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ABSTRACT. The present study examined perceptions of female gossipers in the   10
workplace. Male and female participants ($N = 129$) were asked to think of a woman who
either frequently or rarely contributed negative information about other people during con-
versation. Participants then completed ratings on the target using the six dimensions of the
FIRO-B. As predicted, high gossipers were perceived as having a greater need to exert
control of others, but less need for others to control them, than low gossipers. Higher   15
gossipers were also perceived as less emotionally warm than low gossipers. The
implications of these findings for gossip research are presented.

Keywords: gossip, power, work

THE WORKPLACE PROVIDES A FERTILE GROUND for gossip to flourish.
Formerly defined, gossip refers to situations in which people discuss intimate   20
details about other people while not in their presence (Foster, 2004; Rosnow,
2001). In the workplace, people may use gossip as a coping mechanism for
dealing with stressful workplace situations (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998).
Gossip between workers can also clear up matters that are not explained well in
the formal communication system (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). In fact, the success   25

of organizational communication during times of change can be measured by the number of rumors that are spreading throughout the organization (Bordia, DiFonzo, & Schulz, 2000). Although gossip and rumor may overlap to some degree conceptually, these concepts differ in two important ways: (1) Individuals are less likely to question the veracity of gossip than rumor, and (2) gossip pertains exclusively to people, whereas rumors may spread about events (Foster & Rosnow, 2006). Spreading gossip can also promote an individual's own self-interest in ensuring that his/her "voice" is heard in a situation, thereby influencing others' perceptions since the gossiper may be seen as the "gatekeeper" of important information (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). The present paper focuses on how individuals perceive female gossipers in the workplace.

Researchers have been unable to reach a consensus on the significance and functions of gossip (Jaeger, Skleder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994; Leven & Arluke, 1985). Although some researchers suggest that gossip includes positive information (Leven & Arluke, 1985), others imply that gossip must be negative, or at least, that the information discussed is meant to be private (Foster, 2004). Recent evidence has also demonstrated that it is negative gossip, not positive gossip, that is effective for increasing the intimacy of social bonds (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006). In addition, there is disagreement over the relative importance of gossip. Some authors have described gossip as "trivial," "superfluous," and "not significant" (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; DiFonzo, Bordia & Winterkorn, 2003; Jaeger, et al., 1994), the purpose of which is to entertain (DiFonzo, et al., 2003; Goodman, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994). Gossip should not be dismissed merely as idle chatter, however (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Research points out that gossip serves to enforce group norms, allows for indirect social comparisons, increases intimacy of social bonds, communicates information, clarifies group membership, and enhances perceptions of status, power, or esteem (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Goodman, 1994; Jaeger, et al., 1994; Leven & Arluke, 1985; Nevo, et al., 1994; Noon & Delbridge, 1993, Rosnow, 2001). Dunbar (2004) offers perhaps the most extreme defense of gossip, arguing that "gossiping is . . . the core of human social relationships, indeed of society itself" (p. 100).

Recently, researchers have used evolutionary psychology to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the utility of gossip for developing and maintaining social networks (Dunbar, 1996, 2004; Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006). For instance, social gossip theory (Dunbar, 1993; 1996) states that human language evolved in response to the mounting pressures of maintaining beneficial interpersonal relations within expanding social networks. Furthermore, Dunbar (2004) argues that language serves four important social functions: (1) to monitor additions (e.g., births), defections (e.g., deaths), and movement (e.g., changes in social status) of individuals within our interpersonal network; (2) to engage in

impression management strategies for our personal benefit (e.g., to attract potential mates); (3) to penalize members of our social networks who do not abide by its rules, laws, or norms (i.e., free-riders); and (4) to receive direction or advice from others. Dunbar, Duncan, and Marriott (1997) found that gossip accounts for almost two-thirds of conversation time, with much of that time dedicated to the former two social functions listed previously. Of particular relevance to the present study, Dunbar (2004) argues that social cognitive processes (e.g., theory of mind) are also vital for beneficial social interactions. Being able to take the perspectives of others helps us to determine whether a person is a potential friend or foe. The use of gossip allows us to develop and maintain relations with friends, while also identifying and distancing ourselves and others in our social networks from free-riders. Based on these ideas, it would be interesting to examine how gossipers are perceived by others in their respective social networks.

Unfortunately, little empirical attention has been devoted to the perceptions of gossipers (Jaeger et al., 1994). Jaeger and colleagues (1994) describe two "disparate portraits" of gossipers. First is the view that gossipers are lonely social isolates who gossip to enhance their low self-esteem and status (see also Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1987). Second is the representation of gossips as self-assured connected people in the center of a social web, talking to and about many friends (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Jaeger et al., 1994). To test which portrait was more accurate, Jaeger and colleagues (1994) asked members of one college sorority to fill questionnaires about themselves and others in the group. Those who were perceived as gossiping a lot had lower self-reports of need for social approval and higher levels of anxiety than those who were perceived as gossiping little. In addition, others rated high gossipers as less likeable but more socially connected in terms of numbers of friends. The clique that made up the high gossipers was quite an influential and powerful group in the sorority. Gossipers may be quite powerful because they arguably are more central to a communication network, and they can use this position to "gatekeep" information, selectively revealing tidbits about others in status-enhancing ways (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007).

The present research examined the perceptions of gossipers in a workplace setting. We focused on individuals' perceptions of the interpersonal wants and needs of female coworkers identified as either high or low gossipers (using the FIRO-B) (Schutz, 1958). We operationalized gossip as "communicating negative information about others" for three reasons: First, because social gossip theory prompts us to be more attentive to negative information as a mechanism for guarding against free-riders (Dunbar, 2004; Enquist, & Leimar, 1993). Second, research has shown that negative gossip, not positive gossip, is the more effective "social glue" for the creation of intimate social bonds (Bosson, et al., 2006). In addition, for this initial investigation, we wanted to tap into the general

conceptualization of gossip, that it is primarily perpetrated by women and is 115
primarily negative.

We expected high gossipers to score higher on all subscales of the FIRO-B
than low gossipers, with the exception of the wanted control subscale. Research
suggests that low gossipers are less socially connected than high gossipers
(Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Jaeger et. al, 1994). Moreover, social gossip theory (Dunbar, 120
1993; 1996) appears to suggest that low gossipers' conversations are more likely
to emphasize non-social content than the conversations of high gossipers. There-
fore, it makes sense that high gossipers would score higher on a measure of inter-
personal wants and needs than would low gossipers. The one exception to this
argument would be for the wanted control subscale. For example, high gossipers 125
are more likely to identify free-riders than are low gossipers, because they are
privy to more information about the behavior of individuals within their social
networks. High gossipers are likely to score lower on the wanted control subscale
than are low gossipers, in part, because of their aversion to being exploited by
free-riders.   130

Method

Participants

Approximately 500 non-traditional working students from Albright College
were recruited via email to participate in the online survey. A total of 129 students 135
responded, and 87 participants, whose ages ranged from 23 to 64 ($M = 40$) com-
pleted all 54 items (67% of the total sample). Of the omitted surveys, 96% were
omitted because the student complet`ed less than half of the survey. The high level
of incompletes was probably due in part to the lack of incentives for completion.
There were no incentives for participation (course credit, gift cards, etc.).

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Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of demographic items (e.g., participant age, gender,
etc.), and the subscales of the FIRO-B (Schutz, 1958). In the present study, items
from the FIRO-B were modified to assess participants' perceptions regarding the tar-
get person rather than participants' own needs and behaviors. The FIRO-B consists of 145
a total of 54 items, with 9 items for each of six subscales. Participants responded to
each item using five-point Likert-Type scales (e.g., 1 = never to 5 = usually), giving
each subscale a range of 9 to 45 when summated. In the present study, the scale
demonstrated good internal consistency at the composite level ($\alpha = .94$) and at the
subscale levels (AE, $\alpha = .83$, AW, $\alpha = .83$, CE, $\alpha = .71$, CW, $\alpha = .85$, IE, $\alpha = .83$, IW, 150
$\alpha = .85$). All of the reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the commonly
accepted threshold of adequate reliability of .70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Design and Procedure

The design was a 2 (participant gender) x 2 (tendency to gossip: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial. Participants who volunteered to take part in the study were provided instructions on how to access the questionnaire on Survey Monkey®. Once logged into the site, participants read an informational letter describing the study as a survey about "informal communication in the workplace." Participants were randomly assigned to condition and were asked to "think of a female coworker who *frequently* or *rarely* contributes negative information about other people during conversation" and evaluate the target using a modified version of the FIRO-B (Schutz, 1958). After completing the online materials on the targeted individual, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

We conducted a series of 2 (participant gender) x 2 (tendency to gossip: high vs. low) between-subjects ANOVAs on the summated scores from the six subscales of the FIRO-B. There was a significant main effect for tendency to gossip on the express control subscale, $F(1, 70) = 35.85$, $p < .001$, d = 1.57, such that high gossipers were rated as needing more control ($M = 42.63$, $SD = 9.96$) than were low gossipers ($M = 24.62$, $SD = 12.84$). Tendency to gossip was also significant for the wanted control subscale, $F(1, 77) = 6.87$, $p = .01$, d = −0.65, such that raters perceived high gossipers as wanting others to control them less ($M = 22.94$, $SD = 10.50$) than low gossipers ($M = 29.90$, $SD = 10.81$). For the express affection subscale, the main effect for tendency to gossip was marginally significant, $F(1, 75) = 3.75$, $p = .06$, d = −0.47, such that high gossipers were rated as less emotionally close ($M = 29.35$, $SD = 10.24$) than low gossipers ($M = 33.81$, $SD = 8.86$). No other statistically significant main effects or interactions were found.

Discussion

The present study provided mixed support for our hypotheses. As expected, high gossipers received higher ratings on the express control (need to exert power) dimension than low gossipers. Moreover, high gossipers were rated as less likely to want others to exert power over them (wanted control) than low gossipers. These findings are consistent with social gossip theory (Dunbar, 1993; 1996), especially with regard the policing function of gossip. High gossipers would be more likely than low gossipers to police free-riders (i.e., express control) and avoid being exploited by them (i.e., wanted control).

For women, gossip can become an agency of control, allowing them to reaffirm their own power within the organization. Because our study focused on

negative gossip, this is consistent with Kurland and Pelled's (2000) prediction that gossiping would increase coercive power. After all, women who gossip must grasp the opportunity to willingly, even aggressively, communicate to others knowledge about someone else. While it is true that need for control and perceived control are different constructs, it is intuitive that having a greater need for control would translate into behavior such that high gossipers would make more control attempts.

Contrary to our hypothesis, however, high gossipers were rated marginally lower on express affection than were low gossipers. Moreover, our predictions for wanted affection, express inclusion, and wanted inclusion were also not supported. Initially, these findings seem counterintuitive within the context of social gossip theory, because high gossipers are expected to more socially-connected within their social networks than are low gossipers, but one study found that high gossipers were perceived as having a lower need for social approval than low gossipers (Jaeger et al., 1994). Observers may fail to view gossipers as "needing" inclusion or affection because they are already socially connected. These needs would not be perceived as deficient. In addition, both conditions involved communicating negative information about others in the workplace. Gossip involving negative information may be useful in policing free-riders, but it may not help individuals meet their other interpersonal needs (e.g., impression management). Consequently, the perception that one desires power may also make him/her less likable in the eyes of others (Farley, 2008).

Stereotypical female social roles portray women as warm, nurturing, and relationship-oriented (Kawakami, White, & Langer, 2000). Gossiping (specifically negative gossip), on the other hand, requires a strong personality and the willingness to take several risks: the possibility of ruining relationships, hurting someone's feelings, or being seen as vindictive. Consequently, female gossipers sharing negative gossip with others may suffer from a loss of likability (Kawakami, et al., 2000).

One limitation of the present research involves the manipulation of an instructional set. Specifically, our method allows for the possibility that correlates of tendency to gossip (like extraversion, or assertiveness, etc.) were responsible for differences in ratings. The alternative method that we considered, asking participants to rate a number of other individuals on scales of "gossip" and power, was discarded due to practical, ethical, and social desirability considerations. Moreover, the present study focused only on perceptions about women who spread negative gossip in the workplace. Future research should examine whether the perceptions about female gossipers are also affected by the type of gossip they spread in the workplace.

Despite these limitations, the present study represents one of the few empirical studies designed to investigate perceptions of gossipers. Because of the dearth of research in this area, we decided to focus on the more traditional view of gossip—negative gossip. Clearly the results of this study would not generalize to

perceptions of those who openly discuss positive gossip with others. Furthermore, the use of scenario studies would aid gossip researchers with problems of control and clarify the ways in which real and hypothetical gossipers differ. It would also be beneficial in determining the extent to which gossiping is related to one's likeability.

Previous research has revealed that gossip is a rampant part of informal communication in organizations, especially during times of economic insecurity and upheaval. Those times are currently among us. Since gossip is part of every workplace environment, understanding the dynamics of gossip is important if members of an organization are going to be effective and efficient communicators.

AUTHOR NOTES

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