

# A paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip

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## Abstract

We review cross-disciplinary research on gossip and integrate it with two streams of theoretical scholarship: paradox theory and the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective. In doing so, we develop what we label a paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip. Our perspective holds that gossip does not merely *reflect* or *reveal* organizational paradoxes but contributes to *constituting* them. Drawing on an extensive narrative literature review ( $N = 184$ ), we conceptualize organizational gossip as a socially constructed category of interpersonal communication that, paradoxically, is regarded as both an exceptionally reliable and exceptionally unreliable source of social information. In turn, we illustrate how this contradictory view of gossip engenders paradoxical tensions when gossip surfaces in organizational life, and we illuminate two specific tensions to which gossip contributes: resistance-authority tensions and inclusion-exclusion tensions. Our work has important implications for research on organizational gossip, paradox, and communication and suggests intriguing directions for future investigations.

## INTRODUCTION

Academic interest in organizational gossip has burgeoned in recent years (Dorez Cruz et al., 2021; Waddington, 2022). Gossip is a socially constructed category of interpersonal communication that typically involves the informal and evaluative communication of speculative or verified information relating to another social actor(s) who is not directly involved in the communication (Bergmann, 1993; Bloom, 2004; Brady et al., 2017; Dorez Cruz et al., 2021; Foster, 2004). For decades, organizational scholars dismissed gossip as unworthy of serious attention, assuming it was an unproductive or even counterproductive workplace behaviour—something to be managed out of organizations (Baker & Jones, 1996; Einarsen et al., 2009). Yet an

emerging body of research challenges this assumption and contends that gossip is a complex and nuanced form of interpersonal communication that plays a variety of roles in organizational life (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Michelson et al., 2010; Tassiello et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2018a).

Despite progress toward a more balanced view of organizational gossip—a view that acknowledges gossip's beneficial functions and outcomes, as well as its detrimental ones (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017)—many questions remain unanswered regarding how gossip shapes organizational life. For example, what factors determine whether gossip plays a largely functional or dysfunctional role in the workplace (Baker & Jones, 1996; Brady et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2021; Lee & Barnes, 2021)? Does gossip necessarily

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take place outside the formal structures of organizations, or can it be embedded in such structures (Hallett et al., 2009; Mills, 2010)? To what extent can gossip be treated as a basis for official organizational action (Waddington, 2016)? And how does gossip interact with power at different organizational levels (Farley, 2011; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Waddington, 2012)?

The purpose of the present narrative literature review is to develop a novel perspective of organizational gossip that embraces rather than resolves the complexities and contradictions associated with such questions. Our perspective integrates gossip research with two streams of theoretical scholarship: paradox theory (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016) and the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). Paradox theory seeks to explain why and how organizations and their members enact and respond to the contradictory yet interdependent demands of organizational life (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Hahn & Knight, 2021; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The CCO perspective holds that communicative acts (such as gossiping) are not merely a means of transmitting information about the social realities of organizations but of constituting those realities (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; McPhee & Zaugg, 2008).

By combining these two theoretical traditions and applying them to cross-disciplinary gossip research, we develop what we label a *paradox-constitutive* perspective of organizational gossip. In isolation, a *paradox* perspective suggests gossip is associated with—or reflective of—contradictory yet interdependent elements and tensions of organizational life. For instance, gossip reflects the contradictory yet interdependent tensions of inclusion and exclusion, because workplace ingroups tend to strengthen their intragroup relationships (fostering inclusion) by gossiping about members of outgroups (resulting in exclusion) (Shallcross et al., 2011; Tassiello et al., 2018). The *constitutive* aspect of our perspective takes this paradoxical understanding of gossip a step further. Drawing on CCO theory (Schoeneborn et al., 2019), we argue that gossip does not simply *reveal* or *reflect* organizational paradoxes but contributes to *constituting* them. For example, gossip contributes to the constitution of inclusion-exclusion tensions because gossiping does not just reflect the boundaries of ingroups and outgroups but plays an active role in establishing and maintaining them (Gluckman, 1963).

The overarching contribution of our work is to provide an innovative conceptual perspective that moves beyond the balanced, transmission-based view of gossip, which dominates existing research. In developing our novel perspective, we make four specific contributions to the organizational literature. First, we demonstrate how a paradox perspective can advance organizational gossip

research by enabling the reconciliation of contradictory views and findings relating to gossip's role in the organization of work. To illustrate, a paradox perspective allows for the possibility that the same gossip can be simultaneously functional and dysfunctional (Brady et al., 2017), and that gossip can exist outside formal organizational structures while being embedded in such structures (Mills, 2010). Second, we go beyond existing research that has identified paradoxes associated with gossip (Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2012) by explicitly integrating paradox theory with the CCO perspective. In this way, we highlight the role of gossip in constituting paradoxical tensions, not merely revealing them. Third, we contribute to constitutive views of both the ontology of paradox and organizational communication by demonstrating how, as a socially constructed communication category, gossip creates its own unique paradoxical tensions. Fourth, we contribute to a 'critical' shift in the organizational paradox literature (Berti & Simpson, 2021, p. 253) by demonstrating how gossip interacts with power dynamics to constitute unique paradoxical tensions. As such, we answer calls for more research on how power informs, and is informed by, paradoxical tensions (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2016).

## REVIEW METHOD

### Rationale and addressing concerns over rigor

We implemented a narrative review of relevant literature to develop our perspective. In contrast to systematic and integrative reviews, narrative reviews follow an 'informal process of reviewing a literature based on incremental expansion of knowledge', wherein the 'literature search is adapted alongside the development of theory in a process of discovery' (Fan et al., 2022, p. 173). The narrative review method suited our purposes for two main reasons. First, our aim was to explore and develop a novel perspective of organizational gossip and, therefore, we did not want to constrain the scope of our search by using a pre-set date range or pre-determined databases. Second, and relatedly, we chose the narrative review method because research on our focal phenomenon—gossip—is scattered across multiple disciplines, including not only management and organization studies, but sociology, anthropology, psychology and communication studies (Fan et al., 2022; Snyder, 2019).

The narrative review method has been criticized for lacking rigor (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). Because the scope of the review is not pre-defined, and because the analytic process is interpretive rather than

systematic, some scholars suggest narrative reviews may overlook important streams of research, and that findings may be overly biased by the views and preconceptions of researchers (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). Following other scholars (Fan et al., 2022), we suggest there are two keys to overcoming these criticisms: *transparency* and *reflexivity*. Transparency refers to the level of openness and detail with which researchers disclose the steps involved in their research process (Pratt et al., 2020). Reflexivity denotes the practice of ‘continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation’ about how researchers’ positionality may influence the outcomes of research (Berger, 2015, p. 220). Therefore, to demonstrate the rigor of our narrative review, we next provide a transparent disclosure of the steps involved in our review process. In addition, we illustrate how we practiced reflexivity by including an appendix (Appendix SA) that offers reflections on our review process.

## Literature review process

Our narrative literature review was guided by the overarching research question: *What is organizational gossip and how does it shape organizational life?* We conducted our review over the course of 5 years, between 2018 and 2022. In keeping with the narrative review method, we conducted our search and analysis processes in iterative cycles, adding more literature to the scope of our review as we developed and refined findings (Fan et al., 2022). We conducted three major cycles of search and analysis, each of which ended with a submission (or resubmission) of the present manuscript for peer review, and each of which incorporated a series of smaller cycles.

We used a snowballing technique for searching the literature throughout our review (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). Our starting point was to identify key sources on organizational gossip (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Michelson et al., 2010; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Waddington, 2012) by searching the terms ‘organizational gossip’ and ‘workplace gossip’ in Google Scholar, Scopus and EBSCO. As we read the full texts of these sources, we identified citations and references that could lead us to other relevant sources. In turn, we downloaded those additional sources and, as we read through them, used the citations and reference lists to identify others relevant sources. To supplement this snowballing technique, we: (1) conducted periodic databases searches of Google Scholar, Scopus and EBSCO; (2) used the ‘Cited By’ function in Google Scholar to find sources that cited our existing sources and (3) followed suggestions from our anonymous reviewers. We used the same techniques to search not only the organizational gossip literature, but the wider social science literature on gos-

sip, the organizational paradox literature and the CCO literature.

Our primary criterion for including sources in our review was that they could potentially offer insights of relevance to our research question. We predominantly reviewed peer-reviewed and scholarly literature, alongside a small number of journalistic and practitioner sources ( $N = 4$ ) whose purpose was either (a) to illustrate popular views of gossip and paradox or (b) to provide empirical evidence for conceptual arguments we identified in the academic literature. Other than these exceptions, we excluded sources that: (1) were not scholarly or peer-reviewed ( $N = 23$ ); (2) were not written in English ( $N = 8$ ) or (3) focussed specifically on research methods for examining gossip ( $N = 1$ ). We stored references for all the sources we reviewed in a specific library in Endnote, and we collected PDFs of sources in a shared folder in OneDrive. Over the course of four years, we reviewed 184 relevant sources, as illustrated in Table 1.

As already stated, we conducted three major cycles of analysis. Over the course of these cycles, we read the full texts of our 184 sources and made notes on themes of relevance to our research question. Table 2 illustrates the notes we made for a sub-sample of sources. Importantly, the focus of our analysis shifted and evolved over the three cycles, in part based on our emergent findings and in part based on suggestions from our anonymous reviewers.

Table 3 illustrates how our analytic focus and findings evolved over three cycles. During Cycle 1, our focus was on describing (a) the social functions of gossip and (b) how these functions shape organizational social structures. As shown in Table 2, we identified three predominant social functions of gossip—information, influence and bonding—and we linked these functions to elements of organizational social structures including relationships, norms and power.

In Cycle 2, we applied a ‘paradox lens’ to our initial review findings.<sup>1</sup> This meant reviewing the paradox literature to understanding the concept of paradox, and then using this concept to reinterpret key themes identified in Cycle 1. In practical terms, we accomplished this by re-reading our initial findings—as well as our notes, relevant sections of full text articles, and recently added full text articles—to identify ‘contradictory yet interdependent’ functions, outcomes and elements of gossip. For example, in re-reading the literature on gossip’s social functions, we noted that the bonding and bullying functions of gossip appear contradictory but can be interdependent, because gossip that bullies targets (resulting in exclusion) may simultaneously strengthen relationships between those who engage in it (fostering inclusion) (Bosson et al., 2006;

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

TABLE 1 Full list of sources we reviewed.

Organizational gossip sources ( $N = 69$ )	(Aghbolagh et al., 2021; Babalola et al., 2019; Bai et al., 2020; Baker & Jones, 1996; Banerjee et al., 2014; Begemann et al., 2021; Ben-Hador, 2019; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Brady et al., 2017; Burt & Knez, 1993; Carrim, 2019; Chang & Kuo, 2021; Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Daily, 2018; Decoster et al., 2013; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Einarsen et al., 2009; Ellwardt et al., 2012a; Ellwardt et al., 2012b; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Fan & Grey, 2021; Fan et al., 2021; Farley, 2011; Farley et al., 2010; Grosser et al., 2010; Grosser et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2021; Hafen, 2004; Hallett et al., 2009; Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003; Kim et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, 2010; Kulik et al., 2008; Kuo et al., 2015; Kuo et al., 2018; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Martinescu et al., 2019a; Martinescu et al., 2019b; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004; Michelson et al., 2010; Mills, 2010; Naeem et al., 2020; Noon, 2001; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Shallcross et al., 2011; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Tan et al., 2021; Tassiello et al., 2018; Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997; Tian et al., 2019; Vaidyanathan et al., 2016; van Iterson & Clegg, 2008; van Iterson et al., 2011; Waddington, 2005, 2012, 2016; Waddington, 2022; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005; Wu et al., 2018a; Wu et al., 2018b; Xing et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2019; Zinko et al., 2017)
Non-organizational gossip sources ( $N = 68$ ); includes sources from: psychology ( $N = 25$ ) anthropology ( $N = 11$ ), evolutionary theory ( $N = 15$ ); communication studies ( $N = 9$ ), and sociology and gender studies ( $N = 8$ ).	(Abraham, 1970; Anderson et al., 2011; Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Bergmann, 1993; Besnier, 1989; Bloom, 2004; Boehm, 1999; Bosson et al., 2006; Brenneis, 1984; Brondino et al., 2017; Cox, 1970; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Dunbar, 1998, 2004; Dunbar et al., 1997; Eder & Enke, 1991; Einat & Chen, 2012; Engelmann et al., 2016; Enquist & Leimar, 1993; Feinberg et al., 2012; Fine, 1977, 1985; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Fonseca & Peters, 2018; Foster, 2004; Gabriels & De Backer, 2016; Gambetta, 1994; Giardini & Wittek, 2019; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Guendouzi, 2001; Hannerz, 1967; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Jones, 1980; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, 2010; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Loudon, 1961; Lyons & Hughes, 2015; Martinescu et al., 2014; Martinescu et al., 2019a; Martinescu et al., 2019c; McAndrew et al., 2007; Merry, 1984; Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 1993; Okazaki et al., 2014; Paine, 1967; Reynolds et al., 2018; Rosnow, 2001; Rudnicki et al., 2019; Rysman, 1977; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Spacks, 1982; Suls, 1977; Szwed, 1966; Turner et al., 2003; Watson, 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004; Whitfield, 2012; Wilson et al., 2000; Wu et al., 2016a; Wu et al., 2016b; Wyckoff et al., 2019)
Paradox sources ( $N = 25$ )	(Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Carmine et al., 2021; Clegg et al., 2002; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Engeström & Sannino, 2011; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Ford & Backoff, 1988; Hahn & Knight, 2021; Herald, 2010; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Lewis, 2000; Luscher et al., 2006; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Putnam et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Schad et al., 2016; Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith & Tracey, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015)
Communicative constitution of organization (CCO) sources ( $N = 22$ )	(Ashcraft et al., 2009; Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2019; Bisel, 2010; Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2015; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Fleming, 2005; Koschmann & McDonald, 2015; Kuhn, 2008; Leclercq-Vandelannoite, 2011; McGivern & Dopson, 2010; McPhee, 2004; McPhee & Zaig, 2008; Mumby, 2005; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2010; Schoeneborn et al., 2019; Taylor, 2011; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2019; Wright, 2016)

Shallcross et al., 2011). In this way, we identified three predominant themes relating to the paradoxical elements of gossip. First, gossip is associated with both particularly reliable information (e.g., inside intelligence on co-workers) and particularly unreliable social information (e.g., speculative rumours). Second, gossip is a means of resisting power, yet it is also a means of reinforcing power against resistance. Third, gossip is simultaneously associated with both social inclusion and social exclusion. We grouped these findings on the interdependent contradictions associated with gossip into three paradoxes of gossip, as illustrated in Table 3.

In Cycle 3, we built on our prior work to develop the paradox-constitutive perspective of gossip presented in

this manuscript. We started by engaging with the paradox literature in greater depth, with a particular focus on addressing the distinctions between the inherent and constitutive views of paradox (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Hahn & Knight, 2021; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Moving back and forth between this literature and our findings from Cycle 2, we had the idea that gossip might not just be *associated* with paradoxes, but actively *constitutive* of them. We pursued this idea by reading into the CCO literature, which we were already familiar with from organizational gossip sources (Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2012). A key theme of the CCO literature concerns the interaction between power and communication processes in constituting organizations and organizing

TABLE 2 Illustration of how we summarized definitions and themes from full text articles.

Source	Conceptualization/definition of gossip	Themes reflecting how gossip shapes organizational life
(Bai et al., 2020)	'[E]valuative talk between two or more people in which judgments about an absent third party are made' (p. 1689)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative gossip provides information about supervisors' values and expectations to subordinates (information function)</li> <li>Subordinates perform better (supervisor-rated) when they receive gossip</li> <li>Gossip functions as reflective/ cultural learning</li> <li>'Balanced view' of gossip</li> </ul>
(Brady et al., 2017)	'[I]nformal and evaluative (i.e., positive or negative) talk from one member of an organization to one or more members of the same organization about another member of the organization who is not present to hear what is said'. (p. 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gossip has traditionally been associated with deviance but may not constitute deviance</li> <li>Gossip may be functional; 'balanced view' of gossip</li> <li>Functions of gossip include: uncertainty reduction (information); emotion validation (social comparison); self-esteem (downward social comparison); norm enforcement (influence); networking (bonding)</li> </ul>
(Kurland & Pelled, 2000)	'Informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present' (p. 429)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gossip enhances social power of gossipers (influence function) in different ways depending on valence (e.g., positive gossip enhances reward power, negative gossip enhances coercive power).</li> <li>Legitimate power is not present in model</li> <li>Credibility and work-relatedness moderate effects; relationship quality (between gossipers and recipient) and organizational culture are contextual factors</li> </ul>
(Ellwardt et al., 2012a)	'Informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present' (p. 623)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key focus is gossip and friendship development (bonding function)</li> <li>Compares social capital perspective (friendship precedes gossip) and evolutionary perspective (gossip precedes friendship)</li> <li>Results support evolutionary perspective: colleagues who gossip together are more likely to become friends over time</li> </ul>

(Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2019; Cooren et al., 2011; Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn et al., 2019; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2019). Noting this theme, we reflected on how power and gossip interact in constituting paradoxes and tensions, and through these reflections, we realized that what makes gossip a uniquely paradoxical phenomenon is its discursive construction as both an exceptionally reliable *and* unreliable source of social information. In turn, we used this novel framing of gossip to reconsider our findings on the other paradoxes of gossip identified in Cycle 2. These reflections enabled us to see that gossip is not only associated with tensions of resistance-authority and inclusion-exclusion, but actively constitutive of these tensions.

As we developed our novel perspective of how gossip shapes organizational life (addressing the second part of our research question), we concurrently refined our understanding of the first part of our research question (i.e., 'what is organizational gossip?'). Additionally, we identified problematic assumptions that pervade most existing research on organizational gossip. Therefore, before presenting our paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip, we next present our review

findings regarding two sub-questions: (1) What is organizational gossip and how does it relate to similar communication concepts? (2) What are the problematic assumptions of extant research on organizational gossip?

## ORGANIZATIONAL GOSSIP

### Defining gossip

Pinning gossip down with a precise definition remains a challenging task (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). As scholars across disciplines have noted, gossip is an elusive and controversial term that has different meanings depending on context (Bloom, 2004; Brady et al., 2017; Foster, 2004; Michelson et al., 2010; Waddington, 2012). Paradoxically, the connotations of the word gossip suggest a form of communication that can be both trivial and harmful (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Shallcross et al., 2011), idle and aggressive (Farley et al., 2010; Guendouzi, 2001; Robinson & Bennett, 1995)

TABLE 3 How our key themes evolved over three cycles of analysis.

<b>Cycle 1: Themes reflect a focus on describing the overarching social functions of gossip</b>	<b>Cycle 2: Themes reflect our re-interpretation of the social functions of gossip through a paradox lens</b>	<b>Cycle 3: Themes reflect the development of a paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip</b>
<p><i>Information</i></p> <p>Gossip communicates three predominant types of social information: information about targets; information about gossipers; information about socio-cultural groups.</p>	<p><i>The reliable-unreliable paradox</i></p> <p>Gossip is associated with both particularly reliable and particularly unreliable social information.</p>	<p><i>The inside word-just gossip paradox</i></p> <p>As a communication category, gossip is discursively constructed as both a particularly reliable source of social information (the ‘inside word’) and particularly unreliable source of social information (‘just gossip’); this paradox is unique to gossip and stems from the interplay between power and social truth.</p>
<p><i>Influence</i></p> <p>Gossip enables groups and individuals to gain social power and influence others’ behaviour; for example, groups use gossip for social control, while individuals use gossip to denigrate rivals and enhance their own status.</p>	<p><i>The resistance-power paradox</i></p> <p>Gossip is associated with both resistance and power; gossip enables the powerless to resist the control of the powerful, but it also enables the powerful to gain more power over the powerless.</p>	<p><i>Gossip co-constitutes resistance-authority tensions</i></p> <p>Gossip is simultaneously a means of constituting resistance against authority and reinforcing authority against resistance; the crux is that, as a voice of resistance, gossip remains hidden from the powerful; when gossip comes to the attention of the powerful, it can easily be discredited as ‘just gossip’ or legitimized as ‘information’.</p>
<p><i>Bonding</i></p> <p>Gossip is an inherently relational activity; it fosters intimacy, trust, and solidarity among those who engage in it.</p>	<p><i>The inclusion-exclusion paradox</i></p> <p>Gossip is associated with both inclusion (because it fosters relationships and in-group bonds) and exclusion (because it bullies and ostracizes targets)</p>	<p><i>Gossip co-constitutes inclusion-exclusion tensions</i></p> <p>Gossip is constitutive of inclusion-exclusion tensions because of its formative role in establishing the boundaries of social groups and relationships; insiders are defined by their inclusion in gossip and outsiders are defined by their exclusion from gossip.</p>

and misleading and informative (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003; Mills, 2010). In popular discourse, gossip is often understood as a negative way of talking about other people, practiced mostly by women (Guendouzi, 2001; Jones, 1980; Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 1993; Waddington, 2012). Academics generally take a more neutral view of gossip, arguing that it can be of either positive or negative valence (Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021) and that both men and women can engage in it (Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Waddington, 2012).

We suggest the reason it is so challenging to define gossip is that ‘gossiping’ is a socially constructed category of communication—that is, a communication category with shifting, unstable boundaries that only exist by way of social agreement (Barrett, 2017; Bloom, 2004). In this respect, gossip is distinct from communication categories like ‘speech’ and ‘writing’, which can be defined in relatively objective terms (Bloom, 2004). For example, speech may be defined as a system of communication that uses spoken words, while writing may be defined as a system of signs or marks that represent the utterances of a language. In contrast, gossip is defined by subjective agreement regarding the contexts in which it occurs, the perceived intentions behind it, the functions it serves, and

the types of information it communicates (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994; Bergmann, 1993; Foster, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010). In effect, this means that speech, writing and other forms of communication only ‘become’ gossip when people collectively perceive or label them as such.

The socially constructed nature of gossip poses a quandary for researchers: How can we define gossip in a way that provides sufficient conceptual clarity to enable systematic investigation of the phenomenon while preserving its unstable, context-dependent social character (Bergmann, 1993; Dores Cruz et al., 2021)? Scholarly definitions of gossip must strike a balance between inclusiveness and specificity. If researchers define gossip too broadly (e.g., ‘communicating about absent people’), we risk including instances of communication that few people would categorize as gossip: reference letters, performance reports and honorary speeches, among others (Bloom, 2004). If we define gossip too specifically (e.g., ‘women’s talk about the sex lives of coworkers’), we risk excluding instances of communication that most people *would* consider gossip: a male employee talking to a female co-worker about his boss’s annoying habit of calling everyone ‘Buddy’, for instance.

TABLE 4 Typical features of organizational gossip.

Feature of gossip	Examples/illustration of feature
Gossip communicates information relating to <i>other people</i> (Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Foster, 2004), whom we refer to as 'organizational actors'. Organizational actors can be specific individuals ('Jane', 'my supervisor') or groups of unnamed individuals ('management', 'the accountants', 'the company').	Discussing a colleague's eating habits or work performance; discussing internal conflict in another work department.
Gossip concerns organizational actors who are <i>not directly involved in the communication</i> (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Eder & Enke, 1991; Hannerz, 1967).	Talking about someone who is not present or out of earshot.
Gossip communicates information relating to other people <i>in an evaluative manner</i> , casting some sort of judgement on the organizational actors who are its targets (Baumeister et al., 2004; Brady et al., 2017; Eder & Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004; Martinescu et al., 2014).	Making an explicit judgement of another person ('Jane was so annoying during that meeting') or implying a judgement of another person ('I counted seven separate times Jane interrupted me during that meeting').
Gossip is <i>informal</i> communication, taking place outside an organization's official channels of communication (Brady et al., 2017; Kurland & Pelled, 2000).	Communicating about others in an unofficial capacity or forum, for example, after work, during an impromptu corridor gathering, or in the back of an official meeting.
Gossip communicates information that can be speculative or verified (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Fine, 1985; Rosnow, 2001).	Talking speculatively about how a CEO may have received a salary increase; informally relaying verified information that a CEO <i>has</i> received a salary increase.

Ben-Ze'ev (1994) suggests a solution to this definitional quandary: To treat gossip as a *prototypical category*. A prototypical category has no hard boundaries that define it; rather, it specifies certain characteristics of a phenomenon that are *typically* used to categorize that phenomenon. In a prototypical category, some instances of a phenomenon fit better than others, while others simply do not fit. Accordingly, in the prototypical category 'organizational gossip', some instances of communication fit perfectly, others fit imperfectly and others do not fit at all.

Following this logic, we define organizational gossip as a socially constructed category of interpersonal communication that typically involves the informal and evaluative communication of speculative or verified information relating to another organizational actor(s) who is not directly involved in the communication. Although wordy, this definition is both specific enough to provide a reasonable level of conceptual clarity and broad enough to honour Ben-Ze'ev's (1994) view of gossip as a prototypical category. To provide conceptual clarity, our definition includes five typical features of gossip that we identified through our review of the literature (see Table 4). To acknowledge gossip as a prototypical category, our definition includes the qualifying phrase that gossip 'typically involves' these features, allowing for the diverse and sometimes inconsistent ways in which scholars have defined organizational gossip (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Hafen, 2004; Waddington, 2012).

Scholars have argued that gossip should be treated and studied as a distinct form of organizational communi-

cation, separate from related concepts like rumour and chatting (Brady et al., 2017; Hafen, 2004; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Waddington, 2012). Our conceptualization of gossip supports this view, while acknowledging there is often overlap between gossip and related forms of organizational communication. We maintain that gossip and other forms of communication (e.g., rumour, chatting, storytelling) can overlap because they are socially constructed communication categories, which implies they have no objective essence that makes them mutually exclusive (Barrett, 2017; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). In our conceptualization, the primary criterion for one instance of communication being categorized as 'rumour' and another as 'gossip', say, is people's *shared perception* that the former instance fits better in the category 'rumour' and the latter in the category 'gossip'. Table 5 shows how gossip relates to five similar communication concepts according to this overarching conceptualization.

### Changing views and problematic assumptions in research on organizational gossip

Traditionally, organizational scholars paid little attention to gossip, assuming it was an unproductive way of passing time ('idle talk') or a counterproductive form of indirect aggression ('malicious tales') (Baker & Jones, 1996; Brady et al., 2017; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Consequently, gossip still features more prominently in research instruments for measuring workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009)

TABLE 5 Gossip and related communication concepts.

Communication concept	How gossip relates to the concept	Conceptual similarities/overlap with gossip	Conceptual differences with gossip
<i>Rumour</i>	Gossip and rumour are commonly conflated, and they overlap conceptually (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003).	Both gossip and rumour can communicate speculative information about other people (e.g., 'I hear the CEO gave himself another salary increase') (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Fine, 1985; Noon & Delbridge, 1993).	Rumour must be speculative whereas gossip can also be verified; gossip must be about other people whereas rumour can be about objects ('I heard there is a crack in the nuclear reactor') and events ('I hear they are cancelling the end of year work party') (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Fine, 1985; Noon & Delbridge, 1993).
<i>Reporting</i>	Gossip is conceptually distinct from reporting on other colleagues because of its informality (Brady et al., 2017).	Both gossip and reporting involve the communication of evaluative information relating to other people (e.g., 'Sally is bullying me') (Brady et al., 2017).	Reporting involves the communication of evaluative information in an official capacity (e.g., a worker making a formal complaint to a manager about a bullying incident, with the aim of provoking official action) whereas gossip involves the informal communication of evaluative information in an unofficial capacity (e.g., a worker informally telling a manager about a bullying incident during a social event, without the intention of provoking official action) (Brady et al., 2017).
<i>Bitching</i>	Gossip subsumes the communication subcategory of bitching, which is to say that all bitching is gossip, but not all gossip is bitching (Guendouzi, 2001; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999).	Gossip and bitching are similar in that they are both informal categories of communication and they both cast judgments on other actors in an organization (e.g., 'It's so frustrating working with Jane on this project!'). Both gossip and bitching are gendered forms of communication, most often associated with women's talk (Guendouzi, 2001; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999).	Bitching is more specific than gossip because it is almost exclusively used to express negative interpersonal emotions such as annoyance, anger, and frustration (Guendouzi, 2001); in contrast, gossip can express positive <i>and</i> negative emotions toward coworkers (Martinescu et al., 2019a; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Bitching is more explicitly gendered than gossip, being associated almost exclusively with women's talk.
<i>Chatting (also known as 'small talk' or 'chit-chat')</i>	Gossip is a subcategory of chatting, which is to say all gossip is chatting, but not all chatting is gossip (Methot et al., 2020; Waddington, 2012).	Gossip and chatting are similar in that they are both informal activities during which people talk about news and other social topics (Methot et al., 2020; Waddington, 2012).	Gossip is more specific than chatting because it typically involves the communication of evaluative information relating to other organizational actors. For example, chatting about what I did in the weekend does not constitute gossip because I am the topic of conversation, whereas chatting about an absent co-worker's impeccable (or regrettable) dress sense does constitute gossip because it is evaluative and about an absent third party (Brady et al., 2017; Waddington, 2012).

(Continues)



TABLE 5 (Continued)

Communication concept	How gossip relates to the concept	Conceptual similarities/overlap with gossip	Conceptual differences with gossip
Storytelling	Gossip is distinct from, yet overlapping with, organizational storytelling (van Hulst & Ybema, 2020).	Gossip overlaps with organizational storytelling when it is told in anecdotal or narrative form and makes a connection between the gossip target's actions and the context in which those actions unfold (van Hulst & Ybema, 2020).	Storytelling is distinct from gossip in that it typically (but not always) takes a narrative form, relating events in a sequence involving a beginning, middle, and end (Martin, 2016). In contrast, gossip can consist in a mere snippet of evaluative information about another person (Waddington, 2012). Storytelling also puts more emphasis on the context in which the events in a story unfold (as opposed to the organizational context in which the story is told), whereas gossip is more typically characterized by the informal organizational context in which it occurs (Brady et al., 2017).

and interpersonal deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000) than in textbooks on the fundamentals of organizational behaviour and communication (Waddington, 2022). The traditional view of organizational gossip likely stems from a stereotyped understanding of gossip as a negative, trivial and prying form of communication (Farley et al., 2010; Waddington, 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Noon and Delbridge (1993) were the first researchers to argue that traditional characterizations of organizational gossip ignore its positive potential. Their seminal call-to-arms implored organizational scholars to undertake serious and systematic research on gossip, making the bold claim that 'gossip is a social process that helps to protect and perpetuate organizations' (Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p. 23). Since Noon and Delbridge (1993) published their landmark paper, a substantive body of research has explored how gossip shapes organizational life, working from the assumption that gossip can play either a beneficial or detrimental role in organizations (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Grosser et al., 2012).

The adjective that best captures this emerging view of gossip is 'balanced'. Authors of recent publications frequently claim their work contributes to a more *balanced view* of how gossip affects organizations (e.g., Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2021). The implication of such language is that while gossip can and does have detrimental functions and outcomes in organizations, it can also serve beneficial functions and engender positive outcomes. Thus, scholars must weigh gossip's detrimental impacts against its beneficial ones.

While a more balanced view of gossip undoubtedly represents progress, we suggest that certain assumptions underlying this view may unintentionally impede further

advancement. One problematic assumption is that the functions and outcomes of gossip can be neatly categorized as *either* beneficial *or* detrimental. For example, gossip that fulfils a bullying function may be categorized as detrimental because of its consequences for targets (Shallcross et al., 2011), whereas gossip that serves a bonding function is more likely to be categorized as beneficial because of its outcomes for gossipers (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). The problem with this neat type of 'either/or' categorization is that the same gossip may simultaneously serve a bullying function *and* a bonding function (Bosson et al., 2006; Ellwardt et al., 2012b; Shallcross et al., 2011). A further issue with the balanced view is the assumption that each distinct instance of gossip has essential characteristics—such as content and valence—that make it more likely to produce beneficial or detrimental outcomes. For example, researchers have contended (perhaps counterintuitively) that gossip concerning targets' work performance is more likely to produce detrimental outcomes than gossip about targets' personal lives (e.g., Kuo et al., 2015).

The notion that gossip can be categorized as *either* beneficial *or* detrimental—whether in its functions, outcomes or essential characteristics—is convenient from a practical standpoint. It potentially enables researchers to make concrete and simple-to-follow recommendations to managers and practitioners about how to deal with workplace gossip. However, we suggest this approach does not fully capture the complex, nuanced, and often contradictory ways in which gossip shapes organizational life. Organizations are not monolithic entities with unified interests; they are imaginary abstractions comprised of individuals and subgroups whose interests are frequently conflicting and

competing (Clegg et al., 2002; Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Functions and outcomes of gossip that some organizational actors see as beneficial may well be viewed by other actors as detrimental, and so any neat categorization of gossip's functions and outcomes is likely to engender an oversimplified understanding of the phenomenon.

Another potentially problematic assumption of existing research is that gossip's impacts can be understood using a transmission model of communication. The transmission model posits that communication involves a sender, who transmits a message to a receiver (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Starting in the 1980s, organizational scholars began to criticize the transmission model of communication for its assumptions that (a) the social realities of organizations exist primarily as psychological or material phenomena; and (b) that the role of communication is merely to transmit information about psychological and material phenomena between individuals (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Axley, 1984; Cooren et al., 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2015; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). These assumptions are viewed as problematic because they ignore how communication processes generate and perpetuate social realities.

Our review of the literature revealed that the transmission model is deeply embedded in the way most scholars understand the impacts of gossip on organizational life. Particularly revealing is the language typically used to describe the *gossip triad*, which is said to involve a sender (who transmits the gossip message), a receiver (who receives the message) and a target (who is the object of the message) (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lee & Barnes, 2021). Such language implies that the role of organizational gossip is largely to transmit pre-existing social information between individuals, and that this information may, in turn, change people's minds, thus altering social reality. Although this transmission-based conceptualization might be consistent with common sense experiences of gossip (where it appears that one person is transmitting information to a second person about a third person), the transmission-based view underplays the potential of gossip to *generate* social information and, in doing so, contribute to the constitution organizational reality (Waddington, 2012).

In the remainder of this paper, we develop a paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip that provides an alternative to both the balanced and transmission-based views of organizational gossip. Our perspective shifts focus away from conceptualizing gossip as mode of transmitting social information that engenders either beneficial or detrimental outcomes, and toward understanding gossip as an interactive social process that contributes to the constitution of organizational paradoxes.

## A PARADOX-CONSTITUTIVE PERSPECTIVE OF ORGANIZATIONAL GOSSIP

A paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip has four foundational elements. First, it posits that gossip is a socially constructed communication category and, as such, that categorizations of gossip are contextual, subjective, unstable and potentially contradictory (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Bloom, 2004). For example, a communication incident that some organizational actors categorize as gossip may be classified by others as 'informal discussion' or even a 'behind-doors meeting'. Second, our perspective adopts a constitutive view of both paradox and organizational communication (Putnam et al., 2016; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). As explained in the theoretical background sections below, we submit that paradoxes and other features of organizational reality are not inherent to systems or embedded in material realities, but socially negotiated and constructed through interpersonal interactions and communication processes. Third, and relatedly, our perspective proposes that gossip plays a unique role in co-constituting paradoxical tensions in organizations and organizing. We use the term *co-constituting* deliberately to emphasize that gossip is not alone in constituting paradoxical tensions but does so alongside other forms of communication and social interaction. In saying that, we submit that due to its unique socially constructed characteristics, gossip plays an idiosyncratic role in constituting tensions that is worth understanding in its own right. Fourth, our perspective foregrounds the interplay between power and communication in constituting paradoxical tensions. Following other scholars (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Kuhn, 2008; Mumby, 2005; Putnam et al., 2016), we propose that organizational power struggles are constituted through communicative processes like gossiping, and that power, in turn, shapes how communication processes unfold. To present our perspective, we start by explaining the two theoretical traditions that inform it: paradox theory and the CCO perspective. Subsequently, we discuss an overarching paradox of organizational gossip—the 'inside word-just gossip' paradox—and show how gossip contributes to the constitution of resistance-authority tensions and inclusion-exclusion tensions.

### Paradox theory

Paradox has become a pervasive focus for researchers interested in the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions that form the fabric of organizational life (Cunha

& Putnam, 2019). Most organizational scholars agree that the term paradox denotes *contradictory yet interdependent elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time* (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Such ‘elements’ can be goals, demands, statements, views, functions, beliefs or other features of human mental and social life (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The elements of a paradox appear logical in isolation but become inconsistent or even absurd when juxtaposed (Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). A well-known example is the Liar’s Paradox, encapsulated in the statement: ‘I am lying’ (Schad et al., 2016, p. 9). If this statement is true, then the utterer must not be lying. But if the utterer is not lying, then their statement that they are lying cannot be true. Such self-referential contradictions—contradictions that force us to twist and stretch our cognitive capacities in unsettling ways—give paradoxes a strong psychological appeal. In turn, this appeal likely accounts for why paradoxes have been studied by scholars in disciplines ranging from philosophy and linguistics to mathematics and psychology (Schad et al., 2016), and why they are frequently referenced in popular culture, where there is even a paradox of Oprah Winfrey (Herald, 2010).

Paradox theory goes beyond the mass appeal of paradoxes to explain how and why persistent, simultaneous and interdependent contradictions shape and transform organizational life (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Hahn & Knight, 2021; Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Scholars agree that organizational paradoxes most frequently manifest as simultaneous and persistent tensions between conflicting goals and demands. In professional cycling, for example, there is persistent tension between the conflicting demands of cooperation and competition, which manifest both between and within teams. When cyclists from different teams are involved in a leading breakaway, they often find themselves in the paradoxical situation of needing to cooperate with their breakaway companions to stay ahead of the peloton (due to the speed advantage of slipstreaming), while simultaneously competing against the same companions for the individual win. Within teams, cyclists compete against one another for their place on the team roster, while simultaneously cooperating with one another to defeat other teams. These tensions recur in race after race and during season after season, making them a persistent feature of cycling organizations.

Scholars adopt differing positions with respect to (a) the ontological underpinnings of organizational paradoxes and (b) how to manage and respond to paradoxes (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Hahn & Knight, 2021; Lewis, 2000; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

One school of thought, dubbed the inherent view (Hahn & Knight, 2021), holds that paradoxes are built into organizational systems, where they exist in latent form prior to their ‘recognition’ by organizational actors (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Smith & Lewis, 2011). According to this view, contemporary business environments are so complex, dynamic and competitive that they inevitably create contradictory demands for organizations and their leaders, such as the need to cooperate with competitors (Raza-Ullah et al., 2014), to exploit existing opportunities while exploring new ones (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014), and to treat employees equally while allowing for individuality (Zhang et al., 2015). Early formulations of paradox theory, especially Smith and Lewis’ (2011) dynamic equilibrium model, emphasize the need to accept and embrace such paradoxical tensions, rather than rejecting or resolving them. Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 389) argue that paradoxical demands are so rife in contemporary business environments that organizations can only achieve a sustainable equilibrium by embracing and ‘working through’ paradoxes. Failure to do so indicates *defensiveness* on the part of organizational actors, resulting in dysfunctional outcomes such as paralysis and inertia in the face of apparent contradictions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

The other dominant school of thought on organizational paradox is the *constitutive view* (Hahn & Knight, 2021). This view emphasizes the *constructed* nature of paradoxes, contending that paradoxes do not exist in latent form prior to becoming salient to organizational actors through processes of mental and social construction (Hahn & Knight, 2021; Luscher et al., 2006; Putnam et al., 2016). The reason paradoxes persist over time is that organizational actors repeatedly construct them through shared perceptions, social interactions and performances. The constitutive also differs in terms of its recommended responses to paradox. Whereas the inherent view focuses on maintaining equilibrium and order in responding to paradoxes, the constitutive view advocates responding to paradoxes in ways that leverage *disequilibrium* and *disorder* to create novel forms of organizing and organization (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016). According to this logic, the contradictory elements of a paradox must not necessarily be embraced in a balanced manner (e.g., by giving equal weight to the conflicting demands competition and cooperation), because disequilibrium between elements creates instability that can be a catalyst for meaningful change (Putnam et al., 2016). For example, paradoxes can foster disorder and seemingly irrational behaviours that challenge established power structures (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016).

## Communicative constitution of organization (CCO)

The CCO perspective elevates communication from a process that occurs *in* organizations to a process that *constitutes* organizations (Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). CCO scholarship is internally fragmented, with divisions between three major schools of thought: the Montreal School, McPhee's structuration approach and the Luhmannian systems approach (Brummans et al., 2014). It is beyond the scope of the present review to provide a comprehensive account of these distinct approaches to CCO theorizing. Instead, we focus in this subsection on illustrating the *constitutive principle* of organizational communication that (a) unites the three approaches above and (b) helps explain gossip's unique role in constituting paradoxical tensions.

Following the constitutive principle of communication, CCO scholars conceive of organizations not as containers in which people communicate with one another, but as emergent social phenomena that are *communicated into being* through repeated cycles of meaning production and negotiation (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). In this respect, CCO diverges from ontological perspectives that view organizations either as material entities, which exist primarily in physical space, or as mental/cognitive entities, which exist primarily in individuals' minds (Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2019; Cornelissen et al., 2015; Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). The CCO perspective emphasizes that without communication, material objects would never take on the social meanings that make them part of organizations (Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2019), while mental phenomena such as norms, values and identities would never constitute part of organizational reality, because such phenomena only emerge through social interactions, which are necessarily communicative (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). According to CCO theorists, therefore, communication is not just a process for transmitting information about preformed material and mental phenomena but *the* process (or set of interconnected processes) whereby these phenomena come into being in the social world.

To further illustrate the constitutive principle, consider an example involving gossip. The sociologist Hannerz (1967, p.57) famously stated that, from gossip, 'the individual gets a map of his social environment' (cited by Foster, 2004, p. 84). From a transmission-based perspective, this statement implies that gossip *provides* social information about a preformed social world, just as a cartographic map provides geographic information about a preformed physical world. For example, gossip informs individuals about which of their neighbours are friendly, trustworthy,

dangerous and so on. Yet, according to the constitutive principle, Hannerz's (1967) claim that gossip *transmits* information about social environments underplays the power of communicative acts like to gossip to *create* and *alter* social realities. From a constitutive perspective, gossip does not merely *transmit* preformed social information about other individuals, but produces and reproduces that information, thus *constituting* those individuals' position in the social world.

CCO scholars apply the constitutive principle to understand how communication constitutes organization in three ways (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). First, CCO researchers study how communication processes constitute organizations as *entities* (Kuhn, 2008; McPhee & Zaugg, 2008; Taylor, 2011). For example, Kuhn (2008) and McPhee and Zaugg (2008) contend that producing authoritative, formalized 'texts' (such as an organization's strategic position or corporate social responsibility program) is crucial to defining what an organization 'is'. Second, CCO scholars examine how communicating constitutes organizing as a *process* (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). This stream of scholarship emphasizes that organizations are not stable, monolithic entities but processual flows of social interaction and communication, which are produced and reproduced through everyday practices including routines and rituals (Koschmann & McDonald, 2015; Wright, 2016). Finally, CCO researchers explore the ways in which communication constitutes *organizationality*—that is, the quality of being 'organizational'. For example, Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2019) examined how collective actions undertaken by bike commuters unite them in a novel form of organization—one that defies traditional understandings of what it means to be 'organizational'.

As the preceding examples suggest, the term communication encompasses a wide variety of socially meaningful interactions and material artefacts for CCO scholars, ranging from written texts and spoken announcements to ritualized practices and collective actions. Importantly, however, CCO researchers have paid little attention to the category of organizational communication known as gossip (Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2012), even though scholars in other disciplines have long recognized gossip's central, constitutive role in human social life (e.g., Gluckman, 1963; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). In the following subsections, we draw on evidence from our review of the wider gossip literature to make a case that gossip plays a central role in constituting organizational paradoxes. We first describe an overarching paradox of organizational gossip, then show how this paradox co-constitutes resistance-authority and inclusion-exclusion tensions.

## The inside word-just gossip paradox

Paradox suffuses the way people commonly think and talk about gossip, whether at work or beyond. It is paradoxical, for example, when individuals express their disapproval of people who gossip by gossiping about those people. It is also paradoxical, as Waddington (2012) notes, that gossip is simultaneously among the most universal forms of human communication and the most universally condemned forms of human communication. We suggest these examples reflect an overarching paradox of gossip, which manifests in organizational contexts as what we label the ‘*inside word-just gossip*’ paradox.

The inside word-just gossip paradox is that gossip is simultaneously regarded as both a particularly reliable source of social information and a particularly *unreliable* source of social information. This paradox is discursively constructed through two contradictory ways of talking about gossip. On the one hand, gossip is sometimes characterized as the *inside word* (Fan & Dawson, 2021; Fan et al., 2021; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Waddington, 2016). When characterized in these terms, gossip is regarded as a more reliable source of information than what passes through an organization’s formal channels, because gossip does not need to be toned down or sanitized for public relations purposes (Hafen, 2004; Waddington, 2012). As the inside word, gossip is raw and uncensored—an exceptionally reliable source of information about what’s really going on in an organization (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Waddington, 2016). On the other hand, the social information generated by gossip is sometimes dismissed as ‘just gossip’ (Fan et al., 2021, p. 1651). This phrase trivializes gossip as social information, suggesting it is probably speculative and certainly not reliable enough to provide a basis for official action (Hafen, 2004).

Our reading of the wider gossip literature indicates that gossiping generates three predominant types of social information. First, gossiping generates information relating to other social actors, who are usually referred to as *gossip targets* in the literature (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). Such information can relate to targets’ trustworthiness as partners in cooperative endeavours (Sommerfeld et al., 2007), their personalities and backstories (Mills, 2010), their appearances and achievements (Watson, 2012), their social and financial status (Aghbolagh et al., 2021) and their love lives (Hafen, 2004), among other things. Second, gossiping generates information regarding *gossipers*—the people who initiate gossip. The evaluative content of gossip is crucial in this respect. By communicating negative or positive evaluations of other people, gossipers simultaneously communicate information about themselves. This information can relate to gossipers’ attitudes toward other

people (Bosson et al., 2006), their emotions (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005), or their behavioural expectations and values (Bai et al., 2020). Finally, gossiping produces information about a social or cultural group. Such information may pertain to the norms and behavioural expectations of a group (Baumeister et al., 2004) or to a group’s values and attitudes (Gluckman, 1963; Hafen, 2004). Gossip generates this sort of information when gossipers are viewed as representatives of their group.

When characterized as the *inside word*, organizational gossip is an especially reliable source of the three preceding types of social information. Gossip generates information relating to co-workers that is unavailable through an organization’s official channels—for example, details of co-workers’ private lives and their informal relationships with other organizational members (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Hafen, 2004). Because this information is not made public or shared directly with the people it relates to, it does not need to be toned down for political purposes or to protect targets’ feelings. The same is true of the information gossip generates about gossipers. Gossip communicates the raw attitudes and emotions of gossipers toward other people in an organization (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). If an employee wants to express frustration toward their manager’s behaviour, for instance, they have less to lose from doing so in an informal gossip session than during a formal meeting involving that manager (Guendouzi, 2001). In a similar vein, gossip generates inside information about the norms and attitudes of sociocultural groups. While organizational rules and policies are encoded in official documents, sociocultural norms and attitudes emerge through repeated social interactions and, therefore, must be learnt without formal training and support (Feldman, 1984; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Like storytelling, gossip is an effective means of constructing and imparting norms and attitudes because it frequently takes a memorable, anecdotal form (Baumeister et al., 2004). For example, gossiping about a staff member who consistently left a mess in the cafeteria—until workmates spiked their coffee with dishwashing detergent—communicates the behavioural norm ‘clean up after yourself’ more vividly than a sign stuck to a microwave.

Contrasting the inside word view of gossip is the characterization captured in statements such as ‘That’s just gossip’ and ‘We’re just gossiping’. This characterization demotes gossip to a particularly *unreliable* source of social information. Our reading of the literature suggests the ‘just gossip’ characterization has roots in two labels often attached to gossip—‘idle talk’ and ‘malicious tales’ (Noon & Delbridge, 1993)—both of which create doubts over gossip’s factual accuracy. As idle talk, gossip is an

activity people engage in when they have too much time on their hands. When engaged in idle talk, gossipers adopt a nonchalant attitude toward the factual accuracy of their musings, readily filling in missing details with speculations (Fine, 1985; Gilmore, 1978; Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003; Rysman, 1977). As malicious tales, gossip is a form of indirect aggression. The spreading of malicious tales can be motivated by a desire to damage the reputations of perceived rivals (Reynolds et al., 2018; Wyckoff et al., 2019), to bully and ostracize out-group targets (Einarsen et al., 2009; Shallcross et al., 2011), or to get revenge on enemies (Decoster et al., 2013). When motivated by such antisocial objectives, gossip may easily become inaccurate through deliberate distortion—or even invention—of facts.

How can the same form of communication—gossip—be both an exceptionally reliable and exceptionally *unreliable* source of social information? According to the transmission-based, balanced view of gossip (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Lee & Barnes, 2021; Tassiello et al., 2018), the answer to this question is straightforward: *Because not all gossip is created equal*. Some gossip transmits reliable information, relaying social facts with high fidelity, whereas other gossip transmits unreliable information, distorting or even inventing social ‘facts’, either for the speculative pleasure of idle gossipers or to satisfy their malicious motives. This explanation is intuitively compelling for those who think of social truth as existing ‘out there’, independent of its perceivers. Yet from a constitutive perspective, the explanation is inadequate because it under-acknowledges the role of power in determining what constitutes social truth.

CCO scholars contend that social truth is constructed—as opposed to discovered—through organizational communication processes (Kuhn, 2008; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2011; McGivern & Dopson, 2010). Social power plays a critical role in the construction of social truth, because the ability to speak and be heard in distinct forums is often a product of the type of power a speaker holds (Kuhn, 2008). For example, organizational leaders hold legitimate social power due to their formal positions in the organizational hierarchy, which gives them the right to speak about what is ‘officially known’ in formal organizational forums (e.g., ‘John has been promoted’, ‘The marketing and design departments are being merged’). In contrast, secretaries occupy a lower position in formal organizational hierarchies and, consequently, must gain other forms of social power if they are to influence the construction of social truth by speaking and being heard (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). For instance, secretaries may gain ‘expert’ social power through their intimate knowledge of organizational superiors’ personal affairs, habits, attitudes and so on, which they can share through informal communication channels like gossip networks

(Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Guendouzi, 2001; Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

This line of reasoning suggests the inside-word-just gossip paradox stems not from a discrepancy between the factual accuracy of distinct instances of gossip, but from the interplay between power and gossip in the construction of social truth. As Waddington (2012) notes, powerful people throughout history have attempted to trivialize and undermine gossip because they view it as a threat to their power. For example, men in patriarchal environments have historically dismissed gossip as idle ‘women’s talk’ because gossiping fosters solidarity among women, and in this way, threatens men’s power (Guendouzi, 2001; Hafen, 2004; Rysman, 1977; Waddington, 2012). On the other hand, women in patriarchal environments use gossip to share their knowledge of men’s private affairs, and in doing so, construct alternative versions of social truth that challenge patriarchal domination (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Fan et al., 2021; Farley, 2011). Accordingly, the inside word-just gossip paradox is both a constituent and product of social power struggles. Those whose social power is threatened by gossip seek to undermine it as social information, discrediting it as ‘just gossip’, whereas those who gain social power from gossip seek to promote its reliability, elevating it to the ‘inside word’. In the following subsections, we illustrate how this paradoxical way of thinking about gossip helps understand gossip’s contribution to the constitution of two pervasive organizational tensions: resistance-authority and inclusion-exclusion.

## How gossip co-constitutes paradoxical tensions

### Gossip and resistance-authority tensions

Tensions between resistance and authority (or resistance and *control*, or resistance and *legitimate power*) are a key focus of organizational scholarship (Fleming, 2005; Mumby, 2005; Putnam et al., 2016). These tensions arise in the process of *organizing*, where the achievement of collective goals often requires that certain social actors assume authority over others (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). In prior research, resistance-authority tensions have been understood in dualistic terms, with scholars privileging either resistance or authority as the primary source of tensions (Mumby, 2005), and in dialectic terms, whereby the forces of resistance and authority are seen as being bound in an ongoing struggle for supremacy (Putnam et al., 2016). Based on our review of the literature, we propose that organizational gossip plays a special role in creating *paradoxical* tensions between resistance and authority. The crux of our argument is that gossip simultaneously

constitutes resistance against authority and reinforces authority against resistance.

Gossip's role in both resisting and reinforcing authority stems from its status as *informal* communication. Workplace gossip is typically a 'backstage' activity (Guendouzi, 2001, p. 32), occurring outside an organization's formal channels (Brady et al., 2017; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Formal meetings and other officially sanctioned forums may provide opportunities for gossiping—just think of two colleagues whispering to each other in the back of a meeting room (Hallett et al., 2009; Mills, 2010). However, gossip is not typically recognized as part of the official communication that takes place in these forums (Guendouzi, 2001). If gossip was recognized as such, it would be recorded in meeting notes and other documentation—inscribed as the sort of permanent 'text' that legitimizes an organization's formal structure (McPhee, 2004).

As an informal, behind-the-scenes form of interpersonal communication, gossip provides a voice to oppressed, marginalized, and otherwise disempowered organizational members who seek to resist the authority of organizational superiors (Decoster et al., 2013; Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Guendouzi, 2001; Hafen, 2004; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Waddington, 2016). In organizations, members classified as leaders, managers and supervisors hold authority over members who do not have such titles (Noon, 2001). With authority comes the ability to dictate which channels of communication are recognized by organizations and which channels are not so recognized (Hafen, 2004). As an unsanctioned, undocumented form of communication (Hallett et al., 2009), gossip provides a subterranean channel for sharing information and opinions that may not be recognized or approved of by those with formalized power. In turn, sharing such information and opinions via gossip fosters solidarity among the officially unpowerful, making gossip a covert voice of resistance.

Gossip takes many forms as a voice of resistance. Gossiping enables employees to covertly mock their organizations' agenda of putting efficiency and profitability ahead of human welfare (Hafen, 2004). It allows subordinates to get revenge on abusive supervisors by socially undermining them (Decoster et al., 2013). Gossip sessions also provide an occasion for subordinates to discuss the unprofessional behaviour of organizational superiors and to vent negative attitudes and emotions toward such individuals (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Waddington, 2016; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). For example, nurses may discuss the unprofessional conduct of doctors through gossip (Waddington, 2016), while secretaries may express frustration and anger toward their bosses during bitchy gossip sessions (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999).

Although gossip is frequently intended to resist authority, it may paradoxically *reinforce* authority by relegating

the 'voice of resistance' to hidden, illegitimate forums. As already discussed, gossip sessions provide an ideal forum for voicing resistance against authority because they occur out of earshot of those who would be threatened by such resistance. And yet, some research indicates that *because* gossip remains hidden from the legitimately powerful, it effectively reinforces those individuals' authority (Fan & Dawson, 2021; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). In an observational case study, Fan and Dawson (2021) found that confidential gossip sessions provided an opportunity for voicing grievances about managerial practices and for casting moral judgements on managers' behaviours. However, because these grievances and judgements remained confidential, they did little to confront the prevailing power structure of the organization in question. In a similar vein, Sotirin and Gottfried (1999) report that secretaries who gossip bitchily about their bosses unwittingly conform to secretarial identity stereotypes and, in doing so, reinforce existing power imbalances.

Other research implies that formally powerful organizational members can 'use' gossip to reinforce their authority in a more deliberate fashion. Hafen (2004) explored the process whereby organizational leaders legitimize or discredit gossip as information. She likens this process to a 'revolving door of regulation'. When gossip enters the revolving door, coming to the attention of organizational leaders and managers, it can either be legitimized as 'information' or discredited as 'just gossip'. If legitimized by the organization, gossip becomes part of organizational knowledge and can thereafter be treated as a basis for official action. If discredited, gossip remains an unreliable source of information that cannot officially be acted on. Crucially, Hafen (2004) reports that when gossip enters the organization's revolving door of regulation, the determining factor for whether it is legitimized or discredited is the extent to which it is perceived to support or subvert the interests of the organization's formal power structure. For example, if gossip generates information that could damage an official leader's reputation, the human resource (HR) department dismisses it as 'just gossip'. Yet if gossip yields inside intelligence on an employee who could potentially threaten managements' interests, HR legitimizes it as 'information'.

This research suggests the boundary between gossip and formal organization may be more permeable than is typically assumed. Indeed, some scholars contend that although gossip takes place *outside* formal communication channels, it is nevertheless *embedded in* formal organizational structures (Hallett et al., 2009; Mills, 2010). Clegg and van Iterson (2009, p. 275) capture this notion when they write, 'We see formal organization as a self-regulating system that constantly refines its boundaries, and gossip [a]s the dirt that trickles in and out of these boundaries, illegitimate, formally disdained and often destructive'.

As the dirt that trickles in and out of formal organizational boundaries, gossip can generate information that organizational leaders dismiss at their peril. Scholars—especially anthropologists—have examined the process whereby subversive gossip enters the public domain and erupts as scandal (Gluckman, 1963; Merry, 1984; Szwed, 1966; Waddington, 2016). In this process, gossip goes from being underground social knowledge (the ‘inside word’), to common knowledge in an organization (which everyone knows about ‘unofficially’), to formally recognized information (Waddington, 2016). Journalists have reported on how this process played out in an academic organization, where gossip relating to sexual harassment by senior leaders went from being underground knowledge, to widespread knowledge, to officially recognized information, corroborated in a formal inquiry (Davenport, 2021; Johnston, 2020; Mau, 2020).

Such findings shed light on how the inside word-just gossip paradox contributes to constituting resistance-authority tensions. As Waddington (2016) observes in her research on healthcare organizations, gossip concerning unprofessional conduct by senior members is often common knowledge among peers and subordinates. And yet, the information cannot be acted on officially because it is ‘just gossip’. In such circumstances, ‘embracing’ or ‘accepting’ the inside word-just gossip paradox is likely to reinforce existing power imbalances. For instance, lower-level employees may share the inside word on professional misconduct by organizational superiors, while simultaneously accepting that they cannot do anything about this misconduct because the inside word is also ‘just gossip’. To seriously resist abuses of authority, therefore, it may be necessary to *reject* or even *move beyond* the inside word-just gossip paradox. For example, workers could reject the contradictory notion that gossip can be both particularly reliable *and* particularly unreliable as a source of social information, on the basis that this paradox is a discursive construction of unequal power relations (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Putnam et al., 2016). In line with the constitutive view of paradox, such a response would leverage paradox as a source of *disequilibrium* and *disorder*, potentially catalysing meaningful change (Cunha & Putnam, 2019).

## Gossip and inclusion-exclusion tensions

Tensions between inclusion and exclusion are a persistent feature of the membership negotiation processes that constitute organizations and organizationalality (Brummans et al., 2014; McPhee & Zaugg, 2008; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2019). These tensions are paradoxical because they are contradictory yet interdependent—inclusion and exclusion are opposites, yet they are defined in relation to each another—and they arise in relation to who belongs, and

does not belong, to organizations and organizational subgroups (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). Our reading of the literature implies that gossip contributes to the constitution of inclusion-exclusion tensions because it is simultaneously an inclusive *and* exclusive form of communication.

Research suggests gossip facilitates social inclusion by fostering intimacy, trust and solidarity between those who engage in it together. Even 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). This etymological derivation implies that 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.

The relational functions of gossip are evident in both organizational research and the wider social science literature. For example, researchers found that colleagues who gossiped together in a Dutch childcare organization were more likely to become friends over time (Ellwardt et al., 2012a), suggesting gossip is constitutive (rather than reflective) of friendships. This finding is echoed by other organizational scholars, who report that gossiping is associated with interpersonal trust and closeness (Ellwardt et al., 2012c; Grosser et al., 2010). In the wider gossip literature, communications scholars posit that gossiping is the most common way of constituting relationships in talk (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), while evolutionary psychologists argue that gossip first evolved as a means of social bonding (Dunbar, 1998).

There is also abundant evidence, especially from anthropology, that gossip fosters group-level solidarity and cohesiveness (Abraham, 1970; Brenneis, 1984; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963). Across cultures, gossiping about the affairs of mutual acquaintances is a ritualized form of entertainment that solidifies in-group bonds (Abraham, 1970; Brenneis, 1984). Gluckman (1963) reports that gossiping about a culture’s past scandals is a crucial way for in-group members to distinguish themselves from outsiders: If people do not share the intimate social knowledge that is produced and reproduced by gossiping, they cannot claim to truly belong to that group. Perhaps even more revealingly, field anthropologists believe that their own inclusion in gossip is the ultimate sign they have become fully immersed and accepted in a novel culture, because gossip is only shared with in-group members (Boehm, 1999). Similarly, organizational newcomers report that they feel more accepted when they become privy to cautionary tales shared through gossip (Hafen, 2004).

This accumulated evidence implies that gossip does not just *reveal* the boundaries of social groups but *constitutes* them. As the anthropologist Gluckman (1963, p. 308)



states, 'gossip does not have isolated roles in community life but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life'. Accordingly, as the *inside word*, gossip is critical to the membership negotiation processes that define an organization's inner circle (McPhee & Zaug, 2008), making it a powerful force for workplace inclusion. And yet, *because* gossip is such a powerful force for social inclusion, it is an equally powerful force for social exclusion.

Gossip excludes people from social groups directly and indirectly. Direct exclusion occurs when certain actors are targeted by gossip, which effectively categorizes them as outsiders (Boehm, 1999; Kulik et al., 2008). For example, one case study revealed that gossiping strengthened group cohesion in a rowing team by punishing freeriding team members with reputational damage, effectively excluding those individuals from the team's inner circle (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Research on targets' experiences and perceptions of gossip suggests that it can be alienating, harmful and divisive (Liu et al., 2020; Shallcross et al., 2011; Tian et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2018b; Xing et al., 2021). In one study, researchers explored targets' experiences of gossip in workplace mobbing incidents (Shallcross et al., 2011). Mobbing is a collective form of bullying in which a 'mob' of individuals gangs up on a target. Researchers found that being targeted by gossip through mobbing induced feelings of social isolation (Shallcross et al., 2011). In some cases, gossiping led to targets being expelled from their organization, because management sided with the mob of gossipers, effectively blaming targets for their own victimization (Shallcross et al., 2011). Another study found that perceptions of being targeted by gossip undermined newcomers' social adjustment (Xing et al., 2021), while other research suggests workplace minorities feel their outsider status is reinforced when gossip targets them (Carrim, 2019). Gossip also excludes people indirectly by leaving them out of the loop. When inclusion in gossip is critical for developing a sense of social belonging, exclusion from gossip has the opposite effect (Gluckman, 1963; Szwed, 1966).

Gossip's role in constituting groups makes it a powerful force for delineating intraorganizational boundaries. Indeed, organizational subcultures may be defined by sharing their version of the 'inside word'. Yet, because the inside word is necessarily exclusive—only shared with genuine insiders—gossip's contribution to inclusion-exclusion tensions creates a paradoxical bind for organizational leaders and managers who wish to both control the internal boundaries of their organizations *and* create an inclusive organizational culture. This bind stems from the inside word-just gossip paradox, which implies that the 'inside word' and 'just gossip' are not only contradictory but *interdependent*. Gossip draws its credibility as the inside word from *not* being aligned with formal power, and so gossip is likely to *gain* credibility when it is dis-

missed by formal leaders as 'just gossip'. On the other hand, gossip is more likely to be dismissed as 'just gossip' when perceived by formal leaders as the inside word, because the inside word is inevitably beyond formal control (Waddington, 2012). This suggests that if leaders try to dismiss or even repress gossip (Carrim, 2019; Kuo et al., 2015), they risk strengthening gossip's inclusive-exclusive power as the inside word. And if they try to control gossip, legitimizing it as 'information' and incorporating it into formal organization (Hafen, 2004), they are likely to give rise to even more exclusive incarnations of the inside word, leading to heightened inclusion-exclusion tensions. Therefore, if organizations are to meaningfully address gossip's role in constituting inclusion-exclusion tensions, they first need to address the underlying power dynamics that inform the inside word-just gossip paradox.

## DISCUSSION

In this paper, we present a paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip. Our perspective positions gossip as a socially constructed communication category with unstable boundaries (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Bloom, 2004). It adopts a constitutive view of both paradox and organizational communication (Putnam et al., 2016; Schoeneborn et al., 2019), implying that contradictions and tensions are not inherent to organizational systems but socially constructed through communication processes. Relatedly, our perspective proposes that gossip plays a unique role in co-constituting paradoxical tensions due to its discursive construction as both an exceptionally reliable and unreliable source of social information. Finally, our perspective foregrounds the interplay between communication and power in constituting paradoxical tensions, arguing that organizational power struggles and tensions are both products and constituents of communicative processes like gossiping.

## Contributions and Implications

Our novel perspective of organizational gossip provides an alternative to the transmission-based, balanced view of gossip. The balanced view is rooted in a functionalist tradition (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009), focusing on how specific functions of gossip produce discrete outcomes. While this approach is convenient from a practical standpoint, it potentially leads to an oversimplified, linear understanding of gossip. For example, to understand contradictory findings on gossip—such as why gossip is associated with both beneficial and detrimental organizational outcomes—balanced view scholars focus on how essential characteristics of gossip, such as content and

TABLE 6 Future research ideas stemming from a paradox-constitutive perspective of organizational gossip.

Research idea	Example research questions	Example research designs and methods	Example research contexts
Examining the interplay between gossip and power in generating paradoxical tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the inside word-just gossip paradox play out in organizational contexts characterized by high versus low levels of formalized power differences (e.g., hierarchical vs. egalitarian organizations)?</li> <li>• What is the role of gossip in producing, altering, and reproducing alternate social truths during organizational power transitions?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic designs such as comparative case studies and ethnographies, drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data (e.g., participant interviews, researcher observations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations with steep versus shallow formalized power hierarchies (e.g., police and military organizations vs. small-scale start-ups)</li> <li>• Organizations undergoing power transitions (e.g., following a disruptive scandal, merger, or acquisition)</li> </ul>
Exploring gossip's contribution to paradoxical tensions beyond those identified in the present paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does gossip contribute to the constitution of tensions between cooperation and competition?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic designs such as comparative case studies and ethnographies, drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data (e.g., participant interviews, researcher observations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational contexts where the cooperation paradox is most likely to be salient (e.g., professional cycling, military teams, commercial kitchens)</li> </ul>
Exploring gossip's role in constituting paradoxical tensions across diverse cultural contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does 'gossip' translate into languages other than English, and to what extent do those translated words for gossip carry the same paradoxical connotations as the English word 'gossip'?</li> <li>• How do cross-cultural gossip concepts interact with power dynamics in distinct cultural contexts?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparative case studies</li> <li>• Linguistically focused research methods such as discourse analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations that have sites traversing cultural boundaries</li> </ul>

valence, relate to specific functions and outcomes (Bai et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 2015; Lee & Barnes, 2021). In contrast, a paradox-constitutive perspective repositions gossiping as a dynamic social process that interacts with other social processes to constitute contradictions and tensions. A paradox-constitutive perspective shifts attention away from whether gossip is 'good' or 'bad' for organizations and toward understanding the contradictory and complex roles of gossip in organizational life.

Additionally, our work explicitly links paradox theory and the CCO perspective to enhance understanding of how gossiping contributes to the constitution of paradoxical tensions. Scholars have previously identified paradoxes associated with gossip (e.g., Waddington, 2012), and they have also argued that gossiping plays a constitutive role in organization and organizing (e.g., Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2022). However, our work represents the first attempt to explicitly integrate a paradoxical view of gossip with a constitutive view of the phenomenon. In doing so, we show how gossip not only reflects organizational

paradoxes but contributes to constituting them. Moreover, we support our conceptual arguments with evidence and concrete examples drawn from an extensive review of the wider gossip literature.

Relatedly, we contribute to constitutive views of both organizational paradox and communication by illustrating how gossip constitutes its own unique paradoxical tensions. Scholars have already explored the constitutive links between organizational communication and the ontology of paradox (Putnam et al., 2016). However, researchers have yet to consider how specific categories of communication, such as gossip, play distinctive roles in constituting paradoxes. We identify a unique paradox of organizational gossip—the *inside word-just gossip paradox*—which is discursively constructed through two contradictory ways of talking about gossip. In turn, we illustrate how this paradox plays a unique role in co-constituting tensions of resistance-authority and inclusion-exclusion. We thus show how specific forms of communication generate unique paradoxes, which feed into more general paradoxical tensions. Perhaps more importantly, we demonstrate

that while paradoxes may appear 'inherent' to specific forms of communication (such as gossip), they are actually a product of the ways in which organizational members discursively construct and categorize distinct instances of communication.

Finally, we foreground the interplay between gossip and power in constituting paradoxical tensions. In doing so, we respond to calls for more research on the bi-directional relationship between paradox and power (Fairhurst et al., 2016) and we contribute to a 'critical shift' in the paradox literature that emphasizes power imbalances as an underlying source of paradoxical tensions (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Our perspective holds that the inside word-just gossip paradox is both a constituent and product of organizational power struggles—struggles between resistance and authority, informal and formal organization, and insiders and outsiders. Following other scholars (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016), we suggest that when paradoxes are products of power struggles, accepting and embracing them may stifle progress and change by reinforcing the status quo. Instead, meaningful change may require novel responses to paradoxes of power, which move beyond the dominant dynamic equilibrium model (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

## FUTURE RESEARCH

We suggest three specific ideas for future research based on our perspective. Table 6 illustrates these ideas in detail, providing concrete suggestions for research questions, designs and contexts that would be appropriate for exploring each idea. Following Putnam et al. (2016), we recommend qualitative and holistic research methods for pursuing each research direction, because such methods acknowledge the formative roles of language and communication in generating social realities. We also suggest organizational contexts in which it would be most appropriate to pursue these ideas.

The first idea is to further examine how gossip interacts with power dynamics in generating paradoxical tensions. Our perspective positions gossip as both a product and constituent of organizational power struggles. Future research could pursue this idea by investigating the interplay between gossip and power in diverse organizational contexts and situations. For example, how does the inside word-just gossip paradox play out in organizations with relatively hierarchical formal power structures versus those with flatter formal structures? And how does the inside word-just gossip paradox manifest during organizational power transitions?

The second idea is to examine gossip's role in constituting paradoxical tensions beyond those identified in our review of the literature. We identified resistance-authority and inclusion-exclusion as they key tensions to which gossip contributes, but there may be others. For example, how does organizational gossip contribute to constituting cooperation-competition tensions?

The final idea is to explore gossip's role in constituting paradoxical tensions across diverse cultural contexts. In our perspective, the paradoxical connotations of the English word gossip play a key role in creating the inside word-just gossip paradox. But the English word gossip can have multiple translations in other languages (Gilmore, 1978). For example, gossip has at least three potential translations in French—*commérages*, *ragots* and *potins*—each of which has its own distinctive connotations in that language. Therefore, to what extent do the distinctive conceptual features of 'gossip', as captured by distinctive cross-cultural translations of the term, contribute to the constitution of different paradoxical tensions?

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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