; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Tassiello et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2018a; Wu et al., 2018b; Xing et al., 2021). Therefore, I want to share some of my own experiences of undertaking qualitative research on workplace gossip, as they may shed light on why qualitative studies are relatively rare in the field.

To start, I found that researching a phenomenon on which I already had well-developed opinions required a great deal of discipline when conducting qualitative analysis. As I mentioned above, I did not like gossip much when I started this thesis. In fact, I still have reservations about it. In large part, this opinion is due to my perception that I was (and am) more commonly a target of gossip than a recipient of it. However, given that my role as a qualitative researcher was to interpret data in a way that preserved the experiences and meanings of my *participants* (Gephart, 2018), I had to make a conscious effort to not let my views color my interpretations of the data. Thus, as it emerged that participants experienced many positive outcomes from receiving gossip—even when gossip was negative—I had to put myself in their position. And in fact, as I did so, I found I could draw on my own experiences of being directly involved in gossip to understand my participants' experiences better (Waddington, 2012). Thus, on reflection, having preexisting opinions and experiences of the phenomenon I was analyzing had both drawbacks and benefits.

I also found that *collecting* qualitative data on workplace gossip was difficult from both an ethical and practical standpoint. I became aware of these difficulties in the early stages of my research. My initial idea for the thesis was to explore *gossip about leaders*. During my work experience in the hospitality industry, I noticed that leaders were frequent targets of gossip, much of it negative. I therefore wondered what the purpose of gossip about leaders was, and how it affected dynamics and relationships between leaders and followers. These questions were reflected in the initial design I planned for my thesis, which would draw on qualitative data from both leaders and followers in the same workgroups to explore how gossip about leaders affected leader-follower relationships and dynamics. However, when it came to the ethical implications of this design, I hit an obstacle. The ethics committee at my university would not allow me to collect data on gossip from more than one person within the same workplace. This prohibition was understandable. After all, gossip provides

potentially damaging information about its targets, and by interviewing multiple individuals from the same workgroup, I would run the risk of unwittingly spreading such information to other members of the same workplace. Therefore, I revised my design to focus on the experiences of individuals from different workplaces regarding gossip about leaders, thus addressing the concerns of my university's ethics committee.

Unfortunately, once I had overcome the ethical hurdles involved in researching gossip about leaders, I hit a (perceived) practical barrier. How could I be sure that I would get enough data on workplace gossip that was specifically about leaders? And how could I ensure that participants would provide honest data on such a sensitive topic? Would they not worry that I was in cahoots with their managers, secretly there to spy on them? By the time I started asking myself such questions, I had already gained ethics approval for a qualitative study in which I was going to interview participants from different organizations about the nature, purpose, and effects of gossip about leaders. But at the last minute, I lost confidence in the study, deciding that gossip about leaders was going to be too specific and that I would not get sufficient data on the topic¹⁰. Subsequently, I changed my focus from gossip about leaders to how gossip shapes trust and relationships from the perspective of gossip recipients.

I cannot be certain whether I would have eventually managed to collect enough data on gossip about leaders if I had persisted with my planned research. What I *am* certain about, however, is that even with my revised research focus, collecting qualitative data on workplace gossip proved challenging. Completing my study required a significant commitment of time and energy from participants, the vast majority of whom were busy people juggling full-time jobs with other life commitments. My participants first had to read

¹⁰ As noted in the Preface to Manuscript 2, an additional reason for this shift in focus was my recognition that concentrating on the role of the recipient in shaping the relational outcomes of gossip would potentially enable a broader contribution to the literature. Thus, as it turned out, losing confidence in my initial plan was fortuitous in that it opened the door for me to make a stronger contribution through my empirical research.

through the study information and take the initiative of contacting me to express their interest. They then had to arrange a phone chat with me to ensure their eligibility and receive in-depth instructions on the remainder of the study. Next, they had to complete three *in situ* written incident reports, which required that they pay attention and make notes when they received gossip at work. Finally, they had to attend an interview in which I probed their written responses to incident report questions further. In the end, 12 participants started the study yet never supplied any data. To make matters more difficult, ethical considerations meant that I could not use snowball sampling to find multiple participants from the same workplace. For such reasons, gathering complete sets of data from 20 participants took me approximately 18 months from start to finish. Admittedly, a global pandemic struck during that time, which was particularly inconvenient from my perspective given that participants had to be working in a physical workplace and that COVID-related lockdowns forced people to adopt work-from-home arrangements *en masse*. Nonetheless, even without a global pandemic, my experiences do not recommend qualitative studies on workplace gossip to researchers who want an easy ride.

In many *quantitative* studies, researchers can effectively pay people to participate in their research by purchasing survey data from panel providers like Amazon Mechanical Turk and Prolific. In contrast, qualitative researchers do not have this luxury—ethical considerations dictate that we cannot pay our participants. Moreover, we cannot typically include close friends or family members in our samples due to potential conflicts of interest, unless the topic provides a strong justification for doing so (e.g., researching one’s own family business). Consequently, the qualitative researcher must depend on participants’ genuine curiosity and generosity rather than on financial and social incentives, which makes researching a topic as socially sensitive as workplace gossip all the more challenging.

Despite challenges, however, I *would* recommend qualitative research to those who truly want to understand workplace gossip. As I have shown in this thesis, qualitative data provide unmatched insights into people's lived experiences of the phenomenon. Words and stories reveal nuanced thoughts and feelings that no psychometric scale can capture. They show how small differences in interpretations of gossip can engender big differences in its relational outcomes. Above all, qualitative data tell us that the answer to the question "Is workplace gossip good or bad?" should always be: "It depends." And in my view, that makes it well worth the effort.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL (MANUSCRIPT 2)

Please note that the initial ethics approval below was for a project entitled “The nature, purpose and effect of gossip about leaders in organizations.” During the planning stages for the project, I changed my research focus to be about workplace gossip and interpersonal relationships, with a specific focus on gossip and trust. As such, I also include ethics approval for an amendment to my title and data collection protocols reflecting this change in focus.

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
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E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

14 November 2018

Helena Cooper-Thomas
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Helena

Re Ethics Application: **18/394 The nature, purpose and effects of gossip about leaders in organisations**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 12 November 2021.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation, then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,



Kate O'Connor
Executive Manager
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

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26 March 2019

Helena Cooper-Thomas
Faculty of Business Economics and Law
Dear Helena

Re: Ethics Application: **18/394 Exploring the relationship between workplace gossip and interpersonal trust**

Thank you for your request for approval of amendments to your ethics application.

The amendment to the data collection protocols (now critical incident report protocol) is approved. The research aims and change to title has been noted.

I remind you of the **Standard Conditions of Approval**.

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. If the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all locality legal and ethical obligations and requirements.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,



Kate O'Connor
Executive Manager
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: jgreensladeyeats@gmail.com

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (MANUSCRIPT 2)

Participant Information Sheet

AUT

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

Date Information Sheet Produced:

15/3/19

Project Title

Exploring the relationship between informal workplace communication and interpersonal trust

An Invitation

Kia ora. My name is James Greenslade-Yeats and I am inviting you to participate in a research project that I am undertaking as part of my PhD at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The project deals with informal workplace communication and how this affects interpersonal trust.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to find out more about the relationship between informal workplace communication and interpersonal trust. For the wider community, the research will provide a better understanding of how this relationship affects organisations, potentially leading to happier, more humanely-run workplaces. For me, undertaking the research is necessary to complete my PhD and may also lead to academic publications.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have either been identified as a potential participant for this research by a personal contact of the primary researcher or his supervisory team, or you have responded to a public advertisement about the research. You are being invited to participate because you are currently employed for at least 20 hours per week in a workplace with at least three employees.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you choose to participate in the study, you can let me know via email or by phone (my contact details are below). I will then ask you to formally agree to participate in the research by signing a participant consent form. I will provide this to you prior to the start of data collection.

Please note that your participation in this research is voluntary. Whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

If you decide to participate, you will need to write about three informal communication incidents from your work experience. One will be an incident that took place at any time during your overall work experience. The other two will be incidents that take place at work over a predetermined two-week period. You will be free to choose which incidents you write about and, if you wish, I will send you occasional reminders to keep

an ear out for incidents while you're at work. When you are writing about these communication incidents, you will answer the same set of 16 questions in each report. The amount of time you dedicate to your writing is up to you, though to give a rough idea, I would expect each report to take 10-15 minutes. Once you've completed your three incident reports, I will arrange an interview with you, either by Skype or in person. During the interview, which will last 30-40 minutes, I'll ask you a series of questions about your incident reports and your wider experiences of informal workplace communication.

What are the discomforts and risks?

I foresee minimal potential for discomfort or risk to participants during the study.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Any personal information you share with me will be kept strictly confidential between you, me, and my research supervisors. Furthermore, although my supervisors will have access to the information you share, I will be the only one who knows your real identity. Your name and the names of your colleagues will be replaced with pseudonyms (fake names) in the finalised transcripts, as well as when writing up findings. You are also free to decline any interview questions you don't feel comfortable answering.

What are the benefits?

By participating in the research, you may gain insight into how informal communication affects interpersonal trust in your workplace. Your participation will also advance knowledge on informal workplace communication, leading to better-run organisations. The benefit for me is that I will be able to complete my PhD and satisfy my curiosity about informal workplace communication. The study may also lead to academic and/or media publications.

How will my privacy be protected?

As mentioned above, anything you share in incident reports and interviews will only be accessible to myself and my research supervisors, who will not know your true identity. My supervisors and I are bound to keep your shared information confidential by the ethics application we make to AUT's ethics committee. This stipulates, for example, that I will only refer to interviewees by pseudonyms (fake names) when I write up my thesis. I will store the information you share for up to 15 years, and it may be used in future research publications.

I will keep your contact details throughout the research process, but only for the purpose of clarifying points made during incident reports and the interview. I will not share these with anyone else.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

Participation will likely involve you giving up approximately two hours of your time. This includes an introductory chat, completing the three incident reports, the 30-40 minute interview, and some correspondence via email. For the interview, I will either conduct this via Skype or meet you at a place that you find convenient, so you will not be asked to travel. You won't incur any financial costs at all during the study; if you choose to complete the incident reports using pen and paper, I will provide you with the necessary materials, including postage-paid envelopes.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

I would ask you to respond to this invitation within four weeks of receiving it, but preferably as soon as possible! I will send you a reminder email after four weeks to confirm whether or not you wish to participate.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you choose to participate in this study, you can confirm via email or by phone (my contact details are below). Once I receive your confirmation, I will in turn send you a confirmation email to arrange an introductory chat, either by phone or in person – whichever suits you! During this chat, I will ask you to sign a consent form (which I can email to you if this is more convenient), and then I'll give you more detail about the next steps involved in the research.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you wish to receive feedback on the study's findings, you will be able to check a box on the consent form and I will email you a summary report of the study when it is completed. The report will be a summary of patterns identified in the study.

If you wish to review your interview transcripts, you will be able to check a box on the consent form and I will email your transcripts to you once they are complete. You will be given two weeks to review them.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the project's Primary Supervisor, Professor Helena Cooper Thomas: helena.cooper.thomas@aut.ac.nz or 09 921 9999 ext: 7664

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Who do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Primary Researcher: James Greenslade-Yeats Email: jgreensladeyeats@gmail.com or zk1176@aut.ac.nz
Mobile: 022 2277 620

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Professor Helena Cooper Thomas: helena.cooper.thomas@aut.ac.nz or 09 921 9999 ext: 7664

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 14 November 2018, AUTC Reference number 18/394.

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (MANUSCRIPT 2)



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Consent Form

Project title: *Exploring the relationship between informal workplace communication and interpersonal trust*

Project Supervisor: *Professor Helena Cooper Thomas*

Researcher: *James Greenslade-Yeats*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 15/03/19.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that data I share will be kept for up to 15 years and that it may be used in future academic publications.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I am confident I have a good enough level of spoken and written English to participate in this research.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a copy of a summary of findings and quotes from the research. Yes ☐ No ☐
- ☐ I wish to review transcripts from my interview (Note: if you tick this box, I will email your transcripts to you once these are complete. You will have two weeks to review them. If I do not hear from you after two weeks, I will assume you are okay with me analysing your transcripts as they are.) Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details :

.....

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 14 November 2018 - AUTECH
Reference number: 18/394

APPENDIX D: STRUCTURED REPORTING DOCUMENT (MANUSCRIPT 2)

Below is the structured reporting document provided to participants for the recording of workplace gossip incidents, including instructions. Note that only the specific instructions at the start of each task vary in wording.

Dear Participant,

Your role in this study is to write about three workplace communication incidents. This will include one incident from your overall work experience (that took place at any time and in any workplace), and two incidents that take place at your current workplace during the next two weeks (approximately). These instructions are to help you write about these three communication incidents. If you still have any questions or doubts about what you should do after reading these instructions, don't hesitate to get in touch – my contact details are listed below!

For this study I am interested in how informal workplace communication affects interpersonal relationships and trust among colleagues. The specific type of communication I am interested in is *informal and evaluative talk about another coworker (or coworkers) who is not present*. By “informal,” I mean talk that is not a necessary part of official workplace communication. By “evaluative,” I mean talk that makes some kind of positive or negative judgement about the person being talked about. And by “another coworker who is not present,” I mean a coworker who is not involved in the conversation because he or she is somewhere else (or at least out of ear-shot). So, when I ask you to describe communication incidents from your own work experience, the sort of incidents I am interested in are ones in which a colleague talks *to you* informally and evaluatively about another colleague who is not present. Here are some examples of the types of incidents you might choose to write about:

Examples of positive talk:

- a colleague compliments another colleague's actions while talking to you
- a colleague tells you good things about another colleague
- a colleague defends another colleague's actions while talking to you
- a colleague says something nice about another colleague while talking to you
- a colleague tells you he or she respects another colleague

Examples of negative talk:

- a colleague asks you if you have a negative impression of another colleague or of something another colleague has done
- a colleague calls into questions another colleague's abilities or character while talking to you
- a colleague criticises another colleague while talking to you
- a colleague vents to you about something that another colleague has done
- a colleague tells you an unflattering story about another colleague

For Task One, I want you to describe a communication incident (of the sort just described) that had a big impact on you. Ideally, you should choose an incident that you remember well and that changed something about your relationship with the other individuals involved. For example, the incident may have changed your feelings of trust towards the person talking to you, or towards the person being talked about, or both. The incident may also have changed your working or personal relationship with one or both these individuals. It may have even changed all these things! The incident you write about in Task One can be one that took place at any time during your entire work experience, and in any workplace (not just where you work now). It may also involve either positive or negative talk.

For Tasks Two and Three, you should write about communication incidents that take place at work over the next two weeks. Ideally, you should write about these incidents as soon as possible after they occur, so that you remember the details as accurately as possible!

In Task Two, you should write about an incident in which a colleague talks to you *positively* about another coworker who is not present. In Task Three, you should write about an incident in which a colleague talks to you *negatively* about another coworker who is not present.

Please refer back to the examples of positive and negative talk above as a guide for the sort of incidents you might choose to write about.

Finally, I should note that the more descriptive detail you include in your incident reports, the better! Ideally, I want to know what it was really like to “be there,” so please, don’t hold back.

Once again, thank you for participating in my study. I look forward to reading your incident reports.

Task One:

For this task, you should describe an incident that had a big impact on you and that you remember well. Ideally, it will be an incident that changed either your feelings of trust towards the individuals involved, your working relationships with them, your personal relationships with them, or all the above.

Thinking about your overall work experience (not limited to where you work now), please describe in a few sentences one incident where a coworker talked to you either positively or negatively about another coworker/s who wasn’t there:

Reflecting on this incident, describe your relationship with the “source” (the person talking to you) in a few sentences:

Describe your relationship with the “target” (i.e., the person/s being talked about) in a few sentences:

What was the talk about? For example, was it related to the target person's performance at work, to his or her personal life, or to some other aspect of this person?

Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person? What was your interpretation of his or her motivations?

To what extent did you trust the source person in this incident?

To what extent did you trust target person in this incident?

In this specific instance, did you believe what the source told you about the target individual? If so, why? If not, why not?

Did you speak to anyone else at work about what the source told you? If so, please provide some details of how you went about speaking to others – who did you choose, what did you say, and why?

Did this incident affect your trust in the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your trust in the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your own workplace behaviour in any specific way – perhaps because you learned something about what is acceptable behaviour at work, for example? If so, please describe how the incident affected your own workplace behaviour.

Please add anything else that you think is relevant to how you responded to this incident in terms of your thoughts, feelings and actions:

Task Two:

Please describe in a few sentences one incident from work where a coworker talked to you *positively* about another coworker/s who wasn't there:

Reflecting on this incident of positive talk, describe your relationship with the "source" (the person talking to you) in a few sentences:

Describe your relationship with the “target” (i.e., the person/s being talked about) in a few sentences:

What was the talk about? For example, was it related to the target person’s performance at work, to his or her personal life, or to some other aspect of this person?

Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person? What was your interpretation of his or her motivations?

To what extent do you trust the source person in this incident?

To what extent do you trust target person in this incident?

In this specific instance of positive talk, did you believe what the source told you about the target individual? If so, why? If not, why not?

Did you speak to anyone else at work about what the source told you? If so, please provide some details of how you went about speaking to others – who did you choose, what did you say, and why?

Did this incident affect your trust in the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your trust in the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your own workplace behaviour in any specific way – perhaps because you learned something about what is acceptable behaviour at work, for example? If so, please describe how the incident affected your own workplace behaviour.

Please add anything else that you think is relevant to how you responded to this incident in terms of your thoughts, feelings and actions:

Task Three:

Please describe in a few sentences one incident from work where a coworker talked to you *negatively* about another coworker/s who wasn't there:

Reflecting on this incident of negative talk, describe your relationship with the “source” (the person talking to you) in a few sentences:

Describe your relationship with the “target” (i.e., the person/s being talked about) in a few sentences:

What was the talk about? For example, was it related to the target person’s performance at work, to his or her personal life, or to some other aspect of this person?

Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person? What was your interpretation of his or her motivations?

To what extent do you trust the source person in this incident?

To what extent do you trust target person in this incident?

In this specific instance of negative talk, did you believe what the source told you about the target individual? If so, why? If not, why not?

Did you speak to anyone else at work about what the source told you? If so, please provide some details of how you went about speaking to others – who did you choose, what did you say, and why?

Did this incident affect your trust in the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your trust in the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the target? If so, how?

Did this incident affect you own workplace behaviour in any specific way – perhaps because you learned something about what is acceptable behaviour at work, for example? If so, please describe how the incident affected your own workplace behaviour.

Please add anything else that you think is relevant to how you responded to this incident in terms of your thoughts, feelings and actions:

APPENDIX E: EVIDENCE OF CODING DURING DATA ANALYSIS (MANUSCRIPT 2)

Table 3: Evidence of how we interpreted raw data to generate codes and subthemes for the overarching theme authentic intentions

Subthemes	Second-order codes	First-order codes	Representative quotes
<i>Self-disclosure</i>	<i>Expressions of emotion</i>	Venting frustration or anger	<p>“[The source] was feeling deep frustration because she could not have more time to do her own work because she needed to check what had been done by [the target] before the products in the warehouse get to the customer (to avoid more customer complaints as she did not trust [the target]). (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)</p> <p>“I believe she was venting to me about a situation that she needed to get off her chest. She knows I cannot act on it so I am a reasonably safe person to vent to.” (Midwife, incident report)</p>
		Genuine emotional display	<p>“I trusted [the source] fully as you could see from the upset and anger how she was being honest with me and how shocked she was.” (Office worker, Hospitality, incident report)</p> <p>“When [the source] was telling this story I could sense her frustration and anger towards [the target] for not only having hurt her friend but also for having involved her unnecessarily and lied to General Management about her [the source] sleeping with a colleague.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)</p>
		Expressing appreciation or admiration	<p>“I think the source told me about the target because she was genuinely so impressed of the work and wanted to share her thoughts and feelings with me.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p> <p>“It felt like they were just being very appreciative of having this kind colleague, as otherwise the 'source' themselves would have had to try and deal with the difficult situation, which they really struggled to deal with.” (Optometrist, incident report)</p>
	<i>Honest opinions</i>	Divulging honest opinions	<p>“She was giving her opinion on a new staff member – someone who I had not met yet but was going to work closely with soon. I believe the source was giving her honest opinion on this person.” (Midwife, incident report)</p> <p>“They would be the type of person who would say both [positive and negative things], and yeah, because we share a lunch break we do talk a lot and so, yeah, it is someone I would probably trust a fair amount just to be honest, I suppose – you know, I know that for that person specifically, they would say positive and negative things about the other staff with the actual genuine intention of, you know, like, ‘I’m just actually sharing my thoughts rather than trying to slander people or deliberately cause gossip or contention.’ ” (Optometrist, interview)</p>

		Perceived honesty or genuineness	<p>“It made me think that the source was very honest with their thoughts.” (Optometrist, incident report)</p> <p>“I already trusted the source but this increased even more as she was very genuine.” (Office worker, Hospitality, incident report)</p>
		Seeking social validation	<p>“I suppose he wanted me validate his opinion and make him feel better as up until then I was defending the Project Manager by saying he’s just stressed out or likes to do things thoroughly etc.” (Office worker, Project management, incident report)</p> <p>“She wanted to have someone to, I don’t know, to fall back and maybe just, you know, get like a high five that what she’s saying, is it right or wrong? You know, like am I there to support her?” (Office worker 2, Marketing, interview)</p>
	<i>Personal or sensitive information</i>	Sharing confidential experiences	<p>“Their motivation was to share that others were facing similar challenges to myself and it was a common issue in the workplace.” (Office worker 2, Human resources, incident report)</p> <p>“When that happened to [the source] there, we were work colleagues, but we weren’t great friends, but I think for her to have talked to me about it and trusted me about it, I guess then it gives you something - not to talk about, but it does bring you closer and then, now we’re still really good friends even though we left there - what? We were working there ten years ago - so I think it’s – it’s the trust they put in you, I guess.” (Office worker, Hospitality, interview)</p>
		Confiding personal information	<p>“It makes me think I have grown a lot in the last couple of years when my manager is confiding in me her stresses [about other workers] and I can be of some sort of support to her by listening.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p> <p>“So yeah, I had the trust built even more because we worked closely and then we used to share personal stuff as well, like we were like insiders, like we knew what’s happening so the trust is built even more, yeah.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, interview)</p>
		Preferential sharing of sensitive information	<p>“She is comfortable telling me this because I think she trusts me as one of the closest colleagues at work (and the fact that she's sharing the same office room as me making her closer to me).” (Office manager, Manufacturing, incident report)</p> <p>“They told me because I too was involved. Their motivation was to be honest about their motivations for speaking to management about the target. This person expressed genuine concern for the target’s wellbeing and mental state. This person was very religious and told me it was ‘right’ to be ‘honest and upfront,’ do the right thing for the target to help them get ‘help.’” (Office worker, Management consultancy, incident report)</p>
<i>Interpersonal agreement</i>	<i>Emotional congruence</i>	Shared frustration or anger	<p>“It’s also nice to know that my feelings of frustration are shared, and that when things get too much for him, he is happy to chat.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p>

		<p>“I am used to her venting her frustrations about people asking for days off as I understand the frustrations in always trying to accommodate people.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p>
	Feeling the same about someone	<p>“Um, well it’s kind of down to [the target] is quite an authoritative leader and we know that – and I’m friends with him and I’ve worked with him a very long time but I – though a couple of weeks before [the source] sort of expressed her feelings, I felt like [the target] had been talking to me not very nicely and been quite degrading or like bossy and not really respecting me as much, and it’s not an excuse but he’s American and it is – like it’s his natural leadership style, which sometimes he’s good at kind of not doing, but in stressful situations that’s the style that I think comes out quite quickly. So when she talked about it it made me feel close to her because that’s how he’d made me feel leading up to that as well.” (Hospitality manager, interview)</p> <p>“It was nice to know that other people are sick of the constant negativity of the colleague the target was replacing.” (Teacher, incident report)</p>
	Mutual appreciation or admiration	<p>“It made me happy that the genuine goodness of the target was being noticed and appreciated but also verbalized. It made me really appreciate the people that I work with” (Office worker, Law, incident report)</p> <p>“If anything, this made me feel closer to the source as she was willing to praise my teammate, and I appreciate it when people’s hard work is recognized.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p>
<i>On the same page</i>	Shared values	<p>“It just solidified that we were on the same page and were both looking out for good work.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p> <p>“[After the incident] we became closer. More trust and kind of on the same page. We had similar opinions and wanted a positive team.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, incident report)</p>
	Convergent evaluations	<p>“I think [the source] told me as he wanted to know what I thought of [the target] and he was glad that we were both of the same opinion that [the target] is funny, helpful and although a bit over the top at times it’s all just for fun or to make work more enjoyable.” (Office worker, Project management, incident report)</p> <p>“More often than not I will agree with her, with what she thinks about people. We generally get along with the same sort of people and whenever she has a vent about someone else I generally agree, and the same if she thinks someone else is lovely I’ll agree.” (Midwife, interview)</p>
<i>Validated views</i>	Reinforcement of view	<p>“It increased (even more) my respect for [the target]. I know that if there ever was a work issue I could have trust and confidence in this person. (Office worker, Law, incident report)</p>

		“I think it was only positive results or positive outcomes for my relationship with both of them. I already knew that [the target] did a good job, and this just solidifies that.” (Outdoor team worker, Environmental science, interview)
	Crystallization of emotions	<p>“My feelings were affected as it made me even more frustrated that the target wasn’t listening and was now annoying someone else in my team, adding more work, and not adding any value at the same time.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p> <p>“It helps to confirm the annoyance I was already feeling [toward the target] and the need to distance myself from her as much as I can.” (Teacher, incident report)</p>

Table 4: Evidence of how we interpreted raw data to generate codes and subthemes for the overarching theme good intentions

Subthemes	Second-order codes	First-order codes	Representative quotes
<i>Prosocial information</i>	<i>Team building through praise</i>	Being constructive	<p>“I think her intention was maybe to find solutions, that’s what I was getting out of her, ’cause I was also giving her solutions, so kind of like, it’s not just for the sake of gossiping, it was kind of for finding solutions for what had happened. I think that was her intention.” (Hospitality worker, interview)</p> <p>“Maybe if it’s negative but constructive in a way, like, “Watch this person because of a certain trait.” And then something specific, even though it’s negative, it’s quite specific and targeted and that means you avoid conflicting with this person, with the target, in the future and by that it means you have a better relationship. I guess that’s a possibility, if it’s a negative thing but it’s a specifically kind of practical piece of advice, um, I can see that being something that could help, yeah.” (Teacher 1, interview)</p> <p>“Yeah, that’s right, it was more about her trying to understand the situation rather than her trying to morph how I thought about him. She would never want me to think negatively as a result of the things she had encountered, really... So even though she was discussing like a negative, um, encounter or a negative incident, I ended up having even more respect for her that she was able to process it and talk about it, and then actually the three of us had a discussion together when they got back from the South Island about communication and, you know, how to app – how to deal with those things, and yeah, so I guess a negative incident but positive outcomes and then everyone was</p>

		able to just communicate around it and sort out how to avoid those things in the future and stuff like that.” (Outdoor team worker, Environmental science, interview)
	Spreading positivity	<p>“I think they were truly pleased and they themselves were in a good mood that day, so they wanted to demonstrate some positivity on the back of some negativity that week.” (Office worker, Management consulting, incident report)</p> <p>“I think [the source] wanted to comment positively on [the target] to highlight a good example of working attitude and performance, and to reinforce the team’s relationship and positive view we have of each other.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)</p>
	Acknowledging good work	<p>“I guess when she approached me to talk about it, the colleague, it sort of caught me off guard, and then when she started to talk about how positive she felt about this one person, I was like, ‘Wow, that’s really kind of her to say that,’ but then I just inherently had a lot more respect for her as well, I was like, that’s cool that she’s happy to give feedback on people because a lot of the time, good work’s almost expected and it’s only when you hear about a bad thing that people talk about it, so it was nice for the opposite to happen and for good work to be praised.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, interview)</p> <p>“It just enforces the fact that people are doing good jobs out there and other people are also recognizing good behavior so it’s not just me.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p>
<i>Warning against target</i>	Watch out!	<p>“[The source] wanted to open my eyes and make me aware to some of the personalities within the business, and what the target was capable of.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p> <p>“[The source] was also wanting me to keep my ears out to figure out if [the target] was being truthful about being sick.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p>
	Concerns about behavior	<p>“The source told me because she held concerns on how the conversation between the receptionist [the target] and the caller might affect the relationship between the caller and the practice.” (Healthcare clinic manager, incident report)</p> <p>“That was the first time [the source] had told me that the target, you know, is kind of a bit clever and tries to play safe, and we should not be doing all the work for her.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, interview)</p>
	Not who you thought	“Her motivations might have also been that she wanted to let people know how [the target] truly was and not feel like the only one at work that didn’t like her.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)

			<p>“I think the target told me because she was upset about what had happened but also because she wanted what had happened to form part of my opinion about the target.” (Office worker, Law, incident report)</p>
<i>Perceived prosocial orientation</i>	<i>Trustworthy social partner</i>	Trustable person	<p>“[The gossip] made me think that if anyone saying things about me I can count on [the source] as a trustable nice person who can see positive things in people.” (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)</p> <p>“I thought it was very kind of [the source] to praise a teammate’s good work while she is not there, and it made me trust her even more in that she would also recognize my successes and try to defend me if something happens provided I work well. I have more willingness to show [the source] that I also have a good attitude towards work and also I feel more relaxed knowing that she is able to acknowledge a good performance even if I’m not loud about it. [The gossip] made me trust her more because I know she’s also able to see the good things in people and share them with others even if they’re not there.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)</p>
		Looking out for me	<p>“His intention wasn’t to tell me that the other people are nasty – ‘they said something about you.’ He said, ‘They came and said something to me because they thought I don’t know, and I wasn’t even interested – I listened to them and I don’t care because it’s your personal life – you’re doing very well at work and I appreciate what you’re doing and in case you’re worried about somebody bringing those news to me, I know how much you put into your work while you’re here.’ And that was amazing. That was an amazing moment – that’s what I’m saying – he wasn’t a manager. He’s a leader. This is like how you can run a country – that you don’t care about some small issues – and I loved it.” (Office manager, Human resources, interview)</p> <p>“I think [the source] was looking out for me. She said she noticed [the target] asking me something every two minutes the other day and this really stood out to her. I was directly involved and [the source] was purely commenting on what she saw.” (Teacher 2, incident report)</p>
		Appreciating positivity	<p>“It made me happy that the genuine goodness of the target was being noticed and appreciated but also verbalized. It made me really appreciate the people that I work with” (Office worker, Law, incident report)</p> <p>“If anything, this made me feel closer to the source as she was willing to praise my teammate, and I appreciate it when people’s hard work is recognized.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p> <p>“I appreciated [the source] more for saying good things about another worker and considered her as a good manager.” (Hospitality worker, incident report)</p>

<i>Reliable source of information</i>	Accurate information	<p>“She did also make some comments about [the target] asking other people lots of questions as well. I didn’t see these specific incidences, but have seen it for myself before so I trust what [the source] said was accurate.” (Teacher 2, incident report)</p> <p>“Given that the source’s evaluation was right about the target, it reinforced my trust for him.” (Teacher 1, incident report)</p> <p>“If it’s something that makes sense and I also observe it, like for example I gave an example, some waiter that left a mess, so he’s usually closing at night shift and the other manager she opens the next morning, so I saw that he leaves a mess for her when I came to work in the morning on Sunday, so I understand her, like this is also a physical thing that I could see, so it’s also that if I can see it then I will trust the person that says it.” (Hospitality worker, interview)</p>
	Inside word	<p>“I feel more comfortable asking her about the other staff or anything that happened in the workplace among the staff to check if there is anything can be improved from the management staff because I know she trust me and she's being honest with me.” (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)</p> <p>“So yeah, I had the trust built even more because we worked closely and then we used to share personal stuff as well, like we were like insiders, like we knew what’s happening so the trust’s built even more, yeah.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, interview)</p>
<i>Colored lenses</i>	Loss of trust	<p>“I completely lost my trust in [the target] because he failed to perform well at work, which is what we need in the company. My nature of being perfectionist also affected my attitude which is clashed with people that fail to show effort to do things correctly.” (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)</p> <p>“It made me not trust the target so much and then when I had to ask her about it to find out her side of the story it probably made her think that I didn’t trust her either.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p> <p>“It affected the way I perceived [the target] and my trust toward her was lower after knowing more opinions about her performance from another dimension (as line manager) rather than just my view as her as a mentor.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)</p>
	Increased trust	<p>“Given the source’s positive assessment, I trusted [the target] more despite the fact that I hadn’t met them yet.” (Teacher 1, incident report)</p> <p>“Q: So your colleague told you something positive about this new colleague, and then one thing she said was that [the target] had common sense and therefore you could trust her in her job. Can you just talk about why that trust that you’re talking about there would be important for being able to do the job?</p> <p>A: Ah because – the reason this came up is because I was going to be the senior midwife on a shift with just one other person, and that was this person I was talking about [i.e., the target], so we were</p>

	<p>the only two people in the whole unit over night, looking after all these women, and basically I just wanted to know if I was going to be safe... And like practicing with this person – she’s a new graduate, she’s a new practitioner – I was going to be the senior person, which meant anything that happened kind of falls on me, and so if we had like an emergency or something at night, I just wanted to know if they were going to be like flapping around crazy or if they’re going to be, you know – I’m going to be able to just trust them to go and do what they need to do, and follow instructions or just get on and do it, you know.” (Midwife, interview)</p> <p>“It made me trust [the target] more as they have proven themselves to be compassionate and competent.” (Optometrist, incident report)</p>
Facilitation of positive relationship	<p>“I think from the start, I think I would’ve ended on the same conclusion, but I think I was probably more warm and like receptive to her because of [the positive gossip] at the start, and I wouldn’t have been just like sizing her up from the beginning. I don’t know. Yeah, I probably would’ve been more open to feeling positive things.” (Midwife, interview)</p> <p>“I found it easier to deal with him after looking at him more positively.” (Outdoor team worker, Packaging, incident report)</p> <p>“I tend to be more polite and show more appreciation to [the target] after knowing more evidence of his positive attitude at work. If he needs to complaint that he’s tired, I will gladly listen to him as I think that may help him to feel better and understand that the company cares about the staff.” (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)</p>
Keeping it professional	<p>“It strengthened my decision to not have a personal relationship with this person. Just to keep it civil and professional.” (Midwife, incident report)</p> <p>“I remained professional toward [the target] in work but never had a relationship outside work.” (Office worker, Hospitality, incident report)</p> <p>“Because she had done previously the same thing to me and afterwards to the source, I was a bit distant to the target. We were not friends outside work. Just working professional.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, incident report)</p>
Cautious behavior	<p>“After the talk things have been a bit rocky and I think we are not as good working together, I feel a bit like I am walking on egg shells. I also don’t want him to feel like I am not on his side or am not going to support him in leading the team.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p> <p>“I don’t have much to do with [the target] as he has his own admin onsite. Although, when I email him now I make sure to do things properly. i.e. get cost codes and approval before purchasing anything against his project.” (Office worker, Project management, incident report)</p>

	<p>“It was like walking on eggshells being around her, and I would always have to be so careful with any dealings I had with her. I would second guess myself, and all of my communication with her was exceptionally well thought through.” (Office worker 1, Marketing, incident report)</p>
Seeing in a more positive light	<p>“It increased my respect for the target. The target it always extremely busy at work so I was impressed the target was taking the time to give feedback to the juniors, to help with their development and to encourage them to improve and set goals.” (Office worker, Law, incident report)</p> <p>“It made me see the target in a better light again.” (Outdoor team worker, Packaging, incident report)</p> <p>“I respect [the target] more as he shows evidence of his hardworking nature which greatly contributes on the company's productivity.” (Office worker, Manufacturing, incident report)</p>
Different eyes	<p>“I started seeing the target with different eyes and noticing more weird relationship dynamics with her and [colleague A] and between [colleague A] and [colleague B]. I also saw [the target] as way more flirty and toxic rather than outgoing and fun.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, incident report)</p> <p>“So the trust went down in the way that I thought [the target] was a different person than I thought she was at the start.” (Office worker 2, Marketing, incident report)</p> <p>“It makes me think [the target] is calculated and not afraid to pass the blame to make himself look better.” (Office worker, Project management, incident report)</p>

Table 5: Evidence of how we interpreted raw data to generate codes and subthemes for the overarching theme bad intentions

Subthemes	Second-order codes	First-order codes	Representative quotes
<i>Malicious or manipulative gossip</i>	<i>Reputational attack</i>	Being spiteful	<p>“I think the source told me this because he is jealous of the target and insecure about his job. He is spreading the word of the target being an incompetent worker out of spite.” (Construction manager, incident report)</p> <p>“Two guys in my company always talk about each other behind their back to put each other down. [The source] was saying if things are good at work he is the reason and the other person is not performing well but the fact is both are making mistakes but keep blaming each other. He was saying it because knows the other person does the same thing to him so he wanted to explain himself.” (Office manager, Human Resources, incident report)</p> <p>“I believe her but I also thought she might have a chip on her shoulder after she fell out with me and [the target] at the end of last season and was playing the victim card a bit.” (Hospitality manager, incident report)</p>
		Bringing someone down	<p>“He said it out of frustration and to attempt to boost his reputation amongst staff by bringing down another colleague.” (Teacher 1, incident report)</p> <p>“[The source] said it to damage the target’s reputation and cause drama in the workplace.” (Outdoor team worker, Packaging, incident report)</p> <p>“Yes, yes, ’cause with the boss I think the intention of him was really just to get his anger out and, um, and his intention was for me to get away from the, stay away from the other waitress, because she asked this question she wasn’t supposed to ask, like the how much do I earn.” (Hospitality worker, incident report)</p>
	<i>Hidden agenda</i>	Boosting own status	<p>“So, there’s a lot people who will have their own personal agenda going, so they’re trying to – and this is where the status thing comes in, I think – I always say they’re trying to climb this invisible ladder that you’re really getting – there’s no monetary value in it, it’s all for, um, status and just to feel good about yourself, to be honest, I think.” (Construction manager, interview)</p> <p>“I just kind of felt that they were making the problem bigger than what it was and I probably felt like they were putting themselves on the pedestal of being the person that can solve these problems and that they were needed to, um, I suppose get the solution and, um, particularly because I didn’t see it as being a big problem and being a big challenge and something that took a lot of effort to sort out, ah and the person they had talked about, I didn’t know them very well but my impression of them was that they were quite capable and quite, um, unlikely to get thrown off by little things like that, so it didn’t really align – I just felt it was being blown out of – being made to seem bigger than</p>

			something was, and made to make this other person look good rather than really trying to help the other person.” (Office worker 2, Human resources, incident report)
		Trying to gain something	<p>“I feel like people might over-emphasize and make things sound super rosy if they’re trying to gain something from me or like trying to almost win me over.” (Midwife, interview)</p> <p>“So if it’s something positive and they are in the same team, for example, and they have some interest in that person doing well, then I would be more skeptical – so just to give you some more example if there’s a manager from the other team saying that her or his team member has done very well this month I would say, ‘Okay, great,’ but how much is that true or how much are you willing to sell that person, so that it makes you look like a good manager, um, there’s a bit of that with the positive things, I tend to be a bit skeptical depending on who they come from, as well as the negative I suppose, because yeah, same scenario for the negative ones, I guess, because it really depends for me on the source, yeah, it really depends.” (Office worker 1, Human resources, interview)</p>
<i>Perceived antisocial orientation</i>	<i>Untrustworthy social partner</i>	Questionable trustworthiness	<p>“So like in that situation because it made me feel a bit negative about that person I suppose it made question whether I can trust them when I am talking with them in my interactions with them and how they explain some of the things that I might need help with.” (Office worker 2, Human resources, interview)</p> <p>“This behavior has me wondering how much I can trust [the source].” (Construction manager, incident report)</p>
	What would they say about me?	Fear of becoming target	<p>“This was quite shocking for me as until this point I had perceived [the source] to be professional and nice. On hearing him say these things I felt uncomfortable and it changed my opinion of him. I thought that if he can say these things about [the target] behind his back, he would definitely say similar things about me when I’m not around...I’ve also heard him since dismiss other colleagues so this is a well-founded assumption.” (Office worker, Project management, incident report)</p> <p>“I do remember thinking at the time that I didn’t know why she was so full of gossip. I guess when you hear someone so quickly talk about someone else it is natural to be weary of this and watch what you say/do in case you turn into the target.” (Teacher 2, incident report)</p>

APPENDIX F: TABLE SUMMARY OF GOSSIP INCIDENTS FOR DATA ANALYSIS (MANUSCRIPT 2)

Table 6: Summary of gossip incidents and associated themes based on gossip recipients' incident report and interview data

<i>Incident</i>	<i>Starting relationships</i>	<i>Topic and valence of gossip</i>	<i>Key recipient responses to gossip</i>	<i>Effects of gossip incident on relationships</i>	<i>Mechanisms/ themes underlying effects on relationships</i>
AS #1 ¹¹	Source: very close relationship (“mother away from home”). Target: strongly negative relationship; target is senior	Negative work behavior; bullying confrontation during meeting.	Perceives authentic intentions. Strong empathy and sympathy for source.	Source: reinforces trust and closeness. Target: reinforces negative relationship.	Source: Interpersonal agreement; shared strong negative emotions toward source; self-disclosure of important experience. Target: social validation of existing view.
AS #2	Source: Positive impression with perceived similarities, though still largely professional. Target: good professional and personal relationship (friends).	Positive work performance; “doing a good job”.	Perceives authentic intentions. Appreciation of praise; positive, warm emotions.	Source: increased closeness and trust. Target: reinforced positive view.	Source: Interpersonal agreement regarding positive evaluation of target and also shared appreciation of praise; self-disclosure – willingness to share thoughts and emotions indicates trust. Target: social validation of existing view.

¹¹ Letters such as “AS” are initials to keep track of each participant while maintaining anonymity. Numbers (e.g., #1) refer to the number of the incident as reflected in the incident report data.

AS #3	Source: positive professional relationship. Target: negative professional relationship.	Negative work performance; not trying hard enough / incompetence.	Perceives authentic intentions. Shared frustration.	Source: increased closeness and trust. Target reinforced negative feelings.	Source: Interpersonal agreement through emotional congruence (shared frustration); self-disclosure - willingness to share indicates trust. Target: social validation and crystallization of existing view.
BR #1	Source: mixed feelings; slightly difficult relationship. Target: Close relationship developed over long period working together.	Target's negative treatment of coworkers.	Perceives authentic intentions. Identification with source's situation; shared feelings. Feelings of compassion toward target.	Source: increased closeness. Target: no substantial change	Source: Interpersonal agreement; shared feelings (emotional congruence) induce closeness. Target: cautious behavior but no substantial change long-term due to strong existing relationship.
BR #2	Source: close, trusting relationship and friends outside work. Target: relatively unfamiliar, but largely positive impression.	Positive work performance.	Perceives authentic intentions. Appreciation of praise; good to know target is doing well.	Source: reinforces positive relationship. Target: facilitates professional trust.	Source: Interpersonal agreement ("solidified we were on same page"). Target: Validation of positive view increases trust.
BR #3	Source: positive working relationship (Source is manager;	Negative work behavior; asking for time off, "pulling a sickie"	Perceives authentic intentions.	Source: no substantial change.	Source: no substantial change due to familiarity (venting is normal). Incident does not undermine trust in source,

	<p>recipient is subordinate).</p> <p>Target: relatively unfamiliar but negative impression.</p>		<p>Empathizes with frustrations; uncertain whether information is accurate.</p>	<p>Target: “definitely” less trust.</p>	<p>even though recipient is uncertain about gossip accuracy, because source seemingly believes the information herself (indicating genuine intentions).</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; less trust due to negative information.</p>
CH #1	<p>Source: positive working relationship with high trust.</p> <p>Target: Relatively unfamiliar.</p>	<p>Strong negative evaluation of target’s character (manipulative and untrustworthy) illustrated by specific examples.</p>	<p>Perceives prosocial intentions; takes it as a “warning.”</p> <p>Shocked by information about target; tiny bit of skepticism as recognizes source as having a tendency to embellish.</p>	<p>Source: no substantial change (“still ultimately trusted him”).</p> <p>Target: substantially less trust; precludes personal relationship.</p>	<p>Source: no substantial change due to established relationship.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; negative information makes recipient see target in new light (strongly negative effect); believes evaluation of target’s character.</p>
CH #2	<p>Source: Good professional relationship; get along well; trust in source’s judgement.</p> <p>Target: relatively unfamiliar but positive</p>	<p>Positive evaluation of character and, by extension, capability in the job.</p>	<p>Perceives authentic and prosocial intentions - appreciation of positive talk and no hidden agenda.</p>	<p>Source: confirms recipient’s trust in judgement.</p> <p>Target: increased trust.</p>	<p>Source: Interpersonal agreement due to shared positive evaluation.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; facilitates trust and positive relationship development (“more open to feeling positive things”)</p>

	impression and perceived similarities.				
CH #3	<p>Source: Very good relationship and friends outside work; openly share opinions about others at work.</p> <p>Target: not close; strictly professional relationship.</p>	Negative work behavior; acting defensively about a mistake.	<p>Perceives authentic intentions - venting.</p> <p>Agrees with evaluation.</p>	<p>Source: no substantial change (relationship was already strongly positive).</p> <p>Target: less trust; less likely to become close / develop a personal relationship.</p>	<p>Source: no change due to established relationship.</p> <p>Target: Social validation and crystallization of views; reinforces negative feelings and impressions.</p>
EL #1	<p>Source: “okay” relationship.</p> <p>Target: Not particularly positive or negative.</p>	Negative social behavior; sharing personal information about recipient in a negative way.	<p>Perceives prosocial intentions; believes negative info about target.</p> <p>Strong appreciation of source’s response to target’s behavior.</p>	<p>Source: much closer and much more trust.</p> <p>Target: less trust and undermines personal relationship.</p>	<p>Source: Prosocial information increases respect for and trust in source’s character.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; accurate negative information makes them seem untrustworthy.</p>
EL #2	<p>Source: positive impression (“liked her before”).</p> <p>Target: negative view.</p>	Positive work performance.	<p>Perceives prosocial intentions – “no hidden agenda”</p> <p>Appreciation of praise.</p>	<p>Source: closer and increased respect.</p> <p>Target: lowered respect.</p>	<p>Source: Prosocial information makes source seem more trustworthy.</p> <p>Target: decreased respect and trust because of contrast with source: target often gossips negatively about source.</p>

EL #3	<p>Source: established negative view and relationship.</p> <p>Target: established negative view and relationship</p>	Negative work performance.	Perceives malicious intentions. Does not take negative evaluation seriously; perceives gossip as “waste of time.”	<p>Source: negative effect on trust and respect.</p> <p>Target: no real change to established negative relationship.</p>	<p>Source: Malicious and counterproductive intentions decrease trust and respect.</p> <p>Target: established negative view and relationship remain the same.</p>
HA #1	<p>Source: unfamiliar, “new employee.”</p> <p>Target: Established positive relationship with professional trust.</p>	Negative work performance: “inability to do the job properly and efficiently.”	Perceives malicious and manipulative intentions – trying to undermine target to make himself look good; hidden agenda.	<p>Source: immediate loss of trust.</p> <p>Target: trust and relationship remain the same.</p>	<p>Source: Hidden agenda; perceived malicious and manipulative intentions undermine trust entirely.</p> <p>Target: little change due to established relationship.</p>
HA #2	<p>Source: positive professional relationship; values source’s opinion.</p> <p>Target: familiar from previous work experience together; positive relationship.</p>	Positive work performance; “great worker”, “easy to get along with”.	Perceives prosocial intentions; good for overall staff morale to share this type of evaluation.	<p>Source: generally positive effect.</p> <p>Target: generally positive effect.</p>	<p>Source: Prosocial information - positive talk is constructive and builds relationships.</p> <p>Target: Validation of existing view; gossip reinforces positive view.</p>
HA #3	<p>Source: work closely together.</p> <p>Target: close and trusting relationship.</p>	Negative work performance; unsafe behavior.	Perceives manipulative and malicious intentions; believes the negative information but already knew about what happened.	<p>Source: decreased trust; notices “snarky comments” more.</p>	<p>Source: Hidden agenda; perceived malicious and manipulative intentions undermine trust and make working relationship more difficult.</p>

				Target: no substantial change.	Target: no change due to established relationship and familiarity (already knew about what happened).
KA #1	<p>Source: close and trusting relationship; perceived similarities and warm feelings.</p> <p>Target: do not work closely so not familiar but has generally negative impression.</p>	Negative work performance; lack of motivation and creating problems (customer complaints).	Perceives authentic intentions: outlet for “deep frustration.” Feels trusted for receiving this gossip. Agrees with evaluation of target and shares source’s frustration.	<p>Source: increased trust and closeness.</p> <p>Target: “complete” loss of trust.</p>	<p>Source: self-disclosure and interpersonal agreement increase trust and closeness.</p> <p>Target: Validates view; negative information reinforces negative view and completely undermines trust</p>
KA #2	<p>Source: positive working relationship and friends; respects opinions.</p> <p>Target: Respectful relationship; positive view.</p>	Positive work performance; self-sacrificing behavior (working weekends).	Perceives prosocial intentions; appreciation of praise. Believes information because it aligns with own observations.	<p>Source: increases trust and closeness.</p> <p>Target: more respect and trust.</p>	<p>Source: Prosocial information - perceived genuine and prosocial intentions improve relationship; willingness to acknowledge others’ good work increases trustworthiness.</p> <p>Target: Validation of existing view; evidence of good work and positive attitudes reinforce respect and trust, facilitating positive relationship.</p>

KA #3	<p>Source: quite close and supportive relationship (source is “motherly”).</p> <p>Target: also largely positive relationship (again described as “motherly”) though with some reservations about complaining and dominant behavior</p>	Negative work behavior; domineering behavior.	Agrees with evaluation (feels same way about target sometimes); feels trusted due to this disclosure.	<p>Source: generally positive; more comfortable asking for information but also some reservations about sharing personal information with source.</p> <p>Target: no real effects on trust but slightly altered behavior (avoids listening to complaints from target).</p>	<p>Source: Self-disclosure and interpersonal agreement (shared feelings toward target, indicating emotional congruence) increase trust and closeness though with some slight reservations due to “fear of becoming target” effect.</p> <p>Target: Established relationship and familiarity prevent major changes; attributes source’s negative evaluation to clash of personalities; however, also reinforces slight reservations about target’s character (Crystallization of view).</p>
LA #1	<p>Source: positive and close relationship; trust; perceived similarities.</p> <p>Target: Completely unknown; has never met before.</p>	Positive evaluation of target’s character and suitability for new role.	Happy to hear positive evaluation but takes with “a pinch of salt, ” noting that it is easy to give a false impression in an interview.	<p>Source: subsequently reinforced trust once recipient had chance to agree with evaluation.</p> <p>Target: created positive expectations and facilitated trust and</p>	<p>Source: Interpersonal agreement reinforces trust; established relationship encourages perception of prosocial intentions.</p> <p>Target: positive information from a trusted source facilitates trust and positive relationship.</p>

				positive relationship.	
LA #2	<p>Source: Good working relationship (source is manager).</p> <p>Target: relatively unfamiliar but positive impression (target is temporary replacement for another colleague).</p>	Positive evaluation of target's personality and demeanor.	Agrees with the evaluation. Positive talk aligns with what recipient knows of source (who is a positive person generally). Also perceives the positive evaluation of the target as disguised criticism of the colleague she was replacing.	<p>Source: reinforces positive view of source but no substantial effect on relationship or trust.</p> <p>Target: more trust in target's character and work ability.</p>	<p>Source: Interpersonal agreement; perceived similarities (both favor positivity) enhance relationship but no major change due to established relationship.</p> <p>Target: Social validation of existing view; gossip confirms positive impressions.</p>
LA #3	<p>Source: "awkward relationship"; "little to say to him."</p> <p>Target: relatively unfamiliar but had professional respect for target.</p>	Negative evaluation of target's work performance; criticizing a mistake.	Surprised by source's willingness to share such negative information; believes information but perceives malicious and manipulative intentions (trying to make himself look good in comparison); perceives gossip as "unprofessional".	<p>Source: substantial decrease in trust; loss of personal respect.</p> <p>Target: loss of professional respect.</p>	<p>Source: perceived malicious intentions – "what would stop him speaking ill of me to others?"</p> <p>Target: negative information colors view of target; loss of respect.</p>
LE #1	Source: good working relationship.	Negative information about target's mental capacity	Perceives source's motivations as honest and informative but appalled at what others in team were doing to target; senses that	<p>Source: loss of trust; left team.</p> <p>Target: prevented from continuing</p>	Source: Interpersonal disagreement; loss of trust due to disagreement on how to evaluate target.

	Target: close relationship; perceived similarities.		source has been manipulated by others.	relationship due to investigation.	Target: effects due to formal process of investigation; this process meant their relationship had to end.
LE #2	Source: Private relationship. Target: positive professional relationship.	Positive evaluation of work performance.	Happy for target; surprised by praise. Questioned source's motivations for praise a little ("did they want more from me?")	Source: No substantial change. Target: only reinforced positive view.	Source: No change due to established relationship. Target: Social validation of existing view.
LE #3	Source: "work friend"; perceived similarities. Target: "business" or "talk when required" relationship; recipient's "boss"	Negative information about target's behavior and personality; target described as "selfish".	Agrees with evaluation based on similar personal experiences with target.	Source: minimal change; perhaps adds to the cumulative view recipient has of this person. Target: no surface level change but perhaps a slightly more negative view.	Source: little change due to established relationship Target: Slight validation of view but little change due to established relationship.
ME #1	Source: positive relationship; personal respect; trust judgement. Target: "difficult relationship"	Negative work performance.	Believes information because it aligns with own experiences and observations of target.	Source: no effect. Target: made relationship more difficult for a while; recipient made effort to	Source: no change due to established relationship. Target: Crystallization of view; negative information confirms recipient's experiences.

				restore good relations due to her position as manager.	
ME #2	<p>Source: close working relationship; high trust; values and respects opinions and judgement.</p> <p>Target: unfamiliar but positive impression</p>	Positive evaluation of personality and work performance.	<p>Perceives prosocial intentions.</p> <p>Feels reassured by positive information about target.</p>	<p>Source: reinforces their supportive relationship.</p> <p>Target: facilitation of positive relationship.</p>	<p>Source: Prosocial information; gossip seen as reassurance, hence reinforces supportive established relationship; closeness to source implies trust in judgement.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; positive evaluation from trusted source facilitates relationship development.</p>
ME #3	<p>Source: positive, interdependent work relationship and friends outside work.</p> <p>Target: “reasonable working relationship”; “differences in past”</p>	Negative work behavior; arriving late.	Perceives authentic intentions: expressing frustration and hoping the recipient will take action against target; responds to source to defuse the situation.	<p>Source: minimal effect.</p> <p>Target: minimal effect.</p>	<p>Source: perceived lack of importance.</p> <p>Target: perceived lack of importance.</p>
MI #1	Source: ambivalent relationship; sees source as quick to judge and gossip	Negative work behavior; challenging source’s view and therefore	Does not agree with source’s interpretation of what happened	Source: negative effect.	Source: Interpersonal disagreement negatively affects relationship (clash of opinions).

	negatively; difficult relationship. Target: positive work/personal relationship; high respect; typically share similar views	behaving in “sexist” manner.		Target: trust and relationship not affected.	Target: disagreeing with evaluation means gossip has little effect; recipient also witnessed what happened but interpreted it differently than the source.
MI #2	Source: positive work/personal relationship; high respect; typically share similar views. Target: positive personal and professional relationship but do not work together much.	Positive work performance; complimenting the target’s initiative.	Appreciation of praise; aligns with impressions of target; perceived prosocial intentions.	Source: increased personal respect. Target: confirmation of positive impressions.	Source: Prosocial information; team-building motive. Target: validation of existing view.
MI #3	Source: good all-round relationship; perceived similarities and views. Target: positive relationship but relatively unfamiliar.	Negative work performance; lack of initiative.	Perceives intentions as authentic and constructive; looking for a solution rather than attacking target.	Source: increased respect and closeness. Target: unconscious change in view (more negative).	Source: Prosocial information; authentic/prosocial intentions increase respect and indicates trustworthiness. Target: unconscious change in view inevitable because you cannot “unhear” gossip; however, no big change because the information was not very important.

NA #1	<p>Source: close relationship with frequent communication.</p> <p>Target: close relationship; target believes recipient knows her well</p>	Negative work behavior; “stealing a sale”.	<p>Perceives authentic intentions.</p> <p>Gossip aligns with recipient’s own experience of target; same thing happened to her. Feels trusted by source.</p>	<p>Source: increased trust and closeness.</p> <p>Target: more “distant”; maintains a purely professional relationship.</p>	<p>Source: self-disclosure increases trust; interpersonal agreement (shared feelings and experiences) increases closeness (“on the same page”).</p> <p>Target: social validation of existing view (“the same thing happened to me”); maintains professional relationship for expediency.</p>
NA #2	<p>Source: positive working and personal relationship; frequent communication.</p> <p>Target: not very familiar; mixed impression</p>	Positive comment about appearance.	Motivation is perceived as informational in a “do you know kind of way”.	<p>Source: minimal effects.</p> <p>Target: minimal effects.</p>	<p>Source: Minimal effects likely due to established relationship plus low importance of information.</p> <p>Target: Minimal effects likely due to established relationship plus low importance of information. Not entirely clear.</p>
NA #3	<p>Source: positive working and personal relationship; frequent communication.</p> <p>Target: unfamiliar; negative impression;</p>	Negative work behavior; being deceitful (or “clever”).	Motivation is perceived as entertainment; “having a laugh”. Evaluation of target aligns with initial impressions. This was the second time source had shared info about target’s “cleverness”.	<p>Source: no real change but possibly a way to enact a close and trusting relationship (“we share office gossip”).</p>	<p>Source: No real change due to established relationship.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; more wary of behavior due to negative information from trusted source but not a big impact on relationship</p>

	stubborn and self-righteous			Target: negative change in view of target.	because they interact very little.
NI #1	Source: good working relationship; “got on well”. Target: polite working relationship.	Negative work behavior; deceit and lying.	Perceives authentic intentions (“no hidden agenda”); genuine emotional display (“you could see the upset/ anger”).	Source: increased trust and closeness (become good friends). Target: decreased trust; never developed close relationship.	Source: Self-disclosure and authentic intentions increase trust and closeness. Target: Colored lenses; believing negative information prevents friendly relationship development and trust.
NI #2	Source: very good friend. Target: positive working relationship; “get on very well”	Positive work performance; coping well with big workload.	Perceives prosocial intentions; Positive emotional response to gossip; “nice to hear people being nice about other people.”	Source: confirms trust and positive relationship. Target: confirms positive view.	Source: Perceived prosocial information confirm trust and closeness. Target: Validation of existing view.
NI #3	Source: positive work relationship; only known for one year but already trustworthy. Target: positive work relationship; has	Negative work behavior; argument between source and target.	Perceives authentic intentions; “venting frustrations”.	Source: increased trust and closeness. Target: Recipient initially questioned view of target but no long-term effects on	Source: Self-disclosure and authentic intentions increase trust and closeness. Target: Negative information initially alters view in negative way (Colored lenses) but eventually recognizes the gossip as

	known for longer than source.			relationship or trust.	based on opinion and does not agree with that opinion.
NU #1	Source: close and trusting relationship. Target: positive impression but not especially close.	Negative behavior in personal life; deceitful behavior toward another staff member; also negative evaluation of personality (dishonest and manipulative).	Perceives authentic and prosocial intentions: needed to share to gain support; warning about target.	Source: increased trust and closeness. Target: loss of trust and precludes developing a personal relationship.	Source: self-disclosure and perceived authentic/prosocial intentions increase trust and closeness. Target: believing negative information completely undermines trust and precludes personal relationship ("I started seeing her with different eyes").
NU #2	Source: close and trusting relationship. Target: positive work relationship but not friends outside work.	Positive work performance; coping well with workload and difficulty.	Perceives prosocial intentions; reinforcing positivity in the team; genuine praise of target; positive evaluation aligns with own observations/ experience.	Source: increased personal and professional trust. Target: Increased professional trust	Source: Prosocial information; prosocial intentions and positive talk about target make source seem trustworthy ("she would say positive things about me"). Target: Validation of view; positive information confirms existing view of target as competent and capable.
NU #3	Source 1: close and trusting relationship; Source 2: good work	Initially about negative work behavior (only	Perceives authentic intentions: a way to express feelings toward target and	Source 1: high trust remains; more supportive in	Source 1: no change in trust due established relationship; more supportive in

	<p>relationship but not particularly close; Source 3: positive work relationship and starting to be close.</p> <p>Target: cordial work relationship but not very close due to target's seniority.</p>	<p>caring about KPIs) followed by negative evaluation of personality in general.</p>	<p>gain support through solidarity. Believes information based on trust in Source 1 and because three sources all agree.</p>	<p>working relationship. Source 2: slightly lowered trust. Source 3: not mentioned.</p> <p>Target: decreased trust and starts to question professional competence.</p>	<p>relationship because gossip reveals why source is stressed and needs support. Source 2: slightly lowered trust due to perceived impartiality. Source 3: no information.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; believing negative information changes view and decreases trust.</p>
PA #1	<p>Source: colleague who has become a friend.</p> <p>Target: a colleague who has become a friend.</p>	<p>Target's negative experiences in workplace; related to behavior of manager, so implies negative evaluation of manager.</p>	<p>Perceives motivation being to show target and source have faced similar challenges when working with manager; authentic intentions: social support. Gossip aligns with knowledge of target.</p>	<p>Source: increased trust; positive relationship remains strong.</p> <p>Target: desire to offer social support. Indirect target (manager): confirms negative view.</p>	<p>Source: sympathy toward target increases trust and makes her seem supportive.</p> <p>Target: information about a difficult situation makes recipient want to offer social support. Indirect target: validation of negative view.</p>
PA #2	<p>Source: "colleague and friend".</p> <p>Target: "colleague who works in another office"; unfamiliar</p>	<p>Positive work behavior; talking about positive relationship between source and target and how they speak to</p>	<p>Annoyed by gossip; "felt like my time was being wasted".</p>	<p>Source: slight decrease in trust but no real change.</p> <p>Target: slight decrease in trust and wary of how it</p>	<p>Source: slight decrease in trust due to perceived immaturity; no major change due to gossip being trivial and a waste of time.</p>

		each other in cat meows.		would be to work together.	Target: recipient disagrees with positive evaluation of target and this had slightly negative effect on view of target.
PA #3	Source: “colleague and friend”. Target: “colleague in other office”	Slightly negative evaluation of target’s work performance; always needing help.	Perceives intentions as slightly manipulative (disingenuous); “trying to make herself look good”.	Source: slight decrease in trust and wary about working together. Target: no effect.	Source: Hidden agenda; perceptions of disingenuous intentions undermine trust. Target: information perceived as unimportant.
SE #1	Source: relatively new employee; unfamiliar; “polite casual conversations”. Target: friendly work relationship; more familiar than source.	Negative work performance and negative evaluation of capability; incompetent and mentally slow.	Initial response was to be wary of source as someone who is “gossipy” and readily shared negative talk about others; on reflection, perceived motivation was to make herself look good (disingenuous intentions).	Source: decrease in affective trust – e.g., would not share personal information; prevents or even precludes personal relationship. Target: trust and relationship largely unchanged.	Source: What would they say about me? - readily divulging negative information about target indicates untrustworthiness and thus prevents personal relationship developing. Target: little change due to established relationship.
SE #2	Source: a work colleague who shares the same lunch break.	Positive work performance; dealing well with a difficult customer.	Perceives prosocial intentions; genuine praise of colleague. Gossip aligns with expectations of target’s behavior.	Source: increased trust. Target: increased trust in competence and	Source: Prosocial information indicates trustworthiness.

	Target: established positive relationship and view.			more likely to offer support.	Target: Colored lenses; indicates target is competent and a team player.
SE #3	Source: colleague who often shares lunch breaks; discuss a wide range of topics including work and non-work. Target: recipient's boss; finds approachable and easy to talk to.	Negative work performance; inaction in dealing with problem and staff's stress levels.	Perceives authentic intentions. On reflection, agrees with the evaluation of the target; realizes target does not necessarily act on concerns of staff; on reflection, gossip aligns with own observations.	Source: no real change. Target: slight loss of respect.	Source: No real change due to established relationship. Target: Crystallizes and validates existing view and observations.
SH #1	Source: new boss; low familiarity (barely knew him). Target: another employee; not at all familiar.	Negative evaluation of work performance; "not a good worker," "lazy", "does not know what to do".	Perceives malicious intentions; damaging recipient's view of target out of anger. Surprised and sad at what the source said.	Source: Negative effect on trust; would not share personal information or develop a personal relationship. Target: no effect on trust but tried to avoid target to not annoy boss.	Source: What would they say about me? - decreased trust due to sharing negative information when still unfamiliar and due to perceived malicious intentions. Target: Clash of opinions; no effect on trust due to not agreeing with evaluation; undermines working relationship by encouraging avoidance.

SH #2	<p>Source: positive working relationship with high trust (shift manager).</p> <p>Target: new employee; unfamiliar but positive impression.</p>	Positive evaluation of work performance and capability.	Believes the evaluation based on trust in source; also aligns with own impression of target.	<p>Source: no real change.</p> <p>Target: increased trust in work competence.</p>	<p>Source: No real change due to established relationship.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; positive evaluation facilitates trust and positive work relationship.</p>
SH #3	<p>Source: positive working relationship with high trust (shift manager).</p> <p>Target: unfamiliar colleague; works opposite shifts.</p>	Negative work performance; leaving a mess.	Agrees with evaluation; aligns with own observations; perceives genuine intentions.	<p>Source. No real change.</p> <p>Target: no real change.</p>	<p>Source: No real change due to established relationship; “she usually talks about other people so no surprise”.</p> <p>Target: do not work together so information perceived as unimportant.</p>
ST #1	<p>Source: manager-subordinate relationship characterized by interdependency and professional-level trust.</p> <p>Target: good working relationship and casual friends outside work.</p>	Negative evaluation of target’s character and performance.	Recognizes the subjectivity of the evaluation and disagrees with it.	<p>Source: negative effect on trust in source, respect, and personal relationship (would not share personal information).</p> <p>Target: No effect.</p>	<p>Source: What would they say about me? - “I now believe that he would talk the same about me if I wasn’t there.”</p> <p>Target: No effect because disagrees with evaluation (Clash of opinions) and due to established relationship.</p>

ST #2	<p>Source: positive working relationship and friends.</p> <p>Target: good working relationship and casual friends outside work</p>	<p>Positive evaluation of target's personality in the workplace; good team member.</p>	<p>Perceives authentic intentions.</p> <p>Agrees with the positive evaluation.</p>	<p>Source: increased trust, especially in judgement of source.</p> <p>Target: no real change.</p>	<p>Source: Interpersonal agreement increases trust.</p> <p>Target: No real change due to established relationship.</p>
ST #3	<p>Source: relatively unfamiliar but strongly positive impression.</p> <p>Target: unfamiliar; positive impression but starting to question trustworthiness due to storied from other staff</p>	<p>Negative evaluation and information about target's work behavior; "throwing people under the bus".</p>	<p>Perceives authentic intentions (genuine emotional display); gossip aligns with other accounts of target's behavior.</p>	<p>Source: feels trusted because of confidence: strengthened working relationship through increased trust.</p> <p>Target: starts to mistrust; negatively altered view.</p>	<p>Source: authentic self-disclosure increases trust and strengthens relationship.</p> <p>Target: Colored lenses; perceived accuracy of information undermines trust in target</p>
TA #1	<p>Sources: great relationships and friends.</p> <p>Target: positive relationship with high respect but not particularly close</p>	<p>Positive evaluation and information about target's work performance; giving useful feedback.</p>	<p>Felt trusted they were sharing important information; appreciation of praise for target.</p>	<p>Source: Strengthened their relationship and trust.</p> <p>Target: confirmed their respect.</p>	<p>Source: self-disclosure strengthens relationship by indicating trust.</p> <p>Target: Validated view; positive information increases personal and professional respect.</p>

TA #2	<p>Source: good working relationship.</p> <p>Target: recipient's boss; positive relationship and high respect</p>	<p>Positive information about work behavior; caring about staff.</p>	<p>Perceives prosocial intentions. Gossip aligns with wider group's view of target; feels good about the information being shared and what it says about the team culture; appreciation of praise.</p>	<p>Source: strengthened personal relationship; got to know them better.</p> <p>Target: reaffirms trust in target on a personal level.</p>	<p>Source: Self-disclosure builds personal relationship.</p> <p>Target: Validation of view; information reaffirms that target can be trusted to have others' interests at heart.</p>
TA #3	<p>Source: close relationship; good friends.</p> <p>Target: good working relationship but do not work together frequently; positive impression</p>	<p>Negative work behavior; making an inappropriate joke at target's expense.</p>	<p>Believes the gossip based on close relationship with source; agrees with negative evaluation of target's behavior; surprised by target's behavior; perceives authentic intentions (getting something off chest); also perceives desire to negatively change view of target as part of motivation.</p>	<p>Source: strengthened personal relationship.</p> <p>Target: negatively altered view and less likely to develop personal relationship.</p>	<p>Source: Self-disclosure and interpersonal agreement strengthen relationship.</p> <p>Target: Validate negative view based on agreement with negative evaluation of behavior; less likely to develop personal relationship to not upset source.</p>
VI #1	<p>Source: good relationship with frequent communication; talk openly on a range of topics.</p> <p>Targets: unfamiliar; minimal contact; negative impression of</p>	<p>Negative work and personal behavior; having an affair; being slack at job.</p>	<p>Shocked by information; perceives genuine intentions although slightly uncertain about whether source would gossip about recipient.</p>	<p>Source: strengthened personal relationship.</p> <p>Targets: undermines trust and any potential personal relationship;</p>	<p>Source: Self-disclosure; sharing non-work information implies social bonding and personal relationship; "opening up".</p> <p>Targets: Colored lenses; negative information confirms existing suspicions and negative impression.</p>

	one target based on failure to complete assigned task.			subsequently tried to avoid targets.	
VI #2	Source: good working and personal relationship; talk openly; hang out outside work sometimes. Target: less familiar but positive impression based on previous interactions and observations.	Positive work performance.	Perceives authentic intentions (sharing experience). Positive evaluation aligns with own experience of target.	Source: builds personal relationship; “opened up a new aspect of our working relationship.” Target: strengthens positive opinion.	Source: Self-disclosure and interpersonal agreement build relationship. Target: Social validation of existing view.
VI #3	Source: close and trusting relationship; “closest colleague”; very open communication. Target: mixed relationship (“friendly but annoying”)	Negative work behavior; relying excessively on others (especially the recipient).	Perceives authentic intentions (“no hidden motives”); believes source based on existing, high trust relationship; confirms own feelings and observations of target.	Source: helps build and maintain personal relationship. Target: confirms desire to not have relationship and to minimize contact in working relationship.	Source: Self-disclosure; open and honest communication helps maintain relationship. Target: Crystallization of view; gossip clarifies and confirms something recipient already felt.
ZA #1	Source: established negative view and relationship.	Negative information about target’s personal life.	Perceives malicious intentions; trying to damage target’s reputation.	Source: confirms negative view and decreases trust;	Source: What would they say about me? - malicious intentions undermine trust

	Target: not familiar.		Uncertain whether to believe gossip.	confirms desire to not develop personal relationship. Target: slightly undermined trust and working relationship.	and preclude personal relationship; “if she speaks to me about others’ personal lives she could be talking about me also”. Target: Uncertainty over whether to believe negative information makes recipient standoffish.
ZA #2	Source: good relationship; friends. Target: work together closely and usually get along	Positive evaluation of target’s character and work ethic.	Perceives prosocial intentions (trying to resolve a conflict). Agrees with the positive evaluation.	Source: no effect. Target: more positive view.	Source: No effect due to established relationship. Target: Colored lenses; evaluation positively alters opinion after falling out; swayed by another’s opinion.
ZA #3	Source: good relationship; friends. Targets: mixed relationship; get along but finds annoying.	Negative evaluation of targets’ character; described them as “drones” to be humorous.	Perceives authentic intentions (“nothing malicious just trying to make me laugh”, “venting”).	Source: no effect. Targets: negatively altered view.	Source: No effect due to established relationship. Targets: Validation and crystallization of negative view.

APPENDIX G: ADDITIONAL ILLUSTRATION OF OUR DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Figure 7: Illustration of how the overarching theme "good intentions" emerged through data analysis

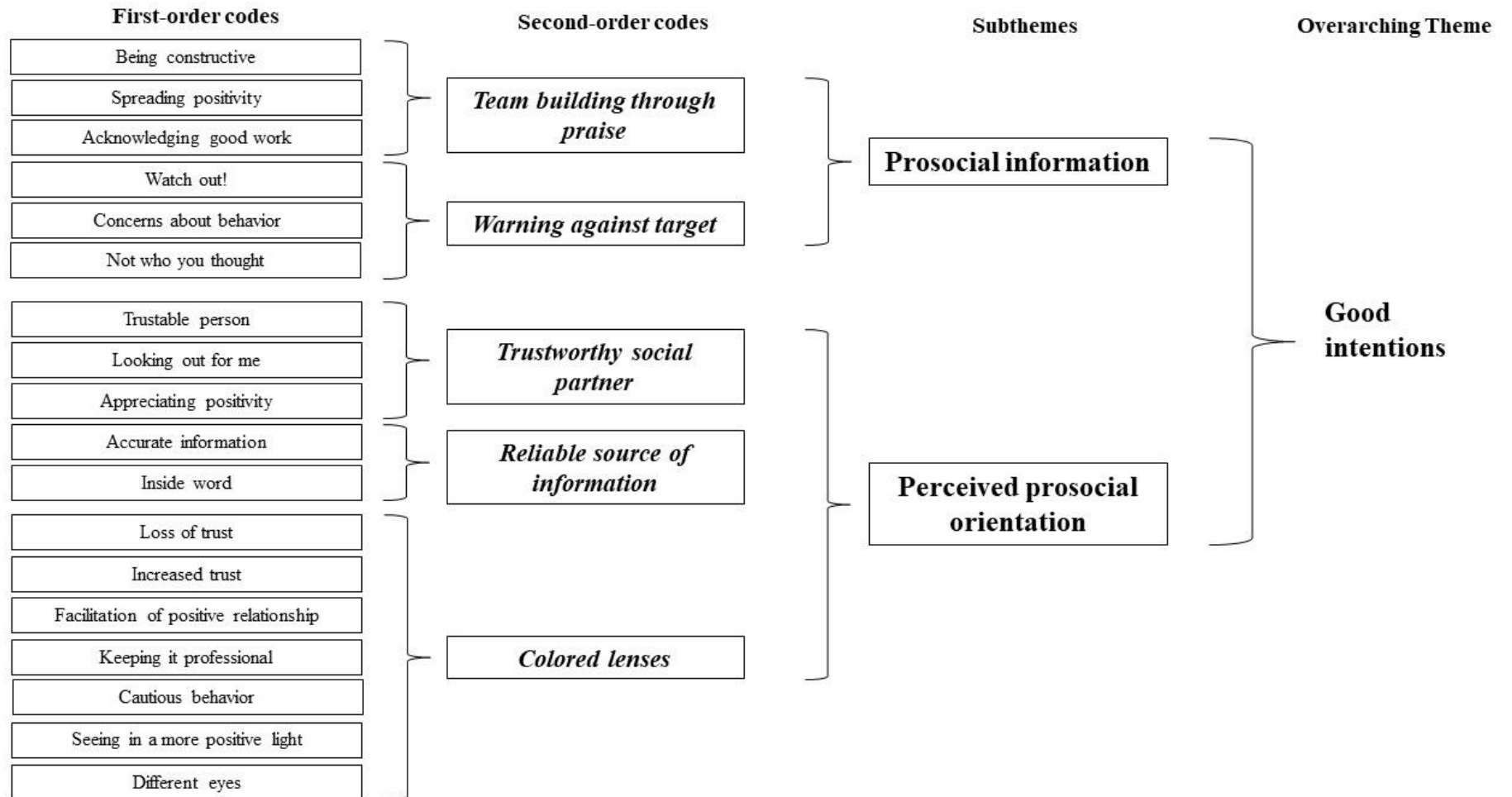
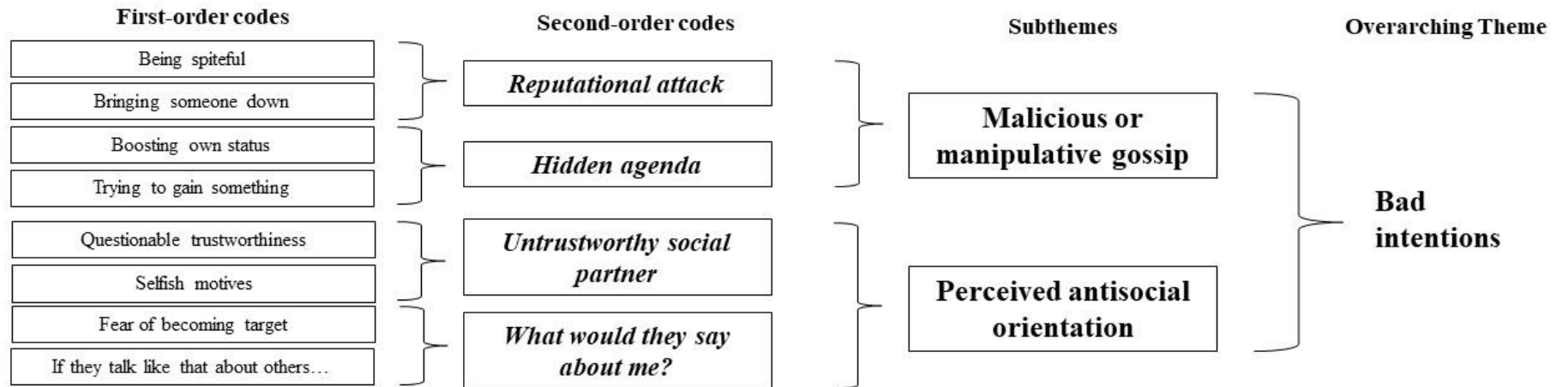


Figure 8: Illustration of how the overarching theme "bad intentions" emerged through data analysis



APPENDIX H: EXAMPLE CODING OF CRITICAL INCIDENT REPORTS AND INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Note that all names in this data are pseudonyms. Coding is highlighted in the following way. The coded text is indicated with brackets that look like this: {“coded text”}. The name of the code appears after the coded text in brackets that look like this: [“*name of code*”]. The codes named in the following examples of raw data are *first-order* codes—that is, the finest grained codes used in data analysis—as explained in the main text of Manuscript 2. Note that not all first-order codes were incorporated into the overarching themes presented in Manuscript 2.

Example Incident Reports

Task One:

For this task, you should describe an incident that had a big impact on you and that you remember well. Ideally, it will be an incident that changed either your feelings of trust towards the individuals involved, your working relationships with them, your personal relationships with them, or all the above.

Thinking about your overall work experience (not limited to where you work now), please describe in a few sentences one incident where a colleague talked to you either positively or negatively about another colleague/s who wasn't there:

It was a year ago that the incident happened. {During the previous weeks to the incident, I could sense my manager Linda being quite tense with another colleague, Sally (who works for another team).} [genuine emotional display] On a Friday evening after a couple of drinks at work for our monthly gathering “social drinks” at the office, everyone left except my manager Linda and I. {Linda asked me about my relationship with Sally at work, and after answering that I thought she was nice, she said she had something to tell me but made me promise that I wouldn't tell anyone.} [sharing confidential experiences]

{Linda told me that Sally was very toxic and she couldn't trust her. Linda explained to me that two years ago Sally had a relationship with our colleague Adam for over a year, which she insisted in keeping as a secret. Later on, Sally broke up with him without many explanations and started dating another colleague, Jim. Adam was very confused by the whole thing and tried to speak with Sally. From her side, Sally complained to Jim and our General Manager about Adam sexually harassing her at work. Sally also told our General

Manager that Linda was sleeping with Adam (which wasn't true) and that therefore if he asked Linda to verify her word (because Linda was a very trusted employee), she would try to defend Adam. } [**negative personal life gossip**]

{ When Linda was telling this story I could sense her frustration and anger towards Sally for not only having hurt her friend Adam but also for having involved her unnecessarily and lied to General Management about her sleeping with a colleague. What also made her very angry was that during working hours, Sally would come by her desk for a chat pretending nothing had happened. } [**genuine emotional display**]

Reflecting on this incident, describe your relationship with the “source” (the person talking to you) in a few sentences:

{ My manager Linda and I are very close. When I started at my job she was another team member sharing the same manager as me, but after a year she got promoted and became my manager. } [**work closely**] *{ Even after that we kept a close relationship, seeing each other during the weekends and having a drink every other Friday night. }* [**interact outside work**] *{ She is also very young and similar to me in many ways, so I feel that she is a true friend. }* [**perceived similarities**]

Describe your relationship with the “target” (i.e., the person/s being talked about) in a few sentences:

{ Even a few days before I started in this job, Sally added me on LinkedIn and sent me a message welcoming me to the company. After I joined I thought that she was very funny and outgoing, and that she was the type of colleague who gets along with everyone and jokes

around. We would share a few quick chats in the kitchen and during our breaks, but never met each other after working hours. Often she would tell me about her dates and a few funny anecdotes during our chats, but never had a close relationship or knew about her life in detail. } [*positive impression*]

What was the talk about? For example, was it related to the target person's performance at work, to his or her personal life, or to some other aspect of this person?

{It was related to her personal life, more specifically about her dating life with other colleagues and about her personality}. [*negative personal life gossip*]

Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person? What was your interpretation of his or her motivations?

{I think Linda told me about Sally's incident because she could trust me and needed to share it with someone who would understand her and support her.} [*seeking social validation*] *Her motivations might have also been that she wanted to let people know how Sally truly was and not feel like the only one at work that didn't like her.* } [*not who you thought*]

To what extent did you trust the source person in this incident?

{I trusted her completely.} [*high trust*]

To what extent did you trust target person in this incident? I partially trusted her, but way less after knowing about the incident. In this specific instance, did you believe what the source told you about the target individual? If so, why? If not, why not?

{*Yes, I believed her 100% because we are very close*} [*closeness encourages belief*]
 {*and she wouldn't have had any reason to lie about that.*} [*no hidden agenda*] {*Before she*
shared that story with me, I could also sense some tension between Adam and Jim in the
office and could feel that Sally's relationship with Jim was way closer.} [*gossip aligns with*
own experience] {*Also, Linda wouldn't have made up a story in which General Management*
and Sexual harassment issues are mentioned unless they were true, as it could have had
serious implications for her job stability and credibility.} [*no hidden agenda*]

Did you speak to anyone else at work about what the source told you? If so, please provide some details of how you went about speaking to others – who did you choose, what did you say, and why?

{*Yes I did. One day I noticed that my other colleague Kathy made a sarcastic*
comment to Linda about Sally in the kitchen with a cheeky smile, and Linda laughed and
changed topics. One day that Kathy and I went out to buy lunch together, I made the
comment that I was seeing Sally and Jim go downstairs for a smoke together quite often, and
I asked her if she knew whether they were together. Kathy laughed and told me that they were
together, but added a comment saying, "poor Jim, he doesn't know her". To that I answered
that Linda had told me a few things about her, and that I was a bit surprised. Kathy answered
saying she wasn't surprised. I first wanted to verify Sally's relationship with Jim and gauge
what impression Kathy had of her based on her answer. After that I could verify through
general comments what Linda had told me. I didn't want to ask Kathy directly about the
whole incident in detail in case she didn't know about it, and also because I promised Linda
not to tell anyone. I chose to ask Kathy because she had been in the company for a long time
and started at a similar time than Linda and a bit earlier than Sally. Kathy is close to Linda

but not so much, for which she wouldn't have had any reason to back her up. } [*getting a second opinion*]

Did this incident affect your trust in the source? If so, how?

{ Yes, the fact that she felt she could trust me in sharing this incident with me made me trust her even more as well. } [*feeling trusted*]

Did this incident affect your trust in the target? If so, how?

{ Yes, massively. I started seeing her with different eyes and noticing more weird relationship dynamics with her and Adam and between Adam and Jim. I also saw her as way more flirty and toxic rather than outgoing and fun. } [*different eyes*]

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the source? If so, how?

{ Yes. I felt more close to her and felt like I could share more problems with her without being judged, as we had a close trusting relationship }. [*increased trust and closeness in source*]

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?

{ Yes, I felt trusted and closer to her. } [*increased trust and closeness in source*]

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the target? If so, how?

{ Yes, I trusted her less every time she made a comment or judgement on a project. }

[different eyes]

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the target? If so, how?

{ No, I continued being friendly with her every time we interacted because that incident didn't involve me directly and I didn't want her to notice that Linda had told me anything }. [keeping it professional]

Did this incident affect you own workplace behaviour in any specific way – perhaps because you learned something about what is acceptable behaviour at work, for example? If so, please describe how the incident affected your own workplace behaviour.

{ Yes, it made me think twice before trusting someone and be more observant and careful before judging someone a certain way. I also learnt that the best answer was to pretend to know nothing and continue having a cordial relationship with everyone, because we spend a lot of time at work and you never know when you'll need to collaborate with others. } [becoming more guarded]

Please add anything else that you think is relevant to how you responded to this incident in terms of your thoughts, feelings and actions:

{ I maintained the apparent relationships I had with everyone before knowing about the incident, but maybe had more sympathy for Adam and Linda. I felt a bit naïve for thinking that Sally was a certain way, and I felt relieved that I wasn't involved in that whole mess. This was a clear example in which I could feel that people are usually not what they seem to be and that I need to be careful with first impressions. } [becoming more guarded]

Task Two:

Please describe in a few sentences one incident from work where a colleague talked to you positively about another colleague/s who wasn't there:

{In our weekly catch-up meeting, my manager Linda and I were going through the projects everyone had within the team. That day my colleague and team mate Amy was sick, so we also reviewed her projects to be able to see if we could do anything on the meantime. After reading everything Amy had on her plate, Linda told me that Amy was completely overloaded with tasks but that is amazing how she manages everything with patience without being or looking stressed. She also commented that Amy is very understanding with stakeholders and never complains, that she always finds a solution and is very sweet and kind.} [**positive work-related gossip**]

Reflecting on this incident of positive talk, describe your relationship with the “source” (the person talking to you) in a few sentences:

{My manager Linda and I are very close. When I started at my job she was another team member sharing the same manager as me, but after a year she got promoted and became my manager.} [**work closely**] *{Even after that we kept a close relationship, seeing each other during the weekends and having a drink every other Friday night.}* [**interact outside work**] *{She is also very young and similar to me in many ways, so I feel that she is a true friend.}* [**perceived similarities**]

Describe your relationship with the “target” (i.e., the person/s being talked about) in a few sentences:

{Amy and I have been in the same team since I joined the company 20 months ago, and she helped me a lot at the start by guiding me through different projects and training me. She works remotely from Poland, so unfortunately I only see her once a month when she flies here for work. She is a very dedicated mum of two small boys. We get along in the office and occasionally have worked in the same project, but we wouldn't meet after work for a drink or a coffee, as we're also very different in other ways.} [**good working relationship**]

What was the talk about? For example, was it related to the target person's performance at work, to his or her personal life, or to some other aspect of this person?

{It was related to her performance and attitude towards work.} [**positive work-related gossip**]

Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person? What was your interpretation of his or her motivations?

{I think Linda wanted to comment positively on Amy either to highlight a good example of working attitude and performance, or to reinforce the team's relationship and positive view we have of each other. Also because Amy works remotely, Linda wanted to let me know how Amy is doing to unify the team a bit.} [**spreading positivity**]

To what extent do you trust the source person in this incident?

{I trust Linda completely.} [**high trust**]

To what extent do you trust target person in this incident?

{I trust Amy a lot, but because of the distance sometimes I feel like I don't know her too well}. [not familiar]

In this specific instance of positive talk, did you believe what the source told you about the target individual? If so, why? If not, why not?

{Yes I believe it, because Amy has had very good results lately and all the stakeholders are happy with her. Also every time I speak with Amy, she doesn't seem stressed but I know she has a lot on her plate and is very responsible and self-demanding}. [gossip aligns with own experience]

Did you speak to anyone else at work about what the source told you? If so, please provide some details of how you went about speaking to others – who did you choose, what did you say, and why?

No I didn't.

Did this incident affect your trust in the source? If so, how?

{Yes kind of. I thought it was very kind of Linda to praise a teammate's good work while she is not there, and it made me trust her even more in that she would also recognise my successes and try to defend me if something happens provided I work well.} [trustable person]

Did this incident affect your trust in the target? If so, how?

{Yes because now I have verified that she is a good worker and that working with her is reliable, therefore trusting her more.} [**increased trust** (in target)]

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the source? If so, how?

{Yes, I have more willingness to show Linda that I also have a good attitude towards work and also I feel more relaxed knowing that she is able to acknowledge a good performance even if I'm not loud about it.} [**trustable person**]

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?

{Yes, I trust her more because I know she's also able to see the good things in people and share them with others even if they're not there.} [**trustable person**]

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the target? If so, how?

{Yes, I see her now as a better role model as before and I know that if I have a problem she would be able to give good advise.} [**seeing in a more positive light**]

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the target? If so, how?

{Yes, I admire her more for doing a good job and having a good attitude but not being loud about it.} [**seeing in a more positive light**] *{I got to know an aspect of her personality better and that brought me closer to her.}* [**facilitation of personal relationship**]

Did this incident affect you own workplace behaviour in any specific way – perhaps because you learned something about what is acceptable behaviour at work, for example? If so, please describe how the incident affected your own workplace behaviour.

Yes, I learnt not to complain about workload and not judge someone's capacity towards work only for what I see on a daily basis, not to assume someone works a certain way. It also motivated me to work harder knowing that my colleagues take their job that seriously and knowing that I can learn from them.

Please add anything else that you think is relevant to how you responded to this incident in terms of your thoughts, feelings and actions:

I felt like sometimes I overlook some of my colleagues and think that only because they're at my level they don't have anything to teach me. I also felt healthily jealous about that comment and I thought I wished someone said something positive like that about my work. However at the same time I felt very happy for Amy..

Task Three:

Please describe in a few sentences one incident from work where a colleague talked to you negatively about another colleague/s who wasn't there:

{It was on a Friday at 5pm during a colleague's goodbye drinks and gathering in the office. On Fridays our schedule finishes at 4.30pm, but that day we started the party at around 4pm and by 5pm the majority of the more senior colleagues had left already. The ones who stayed were the ones who were closer to the girl leaving (group of 5 people) with different seniority levels (from entry level to managers). Three of the 5 people in the group (Kathy, Jill, and Linda) are directly reporting to the account director (Yvonne, who already left the gathering), and the remaining 2 people are directly reporting to the 3 of them.

Suddenly in a moment of silence, Kathy asked Jill in front of everyone if she had had her quarterly KPI meeting with Yvonne already, and Jill answered "omg, yes" with a tired tone. After that the three of them started reviewing their meetings and conversations with

Yvonne, emphasizing that they're very busy with reporting and managing their own team that they're really struggling to achieve their monthly goals, but that Yvonne was only repeating all the time that "I don't care, I just want you to achieve your monthly KPIs". After a few minutes, seeing that the three of them had the same problem, they started complaining about Yvonne not listening, not providing solutions, and being unable to be in their shoes. Kathy also started comparing Yvonne's management style with their previous manager, Jill (who is on maternity leave and is replaced temporarily by Yvonne), saying that Jill would never do that.

The three of them then started talking about how Yvonne pretends to be on our side supporting us and making our lives easier, but at the end of the day she's always on the client side, as if she was scared of confronting them. The conversation went on for about 30min, in where Kathy, Jill, and Linda were agreeing between them in their negative thoughts about Yvonne, and telling the other two people in the group (including myself) about their thoughts on Yvonne's managing style. } **[negative work-related gossip]**

Reflecting on this incident of negative talk, describe your relationship with the "source" (the person talking to you) in a few sentences:

In this case there were 3 sources (Kathy, Jill, and Linda). The three of them are more senior than me within the company, but we work together on a daily basis and also occasionally see each other on the weekends. {Linda is my direct manager, and I have a very close relationship with her, in which I consider her to be my friend.} [close relationship or friends] {Kathy and I have a good relationship within the work environment but we're also very different, so I'm not that close to her as I am with Linda.} [good working relationship] {Jill is very close with Linda and therefore we also became quite close, seeing each other after work sometimes.} [interact outside work]

Describe your relationship with the “target” (i.e., the person/s being talked about) in a few sentences:

{ Yvonne is a very senior director who was managing another account until she started covering Jill and also managing my account. She was also my mentor a year ago for 6 months, meeting her 1to1 monthly to talk about my strengths and weaknesses, and listening to her advise to improve and grow within the company. We have a cordial work relationship, but never felt too comfortable with her for her seniority level. } [cordial formal relationship]

What was the talk about? For example, was it related to the target person’s performance at work, to his or her personal life, or to some other aspect of this person?

{ It was related to the person’s performance at work, more specifically about her management abilities. However after a while the conversation turned to her personality in general and ways of being towards people. } [negative work-related gossip]

Why do you think the source told you what he or she told you about the target person? What was your interpretation of his or her motivations?

{ My view is that the group of 5 people that were part of this conversation trust each other and have a good relationship between them. Kathy started the conversation, but she didn’t want to just criticize Yvonne, she wanted to share her thoughts and feelings with work peers and friends to see if they had the same problem. After the three of them realised they were in the same situation, I think they kept going because they were feeling supported and relieved, as if they suddenly got rid of heavy personal demands. They also wanted to show the other 2 people in the group (including myself) what the real situation was to explain why

sometimes they're overworked or stressed while managing us as well. } [seeking social validation]

To what extent do you trust the source person in this incident?

{ *I trust Linda and Jill very much because I think they are very smart and experienced in what they do, and have a very reasonable judgement.* } [high trust] { *I also trust Kathy quite a lot, but I also know that she is very close with Jill, the director on maternity leave, and that in her eyes no one will be as good as Jill. Therefore I think she's a bit biased towards her new manager Yvonne.* } [taking it with a pinch of salt]

To what extent do you trust target person in this incident?

{ *Yvonne was my mentor and I know that she is very capable in her job, with many big achievements and successes. However, I have never had to deal with her as a direct manager, which makes me more open to believe other sources of information towards her.* } [not familiar]

In this specific instance of negative talk, did you believe what the source told you about the target individual? If so, why? If not, why not?

{ *At the start I was quite shocked, but when the three of them (specially including Linda) had the same view on Ingrid, I thought it was a huge coincidence and I started believing it.* } [crowd view must be right] { *Kathy might be a bit biased because she misses Janice,* } [taking it with pinch of salt] but Linda and Jill were very excited to have Yvonne as a manager, and now it looks like they feel completely different, which made me believe that

their view must be reasonable. { I also trust Linda's and Jill's judgement because I work closely with them and I know they have a fair reasoning and judgements. } [closeness encourages belief]

Did you speak to anyone else at work about what the source told you? If so, please provide some details of how you went about speaking to others – who did you choose, what did you say, and why?

I didn't speak with other colleagues but with Linda (who was also present during the incident). We had a 1to1 meeting to review a project, and before leaving the meeting I asked her how was she coping with her workload together with the end of quarter reporting and the onboarding of a new team member. { I asked her that because after the frustration level I could sense during the incident }, [genuine emotional display] { I wanted to make sure she was ok and verify her personal opinion individually compared to Kathy's and Jill's during the incident, because I fully trust her. She answered saying that she needs to do some extra hours (even during weekends) to achieve her monthly KPIs, and added sarcastically "because you know, that's all what matters". After that I added that she must be very excited for Jill to come back, to which she answered "well, somehow, but I don't know who is better, Yvonne or Janice. Kathy and Janice get along very well but personally I think she's not that good either". After this comment I could verify that the comments about Yvonne were true, but also that Kathy was maybe exaggerating when talking about Yvonne due to her obvious preference for Janice }. [getting a second opinion]

Did this incident affect your trust in the source? If so, how?

My trust towards Linda was the same after this, very high. {My trust towards Kathy was affected, because I could see she's not impartial or objective in her judgements but they're affected by her personal preferences and feelings towards other colleagues (Janice).} [questionable trustworthiness]

Did this incident affect your trust in the target? If so, how?

{Yes, it affected the way I perceived Ingrid and my trust towards her was lower after knowing more opinions about her performance from another dimension (as line manager) rather than just my view as her as a mentor.} [loss of trust]

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the source? If so, how?

{It did affect my working relationship with Linda, in the sense that I was willing to support her more knowing that she is overworked and not supported by her manager.} [providing support] It didn't affect my working relationship with Jill or Kathy, {but with the latter one I learnt to be more careful in taking her judgements or opinions of other colleagues seriously while working together.} [questionable trustworthiness]

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the source? If so, how?

It didn't affect my personal relationship with Linda or Jill, but {somehow it affected my relationship with Kathy. I felt a bit more distant from her and hesitant to share confidences with her, because now I know that if she has a personal preference she can be very subjective and not judge people fairly.} [unlikely to divulge personal information]

Did this incident affect your working relationship with the target? If so, how?

{Somehow I started seeing Yvonne less capable at work,} [different eyes] which also helped me relax around her and speak louder about my suggestions and ideas, knowing that she is not perfect.

Did this incident affect your personal relationship with the target? If so, how?

{My personal relationship with Yvonne hasn't changed much, we still have a formal relationship with each other,} [keeping it professional]

Did this incident affect your own workplace behaviour in any specific way – perhaps because you learned something about what is acceptable behaviour at work, for example? If so, please describe how the incident affected your own workplace behaviour.

It helped me understand that no one is perfect and that even senior and very experienced colleagues make mistakes. I also learnt that regardless of what you do, there's always going to be someone comparing you with someone else or disliking your actions. Seeing this happened with a very senior and respected colleague made me realise that this could happen to anyone and therefore should not affect my confidence at work, which made me relax and feel stronger about my ideas. From the other side I also learnt about the power and importance of listening and understanding everyone's personal situations before being demanding.

Please add anything else that you think is relevant to how you responded to this incident in terms of your thoughts, feelings and actions:

This made me feel that even if you go through a difficult period at work (or in life), it's easier to go through it knowing that there are colleagues in the same situation or sharing the same thoughts. Makes you feel accompanied and supported, as a sort of guarantee that if you fail you won't be alone (like Linda, Kathy, and Jill).

Example Interview Transcript

J = Interviewer

S = Participant

J: So how do you decide what to make of what people tell you about other people at work?

S: {Um, yeah that's hard. I don't know. I guess I just really go on my own feeling, rather than be swayed by other people – um, kind of my own experiences – I don't just believe what someone says just because they've told it to me – or I'm often told that I give people the benefit of the doubt because I think there's always – like I don't know, when – if someone tells you something like I often want to be defensive of the person who's not there haha... }
[*taking it with a pinch of salt*]

J: Oh right, that's interesting.

S: {And so yeah I guess I also reconcile what I'm being told with my own experiences of that person and feelings, yeah.} [*alignment with own experiences*]

J: Yeah I mean um, so it sounds like you're maybe a little bit sceptical to start with?

S: Yes.

J: Okay. Um, like I noticed – just to jump ahead – I noticed that – I think it was the last one where someone came and was confiding to you about the project manager down South –

S: Yup.

J: And you kind of said that after – your first impression of him was fine because I don't know, you didn't have that much to do with him but then as you start to accumulate all those, people telling you stuff about him, it can start to change.

S: { Yes. Well I've now been told, there's probably been about five or so different incidents where he's been brought up in a negative, so now, now I'm going to believe all those people instead of going off my own experience which tells me he's fine, um, obviously he's probably not because if he's upset this many people } [*crowd view must be right*] {and they're people that I kind of trust, who have good judgement, and are reasonable people,} [*closeness encourages belief*] {so I now think he is quite difficult to work with, not that he's been difficult to me, but he must be because he's upset this many people}. [*crowd view must be right*]

J: Yeah for sure.

S: { But initially, when I first was told it, I was like, "Oh he's just stressed out – oh he's new to the company" – I was kind of making allowances for why he might be behaving like this }

[*taking it with a pinch of salt*] but now it's to the point where, okay, I've kind of just conceded that he's not the – not very good at managing his stress and managing his job.

J: Yeah sure. So you kind of said there that's there a few people who you already trust telling you stuff about this guy. Is there any kind of – do you think there's people at your workplace who you kind of almost unconditionally trust their opinions of others or?

S: {Um, no. No I don't know, I trust that what they're telling me is true, but I always think that there could be other reasons, like cause I'm the conduit between all these different teams and people, and so I often see things that other people won't see, so there might be a transaction between two people, and because I know both sides I can then offer extra information that changes the whole – changes the um, what's the word? Like, by adding extra information it changes the light of it, like, so I think ... } [*taking it with a pinch of salt*]

J: It changes the whole story, kind of?

S: { Yeah, well it does, it adds more information so then you can be like, oh, well that's probably why this happened, because someone had just spoken to – or there might be like other circumstantial kind of – I don't know, what I'm trying to say is, I trust the people, but I don't trust that they know the full story or, um, I don't trust that they've factored in everything maybe, so coming back to giving people the benefit of the doubt, I'll almost always say, if someone's done something wrong, well it could be because of this or could be because of that and, you know, you just don't know. For example, the other day my workmate was having a go at that said project manager and he was saying that, Argh, he sent this email after he had spoken to him on the phone and this email kind of threw him under the

bus and he was like, “Why did he send that? We just spoke on the phone about it and he’s gone and sent it after we’ve sorted it out.” And so then I said, “Well maybe he’d sent the email – maybe he’d written the email up and then decided to ring you, and accidentally sent the email after – oh, I don’t know, like I try to think of reasons why it might not just be black and white.” [taking it with a pinch of salt] {yeah but if the story keeps getting told from different people, then I go, “Okay, he’s just being difficult.”} [crowd view must be right]

J: What about um, is there a difference for you if what someone’s telling you is negative about the other person if what they’re telling you is negative versus positive?

S: {Um, probably, I think maybe if they’re telling me someone negative I’ll probably be more sceptical,} [taking it with a pinch of salt] {whereas if they’re telling me something positive, generally there’s nothing to really gain} [no hidden agenda] or like {they’re not just indulging their, you know, just being annoyed or spiteful or wanting to mouth off about someone.} [being spiteful] {If they’re being positive it’s generally cause they’re just saying something nice, so yeah I’d probably think I’d be more willing to accept it without thinking if they’re saying something positive.} [spreading positivity]

J: What about – I don’t know if there’s people in your workplace or in any of your experience where, um, they only ever say positive things about other people, like how do you those kind of people?

S: {Well that’s different – no because they’re not really living in reality, well I shouldn’t say that but like, if someone always prone to looking at the positive, their judgement’s kind of questioned because they’re not really factoring – yeah that’s kind of bias, isn’t it, if you’re

always just looking at the good things – it's not really a complete picture – so yeah nah, I wouldn't trust someone that was continually positive, either.} [*inauthentic view*]

J: Yup, no that's fair enough. Um, and what about like, what about if you kind of – cause I noticed that one of the thing you said in your reports was that usually those are just people's opinion, which I thought was interesting cause, you know, obviously you're seeing it as completely subjective but then what if you disagree versus agree with someone, like I think there was that first example where I think Sam was saying some negative stuff about the guy Craig, and then you kind of clearly disagreed with Sam and that cause you don't mind Craig, but I don't know, what if you thought Craig was a complete asshole?

S: Are you asking if I kind of agree with like –

J: Yeah well does it make a difference for you whether, you know, you agree with someone's opinion of the other person?

S: Yeah well probably right – none of us can be completely objective.

J: Yeah sure.

S: {I don't know though, to be honest, in a work setting, cause often people will kind of grieve, kind of have a bit of a whinge to me because I'm kind of the – my role has something to do with all the different teams, but um, often when someone is doing that I won't indulge them, even if I don't like the person, maybe that more to Or because I don't want to be phoney –} [*staying neutral*]

J: Sorry I didn't catch all that?

S { Yeah if someone comes to me and they're speaking badly about them, even if I don't like that person, I wouldn't kind of engage or indulge their kind of – you know, often people are just willing to have a bitch or a whinge to make themselves feel better – usually there's nothing really productive that comes out of having a whinge, so it's just like, you know, wanting to see where you're at I suppose. If I don't – if that person telling me something negative about another person, like, I often won't go along with it in a work setting. } [*staying neutral*]

J: Oh yip, you won't say something similar yourself.

S: { Yeah. I might kind of say something like, "Oh that's shit," or "That's annoying," but I don't really like to kind of get involved in that because I'll have to deal with that person later, yeah so in personal life totally different – but at work I kind of try to stay as neutral as possible, even if I – or there is someone that I really don't like. But there's aren't many people that I don't like here either, so I suppose it's hard for me to answer. } [*staying neutral*]

J: Haha.

S: Just a couple – there's a couple that are annoying, but yeah.

J: Oh okay, you don't have to tell me about them but I can imagine. So are you saying that's partly your role or do think it's more motivated by who you are as a person? Or both.

S: {Um, that's a hard one. I think it's probably more because it's my role, and like I said I don't want to be phoney when I have to deal with person -like I have to be nice – well I have to be cooperative and, you know, like we have to work together, so yeah I don't really want to be phoney. But, I can then be like, “Oh hi, can I get this report off you?” I don't know -it's just there's something I don't like about that but yeah, I'd say it's mostly my role that determines that.} [*keeping it professional*]

J: But are you saying you have to do that sometimes, that phoneyess, just to do your role, basically?

S: {No I'm saying that's what stops me from engaging indulging in negative talk about someone, I because I don't want to then, like say me and Craig have a bitch about Simon and then I've gotta go be nice – then I'm often – cause I have to work with all these other people, I don't wanna like ...} [*staying neutral*]

J: Oh I see, so say someone had seen you bitching about this other person but then at the same time they see you being nice to that person it makes you come across as really ... I get it.

S: {Yeah, it's probably not just about what other people see but how I would feel myself. I would feel a bit – I don't, it feels a bit tacky or teenagery or ...} [*staying neutral*]

J: Yeah yeah, no fair enough. Okay

S: {And also, because we're all on different sides, I don't want to – because I know there's a lot of politics that goes on on site, like I go down to site sometimes and I'll hear it from the different camps and stuff like, "Oh our last project was so much and this and that and" – and 'cause I don't know the full story it's just easier to not start getting involved.} [*staying neutral*]

J: Yip, not that's cool. Um, I think there was, so it was the number three one and it was where your female colleague who's only been there for like a couple of months and I think she was having a kind of moan about the project manager, so you did say there that you felt like it did strengthen your relationship, just the fact that she was confiding in you, how does that work, like what makes you say that?

S: {Um, well I suppose every time you get to kind of show a vulnerability or a weakness, or share a moment, then that forms a bit more of a bond between two people, I guess, because she came to me instead of the others, cause she couldn't really go to the others, um, so it wasn't like I felt singled out or anything – it was more just a necessity thing, but, you know, that's she's trusting it showed me that she trusted me that I wouldn't say anything –} [*confiding personal information*]

J: Trusted that you wouldn't say anything to other people?

S: {Yeah, yeah. And just the fact that she was kind of vulnerable, and then came to me to kind of vent or whatever, I suppose that just naturally – it might also be a female thing, right, where oh yeah, we've shared a moment – she was pretty upset – so then naturally you're probably more – I mean I don't know, then you've got to know someone a bit better because

you've seen them when they're a bit vulnerable or upset, so it's a bit of a stronger bond than if it was just the normal everyday "G'day, how are you going?") [*confiding personal information*]

J: Yeah yeah, for sure. So you said there that's it's maybe a female thing – do you think there's a difference when it is a female coming to you versus a male?

S: {Um, maybe. I'm not really sure because we don't have many females here, but, um, yeah I don't know. Nah I think it probably would be different actually. I don't know why though, but just we're in a very male dominated industry, as well, so there's this kind of thing like girls try to stick together cause it's usually like most of team, most of everyone – like it's probably like 90 percent male –} [not relevant]

J: Wow.

S: {I mean I don't know – I just made that up – but there's not many – it's mostly males because it's engineering, like all the management apart from this one that I was just talking about are all male – on site the work crews are all male, um yeah it's just a male-dominated industry.} [not relevant]

J: Yip. Okay. I mean that's interesting because that maybe sets you apart a little bit – like you were talking about your role as a diplomat – I don't know I wonder if that has an influence?

S: Mmmm.

J: I don't know – I'm just speculating. So just talking about your work environment – how would you describe it there?

S: Very lax haha.

J: Very lax?

S: So what do you mean actually? In terms of the morale and kind of relationships and stuff? Or the actual physical?

J: Oh no more like the social side of it.

S: {Okay, so it's very social. Um we have lots of work dinner and when people start we have beers on Friday and in my job today I've got nothing to do except going to the craft beer shop and get beers – you know and when I first started I used to organise a lot of things that we'd do on the weekend and stuff like that and we're talking about going down to do a snowboarding trip – like nearly everyone in the office is keen – so it's got a good social vibe I guess – like most people here – like were all – I think the previous manager here was very big on cultural fit when he was recruiting, so we kind of – it's probably a bit ageist – I can't imagine a very old person getting a job here – not that I'm young of course, but like you know, when the interviews come in I can tell who'll get picked already just by – which is not a good thing – it's not very diverse, I'm trying to say –} [not relevant]

J: Okay, like is it people around their thirties and?

S: {And younger, like it's people who like to socialise and, um, are flexible and into sports and outdoors and – you know, like the festivals in summer and stuff like that. Like I tried when started – cause it's open plan and when I first started the engineers used to just have their headphones on and it drove me mental, so I like started the daily staff quiz where we'd stop twice a day and all gather round and do the quiz and just kind of talk and made it real open and I kind of just set these rules – like let's just this an open space where you can say what you want but if it's offensive, make sure you say that you're being offensive, so you can learn from each other, cause yeah I just didn't want it to be a real stuffy kind of over the top, you know, know one's allowed to say anything, um, going to HR type thing, so we have this rule that, yeah you can say whatever you want and that's good, but listen to people if they say they find that offensive or whatever, so we have a lot of quite heated debates, quite a lot about feminism and I just became vegan and it's all very open it's quite a lot of fun.} [not relevant]

J: So do you reckon that – cause my study is looking at this whole thing of talking about people who aren't there – do you reckon that environment of what you've described there, does that lead into less incidents because of the fact that it's more open and people are?

S: {I reckon. Cause up until – cause, for example, there hasn't really been many issues, I mean, everyone's got along really well and everyone's been like, it's cool that we can, you know, we all like each other and we all get along, and so, I remember saying let's not ever go to HR cause like we're all adults and we should be able to say whatever we want without being offended – like everyone's got different expectations of what's acceptable, but you're never going to learn if you're just constantly censoring everything, so it's been really good, I

think a lot of people have been challenged and they've been debated and then, yeah.} [not relevant]

J: Yeah for sure. Is it – is there any kind of cliqueness there at all?

S: {Not really. No, there was one person who's kind of a bit more kind of antisocial but um, that's fine – no one's like peer pressuring or bullying to come out when we have dinners or anything like that, but it is quite obvious, I suppose, because everyone so jovial or like to have a laugh or likes to have a beer and so it's more kind of obvious when someone doesn't, um, but there's no kind of – what's the word? – there's no negativity around that or.} [not relevant]

J: What about competitiveness? Is it kind of competitive around promotions or things like that?

S: {No, I don't think so – not that I'm aware of, I haven't heard anything like that. Ah, I think cause we're quite a small team here in the office and most of the – there's never like, oh, there's a role advertised and two people want it. The roles have kind of changed because we're kind of like the poor cousins to Australia – this company's massive in Australia and they branched out here a couple of years ago but we've just been left to our own devices and that's why we've kind of been able to develop our own culture here, um,. So the recruiting and all that kind of support, and the HR and stuff is still in Australia and just kind of forget about us, so any kind of roles – like promotional roles, they're usually just between your talk between your manager and when you do your review, so no I haven't seen any competitiveness at all.} [not relevant]