

Talking About Gossip at Work

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Abstract

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I explore some effects of vicarious exposure to gossip at work using a multi method multi study program of research. Three studies were conducted. The first was a semi structured interview study. The second study was a between and within multi factorial experiment using video vignettes. The third study was a longitudinal survey design which took place over three weeks and produced quantitative diary data.

Results of the three studies show how the construct of gossip at work is more nuanced than expected. Study one uncovered themes concerning the contested definitions of gossip, aspects regarding the veracity of the gossip at work, and antecedents and consequences of gossip at work.

Study two showed that vicarious exposure to gossip at work has effects on retributive intent, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Perceived veracity of the gossip at work is greater for firsthand content and positive gossip is understood of greater veracity and greater acceptability in the workplace environment. Retributive intent towards the organization is greater in cases where the gossip at work is negative in nature.

Study three uncovered a significant interaction between personal and positive gossip when predicting affective organizational commitment. I also found an interaction between work and negative content gossip for job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was also significantly predicted based upon an interaction effect between personal and negative content of gossip at work. I also found a significant interaction between negative and personal content gossip predicting negative affect. Finally, with negative affect as the outcome, there was a significant interaction when the reported exposure to gossip at work is both work related and personal in nature.

Being that gossip at work is both vilified and at the same time only lightly researched, practical implications and future research directions are offered.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This multi-method multi-study dissertation comprises a series of three studies concerning gossiping at work. Taken together, these studies attempt to move the workplace gossip literature forward in such a way as to offer empirically grounded findings that enhance our current understanding of gossiping at work and also point toward future directions of inquiry worth pursuing. The inspiration for this undertaking is formed at the intersection of the everyday normalness of gossiping, the prohibitions against gossiping and the central role of work in modern life.

Despite the observation that “the workplace is often a hotbed of gossip” (Foster 2004: 88), comparatively little attention has been focused upon researching the nature, transmission and functions of gossiping at work. Yet this is not for lack of interest. A quick scan of search results from the internet (Google, 2013) using the specific search term “workplace gossip” offers 28,200 results; an ad hoc indication of the interest in the subject. Further informal scanning of the content of these results offers a sense of the well understood conundrum regarding workplace gossip; it is reported to be both all pervasive and yet admonished and vilified. While there seems to be a practitioner based interest in the problems concerning gossip at work, there are fewer academic insights into the same phenomenon than one might expect. Practicing managers are instructed in the necessity to eradicate gossiping at work and informed about the techniques for eradication of gossip in the workplace (e.g. Chapman & Sharkey, 2009; Goalsguy, 2008) and some sources even categorize gossip as workplace violence (e.g. Ezinearticle, 2008). A few practitioner sources identify a link between negative workplace outcomes, such as lost

productivity and organizational divisiveness, and gossiping at work (e.g. Chapman & Sharkey, 2009; Healthsystem, 2008). Indeed, gossip at work may be so vilified as to be tied to religious prohibitions, invoking an even higher power than that of the workplace employer: “God is not pleased when we **gossip** in the **workplace**, and neither is your employer.” (Christianwomantoday, 2008; emphasis in original). It seems that the popular understanding of gossip at work is a negative one.

Naturally, social science researchers have recognized the interest, the social prohibitions, and in some cases the utility, of this type of informal information exchange (Foster, 2004; Litman & Pezzo, 2005; Waddington, 2005), yet the study of workplace gossiping has been largely characterized by a lack of empirically grounded findings (see Foster, 2004; Michelson & Mouly, 2000). A notable exception is a study examining group social capital, group effectiveness and informal socializing (Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004) which explored constructs tangentially related to workplace gossiping. However in this study informal socializing was defined and measured as being physically outside of the workplace, with the consequence that actual gossiping at work was unexamined.

This is not to say that there is no relevant literature to inform study of workplace gossiping. Specifically, the intersections of theorizing concerning gossip and power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon, 2001), a typology of gossipers with regard to network awareness and social activity (Foster, 2004) and consideration of gossip as social status enhancement (McAndrew, Bell & Garcia, 2007) offers a number of possibilities as to how to explore the relationship between gossip and the workplace. The prior lack of acceptable quantitative measures has meant that theoretical propositions about the role of

gossip at work (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon, 2001) have for the most part gone untested. In part to augment the existing propositional pieces with quantitative investigations, Yue and Kelloway (2008) sought to measure self-reported gossiping behavior at work. Their efforts suggests that the frequency of self reported workplace gossiping is similar between men and women and that self reported workplace gossiping behaviors are correlated with friendliness as well as achieving instrumental ends in the work environment. Furthermore, Yue (2007) found a significant correlation between self-reported gossiping at work and both workplace influence strategies and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). These early results suggest that gossiping at work is instrumental, indeed potentially beneficial, rather than being purely an exercise of personal malice. In fact, a number of theorists from disparate areas of research see gossip as a potentially positive social process or ritual (e.g. Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Dunbar, 1996) which may also contain positive, not only negative, content (Levin & Arluke, 1985). Such results offer a potentially contentious critique of the popular contention that management should attempt to curtail or control workplace gossiping.

Broadly, perspectives regarding gossiping at work seem to be categorized in one of two main groups: gossip being value-laden and negative evaluative talk rooted in malice, or gossip as a mechanism of social learning (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). One can surmise that the efforts to control gossip in the workplace reflect a deeply embedded assumption of negative and disruptive content.

Why Study Workplace Gossiping?

Gossip's utility. The social mechanisms which contribute to group cohesiveness are clearly of interest to organizations (e.g. Williams & Allen, 2008; Andrews, Kacmar, Blakely & Bucklew, 2008; Wech et al 1998) and yet I have suggested that the popular contention is that gossip at work is divisive and to be stamped out. Combining the idea of social bonding through the act of gossiping with the utility of the *content* of the gossip, offers a conception of gossip which reflects both cultural learning as well as a social bonding mechanism (Baumeister et al, 2004). In this respect, the interaction itself as well as the content of the exchange may be viewed as a site of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995; 2001). Broadly, Weick's work offers insight into how individuals come to act upon and understand their ongoing situation through retrospective consideration of their social past based upon (among others) a plausibility criterion. An amalgamated social learning, social bonding, and sensemaking viewpoint of the phenomena of workplace gossiping is supported through the analysis of gossip within a competitive rowing team (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Kniffin and Wilson used both type and frequency of gossip, observed in a small sample, to illustrate how personal talk (both positive and negative) supported group norms and helped in dealing with personal conflicts within the rowing team. These findings suggest a more relativist conceptualization of gossip as being a way of learning about culture (Baumeister et al, 2004) when compared with the contention that gossip is negative and to be eliminated. The social learning, the social bonding, and the organizational sensemaking processes highlighted above suggest that individuals use gossip to acquire and share information as well as embedding themselves in a social network. This conflicts with the popular

understanding of gossip as being trivial, evaluative, enacted with malice, and being divisive for organizations. It is unclear if, how, or when these competing ideas of divisiveness or cultural learning manifest themselves when applied to gossiping.

Social capital and cohesion. In addition to the obvious simple use of information contained in gossip, the social learning utility of gossip is also potentially a power-laden learning mechanism. Relational social capital (Bolino et al., 2002) is one way to understand the value of the sharing of gossip. Social capital has been defined in a large number of ways (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and these definitions have been based upon both external and internal ties between actors and their organizations. Oh et al. (2004) examined group social capital and informal socializing ties and defined social capital as taking into account social relationships between groups and the broader social network of the overall organization. To the extent that this dissertation examines individual attitudes regarding gossip at work, workplace gossiping activity and organizational ties, there is a natural link between workplace gossiping and organizational citizenship behaviors, relational social capital (Bolino et al., 2002) and generosity and social status (Flynn, 2003). Indeed, the acts of giving and receiving in terms of gossip, when combined with a relational understanding of social capital, provide a sense of how social cohesion (or lack thereof) may be enhanced or diminished by gossiping. Through the conceptualization of social capital as a phenomenon which an individual may possess, collect, augment or even lose through action or non-action, links between workplace gossiping and the social capital outcomes for individuals and their organizations are worthy of investigation.

This idea of work group cohesion is furthermore linked with individual work performance beyond solely the effects of task competence (Wech, Mossholder, Steel & Bennett, 1998) and the authors suggest that to improve both the organizational commitment and performance of group members, training concerning in areas such as “...social interaction, such as communication, effective listening, conflict management and problem solving;” (Wech et al, 1998: 490) be undertaken. These findings are salient when taken in concert with those of Andrews, Kacmar, Blakely & Bucklew (2008), which offer support for organizational justice/affective organizational commitment relationships to be affected through workgroup cohesion. These two works taken together reflect some of the nature of the multifaceted work group cohesion relationship. If gossip could be either divisive or constitutive of workgroup cohesion, then there are clear implications of workplace gossiping for organizations as well as individuals. Thus I propose a conceptual link between gossip as a source of rich cultural meanings and for cultural norms (Baumeister et al., 2004), which when shared may affect organizational cohesion with consequence for the workplace.

In large part then, the rationale for examining gossiping in the workplace extends from the contested recognition of the potential social utility and the pervasiveness of the activity, along with vilification and desire to control or eliminate the behavior at work. There are likely workplace outcomes to be derived from gossiping at work, but it is far from clear exactly what they are, and under what conditions they arise.

But why the workplace? At this point in the discussion, the reader may be wondering if this discussion of gossip and group processes necessarily evokes an interest in the workplace. Indeed, in recent works, gossip is interrogated in terms of

organizations rather than specifically work (e.g. Waddington, 2012; Clegg & van Iterson, 2009). The Oxford Dictionary defines an organization as “an organized group of people with a particular purpose, such as a business or government department” (Oxford Dictionary, 2013), and while the definition of a workplace is spatially situated, my real interest is the colloquial sense that a workplace likely involves paid employment. The structure of paid employment seems to me to have the potential to polarize the social acceptability of gossiping, perhaps partially accounting for the practitioner literature’s vilification of the act. To further articulate why I have an expressed interest in the workplace as an important social context for gossip, I turn to Jorg R. Bergmann’s 1993 book *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*.

Bergmann was a student of Thomas Luckmann, himself one of the authors of the seminal text *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Bergmann acted as a research assistant for a variety of sociology of knowledge projects with Luckmann and it was in this context that Bergmann undertook to write on the sociology of gossip from a broad social constructivist perspective. His observations are important in that they best articulate the convoluted nature of gossip intertwined with work that interested me in the first place. In summarizing ethnographic perspectives on gossip and work, he wrote: “The rule that anyone who gossips during work time is neglecting his or her work also belongs to the core of our everyday understanding of gossip.” (Bergmann, 1993: 77). He goes on to state: “Gossip is viewed as social inactivity and thereby is incompatible with work.

Anyone who gossips to the detriment of working runs the twofold risk of not only being discredited but also of acquiring a bad reputation.” (Bergmann, 1993: 77).

Bergmann further questions that if gossip at work is ubiquitous and only about a sort of resistance to mundane work, then it should not be seen as fundamentally different from other behaviors such as smoking, teasing or even flirting at work. This is terribly interesting, for much of the critical management studies writings concerning gossip and organizations (e.g. Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; van Iterson & Clegg, 2008; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson & Mouly, 2000) do situate gossip and power as intertwined in organizational life, furthermore with a focused interest in gossip as a resistance strategy. Bergmann’s broader sociology of knowledge perspective is informative because he does not trivialize the role of the location of gossiping in order to privilege a power-based resistance perspective. The utilitarian nature of the quintessential sociologist’s question “what practical problem is being solved by these people I am studying?” is embedded in Bergmann’s thoughts on gossip and the workplace:

“As far as gossip is concerned, this means that *anyone who wishes to avoid the reputation of being a notorious gossip must try to contextualize his affinity for gossip so that it appears as the unintended, accidental, and thereby excusable activity of an occasional gossipers. This contextualization can be achieved, however, if the gossipers situate their behavior within the context of work.*”

(Bergmann, 1993: 77-78, emphasis in original).

This idea, that the workplace location solves the problem of how to legitimize gossiping for the gossipers, is a unique insight of Bergmann's, summed as: "The gossipers demonstrate to each other and to others that, even if they momentarily indulge in gossip, this does not form the telos of their being together." (Bergmann, 1993: 78).

Considering workplaces as legitimating social spaces for gossiping rather than examining illegitimate gossiping at work is a fundamental shift in perspective. Not only does this perspective call into question aspects of the commonplace practitioner prohibitions against gossip at work, it also implicitly critiques a central critical management studies perspective of gossip at work, this being that gossip is largely a form of discursive resistance against management and/or the organization.

Thus far I have provided a series of rationales for examining gossip at work which reflect the problematic nature of understanding what social functions it may offer, why individuals are engaged in it, why some might vilify it and how it could in fact be a positive force in some ways. These fundamental questions about the uses and effects of gossip at work are compounded through problems even defining the phenomenon.

Definitional challenges for the workplace context. Perhaps contributing to the shortage of empirically grounded research concerning gossip at work is the number of overlapping and competing definitions of the phenomenon. Indeed, it is often the case that rumor, gossip and other forms of informal communication (e.g. chitchat, urban myths) become confused or subsumed under one or the others definition (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007:12). These definitional problems appear to be historical artifacts in some cases but also may originate as artificial constructs derived from researchers' own

definitions, often grounded in a biased “common sense” definition of the phenomenon. Both situations may have contributed to the difficulty of empirical, and particularly quantitative, inquiry into the phenomenon.

DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) have conducted a coherent examination of the competing definitions for gossip and rumor in the literature, whereby they concluded that while common usage often treats rumor and gossip as interchangeable, they are in fact distinct. In *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches*, DiFonzo & Bordia define rumors as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk.” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007: 13). The authors then conclude that gossip is “...evaluative social talk about individuals, usually not present...” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007: 19). These seem to initially offer usable working definitions but upon detailed examination reveal some potential problems with the definitions of rumor and gossip in the case of the context of work. Workplaces are unique social settings, in which evaluative talk about individuals can be either rumor or gossip as defined by DiFonzo and Bordia or perhaps simply task and work-related communication. This calls into question the appealing simplicity nature of these definitions. As an example, we can imagine two managers discussing in an evaluative manner a third individual who is not present. Should this discussion revolve around an individual’s performance at work, we might argue that DiFonzo & Bordia’s definition of gossip is not nuanced enough to capture the difference between evaluative talk regarding tasks versus exclusively personal attributes. This example highlights one particularly

obvious definitional problem in researching gossip in the workplace. Additional definitional challenges exist.

Relying upon the notion that gossip is related to social network formation (while rumor is more focused upon information exchange in an effort to reduce uncertainty), DiFonso & Bordia (2007) further proceed to offer examples which illustrate the difficulty in clearly separating the two constructs based upon contextual instrumentality. Moreover, with consideration of the earlier described perspective of gossip as social learning (and thus incorporating both content and process as intertwined), makes separation of rumor and gossip at work remarkably difficult. If we maintain that workplace gossiping is linked to a broader concept of the individual making sense of their environment (see Weick 1995; 2001) while also constructing their identities (see Yue and Mills, 2008d) then there is no clear distinction between someone engaging in creating social bonds and someone simultaneously using their social network for information gathering or dissemination. Put differently, if gossip is a social bonding behavior and also an information exchange, then it is also a fundamental mechanism to reduce uncertainty in social milieu. This consequently forces an overlap between DiFonso and Bordia's notions of rumor and gossip, at least when considering the workplace context.

In short, the present definitions of gossip, when applied to the workplace, seem unable to accommodate the unique aspects of the social situation of work, while simultaneously being deficient in allowing for a nuanced understanding of gossip as more than simply malice. Nevertheless, as a starting point for investigation it is useful to rely upon the existing understandings of gossip to ground my research into the workplace

specific context. To this end, I begin with a definition of gossip which is reasonably consistent in the literature; gossip is defined as evaluative talk between two or more individuals about a third part who is not present at the time.

Summarizing the substantive rationale for the thesis. In review and by way of an essential summary then, the literature suggests that:

1. Informal socialization may contribute to social ties which can result in enhanced group and individual effectiveness. It is unclear if this may or may not act to the detriment of organizational management.
2. Both the frequency and content of team based gossip reaffirms group norms whilst also acting with potential to encourage or contain personal conflict. However, this reaffirmation of group norms may eliminate conflict through the expulsion of the individual from the group.
3. The frequency of workplace gossip is positively related to influence strategies as well as friendliness and organizational citizenship behaviour.
4. The very definitions of gossip are confounded when in the workplace.
5. Gossip at work may well solve a practical problem of legitimacy for the gossiper which goes beyond simple actions of resistance. On the other hand, the very legitimating strategy of using the workplace to elevate gossip is a precarious balance, because the workplace is situated in a power laden matrix of social capital.

I conclude that there is some value in conducting basic and fundamental inquiries in order to understand how individuals understand and make use of gossip at work. This is indicated by both the definitional problems highlighted earlier as well as the potentially contradictory findings found in reviewing the management literature, which suggests that gossip at work may be related to positive outcomes both for the individual and the organization, despite its' popular vilification. Furthermore, Bergmann's (1993) insights into how the workplace supports the social needs of gossipers fundamentally questions the use of power and resistance as the starting point for investigations of gossip at work. Consequently, even the critiques of the conventional vilification of workplace gossiping are not of clear value in suggesting a way forward. In short, the acceptability or not of gossip at work is unclear in terms of how it is viewed, under what contextual circumstances it is appropriate, and the implications of these issues.

A Program of Research

I have set out to convey that the study of gossip is interesting, and of consequence for workplace situated outcomes. The mixture of competing and contested definitions, perspectives and the general lack of a discernable and coherent approach to gossip at work inform my approach to researching the topic. In this section I outline my program of research approach, which is largely situated within a mixed methods and mixed approaches strategy.

Being that workplace gossiping and its implications are both poorly defined and likewise sparsely researched, a multi-method approach to conducting a program of research for this dissertation offers some important opportunities.

A program of study which draws upon the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods offers a strong foundation upon which I may build later research to deepen any initial exploratory understandings concerning the topic. This multimethod multistudy approach is *not* intended to pursue a triangulation strategy which is a method now largely absent from contemporary Canadian management research in any case (see Hartt, Yue, Helms Mills & Mills, 2009). Instead, I am drawing upon the benefits of mixed methods research as articulated in Bryman, Bell, Mills & Yue -- *Business Research Methods* (2011) -- in which mixed methods approaches are viewed as aiding puzzle solving (2011: 159), the filling in of knowledge gaps (2011: 154), examining process features of a phenomenon (2011; 157-159) and studying different aspects of a phenomenon (2011: 157-159).

The attempt to make best use of a variety of methods and data types to investigate a phenomenon is fundamentally an acknowledgement of the “three horned dilemma” of research design so eloquently written about by McGrath (1981). Essentially, McGrath articulates that: “The research process can be viewed as a *series of interlocking choices*, in which we try *simultaneously to maximize several conflicting desiderata*.”(McGrath, 1981: 179, emphasis in original). This is critical to the structure of the program of research found in this thesis, for McGrath tells us that there is no true method, nor even a best strategy to pursue in terms of a research design; simply a series of flawed choices that involve mutually incompatible goals. Nevertheless, McGrath also understands that

dilemmas still demand choice and action, and so he articulates a cycle of empirical research when interrogating questions of the ‘Real World’ which highlights how research strategy choices involve dilemmas (McGrath, 1981). The three conflicting desiderata in his framework are: The point of maximum concern with generality over actors, the point of maximum concern with precision of measurement of behavior, and the point of maximum concern with system character of context. Privileging one point of concern necessarily compromises the other two in McGrath’s framework, thus provoking imperfect but nevertheless optimizing choices in research design. When combined with the challenges in data collection which are evident in studying a socially awkward if not prohibited behavior such as gossiping, a program of research approach utilizing multiple types of data and methods is appropriate. Similarly, I propose that a combined inductive-deductive approach, mirroring that of historically classic scientific inquiry, offers a reasonable starting point for expanding our understanding of the phenomenon.

The arguments concerning the relative value of inductive versus deductive reasoning as applied to research are not new, nor are situations in which both approaches are employed. The history of the Royal Society in the UK during the 17th century illustrates how repeatable and observable demonstrations and live experiments were essentially used to generate a formalized naturalism which then often led to abduction type theorizing (e.g. Gould, 2004; Mullis, 2002). Contemporary critique of naturalist “*Tabla Rasa*” induction (e.g. Silverman, 2005) largely stems from pragmatist concerns which clearly originate from the early work of Pierce (1878) in which he examined in detail how inference operates. What seems to have been lost in the caveats about

atheoretical induction (Silverman, 2005: 78-80) are the corresponding insights from C.S. Pierce which reflect the acknowledgement that insight, indeed knowledge creation, comes from the practical act of an iterative, experientially based and therefore incompletely blank-slate probing of questions by the researcher (Strübing, 2007: 589).

I conceive the inductive deductive dyad, when embedded in an articulated program of research, as a type of inquiry driven by curiosity, doubt and manifest as iterative problem solving. This is consistent with how Dewey (1938) defines inquiry (Strübing, 2007: 590-594; Dewey, 1938: 104-108) and compatible with how I understand the dilemmatics of research design (McGrath, 1982; 1981). Consequently, this thesis attempted to manage the three horned dilemma of research design (McGrath 1981) through multiple studies and methods and also used a combined inductive and deductive stance based upon the near ubiquitous experience of gossiping and the simultaneous voids in basic research about gossip at work.

As a starting point, a grounded theory approach is an inductive method which is conducive to both uncovering meso-level theory and also for identifying basic social processes (BSPs) at play in complex social situations. I have chosen to use qualitative self-report interview data analyzed using a broad grounded theory approach in study one in order to focus upon McGrath's "point of maximum concern with system character of context". As a consequence of this decision, theory or social processes which are inductively uncovered and identified may then be examined using conventional deductive methods. The use of a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006) to understand what individuals report as constituting gossip in the workplace fits squarely within Locke's (2007) examination of the role and advantages of inductive

theory building. This inductivist approach partially avoids the pitfalls in creating yet another definition of workplace gossip based upon supposition, folklore or common sense. Essentially, the first study in this dissertation asks “How do individuals report their understandings of gossiping in the workplace?”

Following from this first study, in study two I make use of self reported quantitative data collected in an experimental design in an effort to focus upon McGrath’s “point of maximum concern with precision of measurement of behavior” or, in the case of my topic area, intended behavior. Finally in study three, I use a longitudinal self report survey method which collects quantitative data from individuals over time. This last study is an attempt to focus upon McGrath’s “point of maximum concern with generality over actors”.

In summary, to make a substantial contribution to the limited empirical literature concerning gossiping at work it is useful to conceptualize this thesis as a small scale program of research, with an early aim to more clearly understand how actors themselves understand the phenomenon, followed by deductive examination of such actors own phenomenological theorizing. Through using a multi-method multi-study research design I seek, in fundamental terms, to:

- 1) ***discover*** what individuals believe about gossiping in the workplace,
- 2) ***test*** some of these assertions
- 3) ***examine*** predicted causal relationships regarding workplace gossiping and its consequences

To remain open to the possibilities of such exploratory research as the first step in this program of research, I have necessarily limited early proposition statements concerning the phenomenon. As a consequence this first chapter has largely served to problematize the notion of gossiping at work. It falls to both the next chapter of this thesis and the reportage of the first study to allow for further elaborations.

Chapter 2: A Grounded Theory Study of Workplace Gossip

Given the problems with definitions of gossip at work, it is prudent to conduct an initial basic inquiry into what constitutes the construct. This examination could lead to a better understanding of what the behavior is and under what circumstances it might occur. Both of these aspects are critical to future interests in examining issues such as the frequency of the behavior, the context in which it occurs, and possible outcomes for individuals and organizations. This foundational approach also offers the potential to empirically examine and explore power relations as they apply to gossip at work, in part answering the ongoing calls to do so (e.g. Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Noon, 2001). To these ends, the first study in this dissertation is a grounded theory inductive approach to the phenomenon. (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which I examine thematic categories and relationships found in interview data. This approach supports my fundamental inquiries into the conditions under which gossip is acceptable or not, and subsequent work concerning organizational based outcomes of gossip at work. In essence, this study is an exploration to *discover* what individuals believe about gossiping in the workplace and thus how the study participants understand the nature of gossip and its acceptability at work.

About Grounded Theory

With the publication of their 1967 work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Glaser and Strauss introduced their method as a

reaction to hypothesis and deductive driven theorizing which was popular at the time. Broadly situated in the qualitative methods of both the Chicago School and influenced by the work of Merton (particularly influential for Glaser) from Columbia University (Locke, 2001), grounded theory is an inductive approach to the “discovery” of both formal and substantive theory. This is achieved through ongoing direct contact with the data and the simultaneous eschewing of *a priori* theorizing.

The much-made-of distinction between substantive and formal theory is important, for while Glaser and Strauss see formal theory as being the hallmark of both well used grounded theory and likewise the ultimate goal of sociologists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001), they also acknowledge the need for the firm, situational based substantive theory as well. Much of both the appeal and the critique of middle level “meso-theorizing” is that it is contextually bound and does not necessarily generalize to the extent that grand scale formal theorizing purports to do. Interestingly, this meso-theory domain is where much of the recent management literature resides (e.g. Kuhn, 2012; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; House, Rousseau & Thomas-Hunt, 1995).

In these respects, grounded theory may be seen more loosely as an inductive approach which seeks to explain how actors understand a particular situation or indeed social process through the direct examination of words, actions, etc. and the coding (and constant comparison between such codes) of these pieces of data by the researcher. Because there is no *a priori* theorizing concerning the work, there are no prohibitions regarding the type of data or the coding schema. Even notions of sampling adequacy become contentious in a grounded theory approach. This leads to a distinct lack of a codified method and is reflected in the wide invocation of grounded theory, the critique

of grounded theorizing, and even disputes about what constitutes “the real” grounded theory method (Locke, 2001). Consequently, even Barney Glaser himself (personal communication) advises that neophyte researchers are both well placed to conduct good grounded theory studies and are also at risk when they employ it in their theses; the requirements for rigid and formal methods and likewise demands for extensive literature reviews/propositional statements can be seen as antithetical to classic grounded theorizing.

While I recognize the potential troubling “looseness” of method which the use of grounded theory may entail, my interest in conducting exploratory examinations of gossip at work suggest that an inductive approach to a potential meso level substantive theory is indicated. Thus I make informed use of elements of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to examine this thesis topic.

Employing Grounded Theory

Method. In an attempt to address some of the questions concerning gossiping at work and to contribute towards building a strong foundation for future workplace gossiping research, I asked working individuals about their experiences, attitudes and behaviors surrounding gossip in the workplace. I chose to employ elements of grounded theorizing for my analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). This decision was informed through trying to balance a desire for a more social constructivist perspective, which simultaneously needs to remain philosophically compatible with my subsequent quantitative work in the same thesis. My intent was to understand, indeed privilege, the

participants' world views concerning gossip at work, in essence employing a sort of phenomenological frame with which to ground my analysis.

Sampling can be quite contentious when evaluating grounded theory work as “Grounded theory logic presupposes that we will construct categories through the comparative methods of analyzing data” (Charmaz, 2006: 100). That is, we will not necessarily use prior theoretical sensitivity to derive sample frames based upon existing theoretical categories. With this in mind, my initial sampling frame attempts to offer some heterogeneity. Furthermore, this would be useful through informing later re-visiting of topics with participants through what is typically referred to as abductive reasoning; a process through which the initial categories uncovered in the earlier work are then specifically sought out in a systematic and strategic manner (Charmaz, 2006: 103).

Participants. For initial sampling, I interviewed men and women, managers and non-managers, those who had desk jobs as well as those who do manual labour. I tried to speak with individuals from a variety of age groups. In total, I coded interviews from 7 individuals. I actually interviewed a total sample of 10 individuals, but was not granted permission to record three of the exchanges. This perhaps highlights the potential social prohibitions concerning speaking about gossip and the workplace. Table 1 identifies the sex, approximate age and occupational characteristics of the interview subjects I was able to record an exchange with during the first round of interviews.

Table 1: First Round of Interviews

Interviewee's Sex	Approximate Age	Occupation
Female	Early Forties	Call Centre Manager, Bilingual Team
Male	Early Thirties	Apprentice Electrician
Female	Late Twenties	Registered Nurse
Female	Late Forties	Call Centre Manager
Male	Late Thirties	Call Centre Manager
Female	Mid Thirties	Call Centre Manager
Male	Early Fifties	Internal Consultant, Garment Manufacturer

Subsequent to this first round of interviews, and based upon initial coding and memoing, I conducted a second round of interviews. In this case I procured an initial sample of 7 interviewees, with permission granted to record 6 of these exchanges. The relevant attributes of this second group of interviewees is outlined in Table 2. In summary then, I interviewed a total of 17 individuals in two rounds of data collection and was granted permission to record the interviews in a total of 13 cases. The cases in which I did not have permission to record were not explicitly part of my coding practice. My notes were reasonably detailed, but I was concerned that the extreme close reading offered through my constant reference to the actual audio recording (see the section *Data analytic technique* which follows) would represent a type of methodological bias against

the notes based information during constant comparison procedures. However the notes did sensitize me to certain areas which were considered in my close “reading” of the audio data.

Table 2: Second Round of Interviews

Interviewee's Sex	Approximate Age	Occupation
Male	Mid Thirties	Professor
Female	Mid Forties	Recreation Facility Manager/Yoga Instructor
Female	Late Thirties	Staffing/Workflow Scheduler
Female	Mid Thirties	ESL Program Developer/Administrator
Male	Mid Forties	Military Engineer
Male	Early Thirties	Communications Professional

Participants were recruited through snowball invitations to participate and this was accomplished both verbally and through email. All participants were assured of the anonymous nature of their comments and that they and their organizations would not be specifically identified in any way. The interviews were semi-structured according to the interview questions found in Appendix A and recorded using an MP3 recording device. The procedures involved in the study and the content of the questions were approved by the University Research Ethics Board.

The use of semi-structured interviews represents a compromise between the very open understanding of what constitutes data in the grounded theory literature and the

requirements of research ethics approval for research in a thesis context. The university ethics board was decidedly uneasy with my initial loose interview schedule and wished a more structured list of questions. This need for more detail did not however preclude follow-up questions seeking more insight from the participants. Moreover, the constant comparison method of data processing which is central to all forms of grounded theory practice is not predicated upon a certain type of data, and so the data collection method was not antithetical to the premises of grounded theory as a practice.

I used initial “grand tour” type questions whilst interviewing, which loosely conform to the data collection aspect of McCracken’s (1988) long interview method. The use of both floating and planned prompts offers probes to explore areas of specific interest, both planned and surreptitious. This data collection (interviewing) method was paired with grounded theory analytic procedures. Glaser and Strauss’ grounded theorizing method, particularly when augmented with Kathy Charmaz’s constructivist approach, offers a recognized method to approach inductive qualitative data analysis. Being that I am trying to understand gossip at work from the participants’ viewpoint (this driven in part by present construct definitional problems), the relative suspension of prior theoretical sensitivity found in constructivist grounded theorizing is consistent with the comparatively phenomenological approach of the study and the method.

Data analytic technique. The coding strategy I employed demands some discussion. It is conventional in most cases to take the interview recordings and then transcribe the recording into a document which facilitates a variety of coding strategies. Recently it has become possible to both record the interviews in a format which is easily

transferred to a computer and to segment and tag (i.e. write attached and associated memos) to the sound file itself. In essence, “sound bites” are now able to be delineated and coded. I chose to use the interviews in this way, thus maintaining closeness to the data which was implicit. This is not for convenience sake, for the early requirements of iterative microscopic examination of the data within grounded theorizing demand that “...the analyst to **listen** closely to **what** the interviewees are saying *and* **how** they are saying it.” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 65; emphasis in original). In the case of recorded interviews which are transcribed, it is likely that the researcher will have to return to the recording when working with text based transcriptions in order to capture the nuance contained in the vocalizations and speech patterns of the interviewee. Through working with the original audio data, the requirement and complications in producing accurate and rich transcripts, which then must be constantly compared to the recording itself, thereby largely disappears. While remarkably time consuming, and demanding of much focused attention for coding, I find the almost (re)living of the interview through continually hearing the voices of the study participants to be useful. Prior exploration of this method (Yue & Kelloway, 2008a) has offered both some valuable experience and some limited support for the idea that staying close to the data in this manner offers nuance which I surmise could have been lost in conventional transcription.

I entered the sound files into the software program AtlasTI and proceeded to listen repeatedly to the interviews, coding individual reported incidents, ideas and themes. Such coding practice roughly compares to what Charmaz (2006: 53) identifies as incident-to-incident coding, although her description of focused coding (Charmaz, 2006:

87) as being more selective and conceptual, further demonstrates the blurry divisions between such processes.

As codes became more nuanced and were repeated (or opposed) by other respondents, the constant comparison method became possible. The resulting emergent themes which I report below have come from this constant comparison, and are therefore essentially a product of a process which reflects both agreement and disagreement between individual interviewee's accounts.

Results

A number of emergent themes have arisen from the coding done of the recorded interviews. These are presented not as definitive or totalizing, as in the case of a formal theory, but rather as some of the key areas which I intend to pursue through further data collection and later analysis in a more hypothesis driven deductive research design. Interestingly, some of the results point very much to the confusion of rumor and gossip from the more traditional definitional perspective (e.g. see DiFonso & Bordia, 2007). Aspects of social prohibition of gossiping at work are in evidence, yet this seems to be augmented by an individual's social position. The idea of making sense of one's environment was offered, but also an unanticipated description of a process of sensegiving was uncovered.

I asked the respondents initial questions which were aimed at finding out about their work and workplaces, and also to build rapport with them prior to investigating gossip. I then was able to ask them to theorize about gossip. Is it good or bad? Where

does it occur and what is the content? Why do people gossip and is gossip at work the same as gossip elsewhere? I also wanted to know what they thought might be some outcomes of gossip at work. Many of these interviews spanned 40 minutes or more, and the length of them was driven by the respondents who in many cases warmed to the topic and revisited former questions throughout the interview.

By way of summary, these findings are able to be grouped in three main categories:

1. *Defining the phenomenon.* The extant definitions of gossip (as being personal and malicious) and rumor (as being information seeking and depersonalized) are problematic when applied in the in the workplace. Furthermore, individuals report blurred lines in terms of how they understand what constitutes workplace gossip versus “other gossip”. This is important because the varied positive and negative attributions in terms of content or instrumentality of the gossip seem to play a role in how respondents report that they engage in the behavior.
2. *Veracity of the gossip.* Participants told competing accounts of how the gossip was either useful, accurate information, or was to be distrusted. In particular, the relative certainty of the veracity of the information seems related to who tells the gossip. This is a nuance which the extant literatures on gossip and sensemaking do not explicitly capture.
3. *Antecedents and effects of the phenomenon.* Related to the above, it is clear that my interviewees see a relationship between the functioning of a workplace, the need for information by different groups (workers and/or management) and

acceptable use of gossip to bridge the information gap (that is, gossip often has the utilitarian function of rumor when at work). This suggests that it is not clear what the differential effects of gossip in the workplace are, let alone the proclivity to engage in gossiping with different groups at work.

I further describe and elaborate upon these findings below, making use of select *in vivo* quotes from the research subjects themselves, which are offered as poignant examples of the themes to which they speak.

Defining the phenomenon. It seems that my core research question, essentially concerning “What is workplace gossip?” was shared by some of the interviewees. Indeed some asked about such definition issues outright:

“...My opinions? What do you mean by gossip?”

Internal Consultant

I quickly became aware, after only a few interviews that participants were speaking about gossip and gossiping at work, rather than expressing ideas about workplace gossip. That is, the workplace was constituted as a location and then gossip did (or did not) occur here. Thus the place took precedence over the content. I found that there was some conception of both positive and negative gossip, but in the workplace it largely seemed to be an artifact of how related the material was to the context of work, and not whether or not the content was positively or negatively evaluative of an

individual. That is, negative gossip at work was often seen as concerning topics not related to work and concerning one's life outside of the day to day job:

“It's like a soap opera... [Interviewer] :So what do people talk about?. [Pause]
Who's leaving, who's going out west [leaving the job for more lucrative markets]
ummm money...”

Apprentice Electrician

However, this did not preclude respondents from offering examples of evaluative talk about individuals at work:

“Most of its negative. None of it is ever really positive. We also talk a lot about the doctors and how much we hate them and which ones we like and which ones we don't, which is the majority of 'em.”

Registered Nurse

Perhaps most interesting is that a number of respondents felt that the targets of gossip at work were more of a reified department than were individual workers. This aggregation and depersonalization seemed to allow for the gossip to be framed as informal critique rather than evaluative talk in the more conventional sense of gossip:

“It’s interesting because as I said earlier, a lot of the gossip is around departments, you know. They’re going to do this or they’re going to do that or they don’t do this very well...”

Internal Consultant

Moreover, this sense of negative gossip as being concerned with non-job related information then allowed for notions of gossip as being positive based upon workplace utility or valence:

“So sometimes gossip benefits the organization, ‘cause it may, peer to peer, whatever the level, sometimes when you hear something from a peer and you may go ooohhhhhh, I never thought of that or I didn’t think of that or I didn’t know that was happening, so it can be beneficial to the organization in some respects as well as the individual...”

Bilingual Team Manager

Overall, there was substantial confusion between what the literature would define as gossip, rumor and even just broad concepts of informal communication. It seems that the veracity of the information or the evaluative component of the information transmission (as in taken for granted definitions of gossip versus rumor, again see DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007:12) is not enough in itself to disentangle the constructs in the workplace context from the viewpoint of these interview respondents.

Veracity. Trust in the veracity of the information contained in gossip at work was a theme which I was able to ascertain by considering the interview data as a whole, and not only through atomized pieces of utterances. In this respect the method of continual use of the audio data rather than transcription offered perhaps the most meaningful insight. As I examined who reported engaging in gossiping at work behaviors, it occurred to me that managers saw it as very important to get information from employees and not from other managers. This finding initially seemed strange because my bias was to assume that there would be more likelihood to gossip with others who occupied a similar social status as oneself when at work. What emerged through considering the data via classic grounded theorizing (that is, asking the fundamental question “What is really going on here?” per Barney Glaser (personal communication) was that the veracity of the information was seen as being linked to who recounted the gossip. The trite idiom of “getting information straight from the horse’s mouth” is apt; my exploratory work indicates that who tells the information is related to the perceived veracity of the information.

Antecedents and effects of the phenomenon. Gendered attribution of gossiping (particularly malicious gossip) is by no means a new phenomenon. Spacks (1986: 38-39) offers numerous examples of this type of negative attribution to females as early as the 17th and 18th centuries. The participants in my interviews partially supported such contentions in terms of workplace gossiping:

“Well, nursing’s predominately women, so there’s a lot of gossip and cattiness...”

Female Registered Nurse

“But...it could just be that it’s in my situation, but it’s [pause] it’s almost exclusively females speaking to me, not males.”

Male Internal Consultant

These attributions were compounded in some cases by an individual’s position in the organization. While respondents broadly described gossiping behavior as occurring throughout the company (both within and between management and the employees), managers specifically highlighted the usefulness of such gossip as a sort of early sensing mechanism for management, whereas non-managers tended to see the gossip as a way for those “not in the loop” to get information:

“...sort of, uhh, finding out what, what the pulse of the centre is, what sort of feeling of what people are thinking.”

Male Call Centre Manager

“It could be, certainly, you know, about a manager didn’t treat me fairly or did you get the same sort of rating on your PA [performance appraisal]...”

Female Bilingual Team Manager

The difference in attribution of the reason (or utility) for gossip at work is interesting in itself, however more interesting is the fact that the workplaces of most of the respondents contain a majority of female employees (management's gender distribution varied greatly between workplaces). Managers tended to discuss the utility of receiving gossip but reported not engaging in it. In the case of the largely female workforces, however, gossip was described as rampant and based upon relative information poverty:

“...it really varies, but you know out there on the [shop] floor I guess what I was going to say, like, some -a lot of those people- would not be very well informed about what's going on.”

Male Internal Consultant

This raises the possibility that such workplace gossiping may be an issue of gendered attribution as well as whether or not one belongs to the managerial function within the organization. Put another way, the pejorative attribution of gossip to females makes apparent both gendered ideas about who gossips and also highlights the information scarcity faced by non managerial females as well. This idea, that one could require gossip, be vilified for gossiping and then have these attributions tied to gender, are what Collins (1994) wrote about in a piece which is essentially a feminist attempt to reclaim and then legitimize gossip. My sample of respondents precludes further insights in this area, although this finding offers an interesting area for future investigations.

Notwithstanding the theme of gender and gossip at work, I also uncovered the theme of disruptiveness of gossip at work. This was a particularly interesting finding because while some interviewees described how gossip at work was disruptive, even toxic in the vernacular sense, they then went on to describe a sort of social unity in terms of how most people either did or did not sanction the behavior. This interesting juxtaposition offers some limited support for the idea that the content of the gossip at work is not the only fruitful area of inquiry, but that the relative norms concerning gossip are also important. This observation links well with the extant studies which relate to gossip as social learning (e.g. Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004) but point towards the act of gossiping at work, rather than solely the content of such gossip, as being an instrumental factor.

Beyond inquiring about why people gossip at work and what the results might be, I also asked interviewees about where gossiping at work occurs. I was interested in how the broad social prohibitions against gossip might play out in the workplace, in a concrete space. Most participants reported that communal areas such as lunchrooms or common areas were likely places to hear or share gossip whilst at work. In fact, there seemed to be few places, or times, it didn't occur:

“[Interviewer]: So when people are gossiping at work where does it happen?”

[Respondent] Almost anywhere but a lot of the time on break- breaks, lunches.”

Apprentice Electrician

“It usually happens in the lunchroom, in the lounge, ummm down by the telephone-we have an area with telephones. Sometimes people will, within if it is a quiet time on the phones people will talk within the team.”

Bilingual Team Manager

“...the office, possibly bathrooms, lunchrooms, food court, those kinds of places...”

Call Center Manager

What was especially interesting was how respondents described the ways in which people in a public space create private space for their gossiping:

“...and sometimes it might be public places but people are whispering among themselves. They’re trying to create a private environment but they’re actually still in a public place.”

Call Center Manager

This begs the question as to whether or not a public act which is also an attempt to create a private space is public, private, or both. Perhaps even more interesting were the descriptions of how certain people (“The Gossips”) tended to form small and tight-knit groups at work:

“...most of us know who the gossips are. There are several sets of them...So you kind of figure out who they are and you try to tell new people who they are.”

Registered Nurse

Interviewees also reported that gossip could have substantial opinion shaping persistence and that the result was that a somewhat marginalized group could wield considerable power in altering broader scale opinion formation:

“You know, the one-sided story... you get a lot of shared opinions on people... and I find that’s the main, that’s the one thing I have to say about gossip. One individual opinion will become a total floor shared opinion. If one person, the wrong person is a person that gossips and has a big mouth and will speak their mind more than another person it becomes the whole floors shared opinion.”

Registered Nurse

These findings, taken together, offer insight into not only the places and social spaces where gossip at work occurs, but also allude to the acceptability, based upon social contextual factors, of the gossiping at work.

Discussion

By employing a grounded theory research design, and particularly through continuously listening to interview data, I have been able to gain an emergent sense of interviewee's world view and theorizing concerning gossip at work. This has offered insights into how convoluted the very definition of workplace gossip can be. It furthermore seems that the intersection of hierarchical status, gender, and social prohibitions as well as acknowledged utility of workplace gossip makes simple use of straightforward definitions of gossip for the context of work quite problematic.

Managers saw workplace gossip as a way of keeping in touch with the "pulse" of the workplace. They also reported that third party sharing of issues enabled those who are either afraid or unwilling to come forward with concerns to have voice. They recognized that workplace gossip flourished in circumstances when there were voids in the information available to workers.

There appears to be some sense, in fact attribution, that women are more prone to gossip at work and that the stereotypical "cattiness" associated with women gossipers is still at work. The judgment as to whether or not workplace gossip is bad or good is related to the salience of the content to the workplace. This suggests that a different sort of vilification of the behavior is at work. Perhaps the prohibitions against gossip are modified once one passes through the office doors; now only *work-related* gossip is acceptable.

Thus, study one essentially offers a view of workplace gossip reframed through a notion of a basic social process; moreover, one which offers some intriguing possibilities for future research while also offering some notions about how the definitional confusion

concerning gossip and rumor might be explained. The central concepts of acceptability based upon who says what and where they say it is are clearly at play and in need of further study.

Based upon these data in study one, I can now articulate a refined definition of gossip:

Gossip is evaluative talk between two or more individuals about a third part who is not present at the time. It may be positive or negative in content. Its veracity is evaluated based upon the source of the information, and at work its acceptability is affected by whether or not the content is salient to the workplace.

This more nuanced definition will guide subsequent studies in this dissertation.

Limitations

The main limitations of this first study relate to its exploratory nature. Of course, inductive theorizing using qualitative data will always be contentious according to certain schools of thought. While a deductively focused researcher would be concerned about tests of veracity as applied to grounded theory, the postpositivist researcher would likely view grounded theorizing as being especially objectivist. For my part, I believe the use of selected grounded theory techniques with the particular methods in this study (namely, extensive work with the raw interview data) is both reasonably consistent with a broad social constructivist perspective, while at the same time allowing

for the beginnings of middle ground theory within the workplace context. This middle ground, so to speak, is critical to my ongoing forays into the workplace gossip domain.

Conclusions and Links to Next Study

This chapter has reported the results of a grounded theory inquiry into gossip at work. The overarching goal of study one was to examine what participants report as being the nature of gossip at work. Through interviewing individuals about their thoughts and experiences concerning the topic, we have the building blocks of a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. A substantial finding of the exploratory study is that individuals identify confusion in detailing whether gossip at work is about shaping social situations or dealing with information scarcity in organizational contexts. This confusion links with diffuse notions of the content of gossip, informing the lack of a coherent definition of gossip at work, thereby placing attention upon the context of such gossip.

To this end, my analysis of interviewee's responses indicates that veracity of the information is an important component which relates to the utility and legitimacy of engaging in gossiping at work. Such attributions regarding the legitimacy of the act of workplace gossiping also seem to extend to value judgment of the gossipers themselves.

By way of a program of study approach, the grounded theory exploratory study can be conceptualized as a sort of case study linked with a purposive sampling frame. In essence, the internal validity from a qualitative methods viewpoint is high, but the leap to external validity is one which would require that we accept the tenets of classic and more objectivist grounded theorizing in terms of generalizability concerns (see Glaser 1978; 1998; 2007). Through the combination of constant comparative coding, the abductive

reasoning approach (purposive process based addition of more data, subject to the ongoing comparison), and the constitution of grounded theory methods as a sort of cross sectional case study contribute to high internal validity. If we were presuppose that grounded theory methods are only about formal grand theorizing it is possible that, because of the leap to a totalizing, overarching and completely generalizable theory, we miss the opportunities offered through contextualized middle level substantive theory building. While the internal logic of classic grounded theorizing in pursuit of formal, grand theory (and implicit moves toward generalizability) is defensible, it is nonetheless problematic for some researchers, particularly those who seek more quantitative based notions of sample representativeness as an arbiter of validity, predicated upon reliability of the measures, etc.

Through taking a broader approach to grounded theory, augmented by Charmaz's constructivist perspective (2006), focused upon contextualized meso-level theorizing, and rooted in a purposeful closeness to the original audio form of the data, I have uncovered some interesting aspects of gossip at work. Rather than potentially lose these insights through further attempts to create formal theory using a grounded theory process, and this work furthermore being a constituent part of a thesis, it makes sense to address dilemmas of validity issues through a multiple study, multiple method approach. Consequently, the results from the first study in my thesis identify some important exploratory findings which, in order to offer a substantive contribution in terms of a dissertation, require some further investigation. In this regard, I have remained true to my attempts to deal with McGrath's "point of maximum concern with system character of context". I next turn to

study two, and the second point of the McGrath (1981) three horned dilemma of research design as I continue to expand our understandings of workplace gossip.

Chapter 3: An Experimental Evaluation of Vicarious Exposure to Gossip at Work

A number of key areas of interest have arisen through the work undertaken in Study 1. Specifically, a central point of interest from the interviews concerns the acceptability of gossip at work. How does the content as well as the relationship of the gossiper to the person being told the gossip influence the acceptability of the act? Furthermore, findings in Study 1 lead to my specific operationalization of the ideas of appropriateness and acceptability of the gossiping at work. In this chapter I build upon the earlier inductive study and deepen our understanding of the phenomenon.

Linking study one to this study

Beyond self-reported attitudes and behaviors, it is difficult to examine gossip in the workplace. As suggested earlier, the prohibitions against such talk in the workplace are commonplace. Furthermore, gossip is broadly vilified in the larger social milieu. Jaeger, Skleder, Rind, & Rosnow (1994: 156) observe that empirical investigators face difficulty in finding those willing to openly discuss gossip, let alone exhibit the behavior around strangers and Bergmann aptly writes: "...that gossip can also function very well as a *means of social segregation and distancing*, which for those who are excluded from it does not entail the acquisition of information but the denial of it."(Bergmann, 1993:8, emphasis in original). While these aspects of gossip research (in this case, at work) offer some de facto support for the concept of gossip as an important social activity, it renders a difficult situation for empirical study. In addition, the phenomenon is unlikely to be

easily isolated from other confounding factors when study is conducted in the field.

These issues combined suggest that a laboratory experiment may be an advantageous way to study the phenomenon.

Study Two is a between and within subjects factorial design experiment. A main advantage of the factorial design laboratory experiment is the ability to control for confounding variables and the opportunity to use different levels of treatment. In addition, the sophistication of this research design offers the opportunity to explore the importance of interaction effects. In this study I explore some specific relationships regarding workplace gossip which I uncovered in Study One.

Independent variables

Working from the main themes I uncovered (namely, defining the phenomenon, veracity of the gossip, and antecedents and effects of the phenomenon), I specifically set out to operationalize a number of these relationships for further testing. Three independent variables were derived from findings in study one and employed in this experiment.

The first two independent variables were related to the contested definitions of gossip at work. Earlier in study one I found that the very definition of gossip was nuanced, and so with the confusion evidenced in definitions of gossip as uncovered in the exploratory work in study one, I found that interviews contained references to both positive and negative evaluative talk about others. Both were seen as constituting gossip. More prevalent in the interviews was the description of gossip as being good or bad based upon whether or not the content was related to the workplace or not. This nuanced

and convoluted relationship between content and context demanded further investigation, and so I operationalized from my interview data two independent variables. One condition contained information that was either positive or negative in terms of the information being shared. The second independent variable that was derived from the content/context conflation was whether or not the information contained in gossip was work related.

The third independent variable I operationalized concerned whether or not the gossip has first person knowledge of the information being told or if they were reporting secondhand knowledge. This independent variable was derived from the findings concerning veracity of information found in study one and arose in the interview study in particular when interviewees, especially managers, reported wanting to hear information directly from employees rather than other managers. The willingness to engage in gossiping across organization hierarchical strata implies that there is something important in getting information directly from the source rather than mediated via another individual and consequently I operationalized an independent variable condition of either first person information or second person sourced information being shared.

In summary, from study one I set out to test three conditions based upon the following independent variables:

1. negative or positive content of the evaluative talk,
2. work related or personal content of the gossip
3. first hand or second hand information reported by the gossip

Outcomes

I designed study two to investigate three outcome variables:

1. Veracity of the gossip,
2. acceptability of the gossip, and
3. retributive intent toward the organization in which the gossip was observed taking place within.

Two of these dependent variables or outcomes that I operationalized from study one are direct manifestations of the interview supported relationships that I wanted to examine. Interviewees reported differential attributions of the veracity of the information contained in gossip at work depending upon who reported the information. Likewise the content of the gossip being work related as opposed to being exclusively personal in nature was reported as being linked to the acceptability of the context to the context of work. These outcomes reflect potential attributions towards the gossip itself as well as being potential conditions which could have instrumental outcomes. One of these outcomes is the third outcome I examined. This construct of retributive intent demands some further theoretical contextualization.

Retributive intent. The retributive intentions construct is interesting because it captures the idea of intentions towards the organization within a broader organizational justice framework. In their 2001 meta-analytic review of the organizational justice literature, Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng (2001) identify a number of conditions

and indeed models of organizational justice in which interpersonal and informational justice retain explanatory power when, for instance, distributional justice is controlled for. One way in which interpersonal justice is evaluated is through notions of fairness.

Fairness heuristic theory is related to how individuals form models or shortcuts that aid in decisions regarding trust of authority (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Lind, 2001; Van de Bos, Lind & Wilke, 2001). Jones & Skarlicki (2005) observe that fairness heuristics form early on in relationships, particularly in contexts of information scarcity and furthermore have lasting impact. In contexts of information scarcity, individuals sensemake in order to come to terms with the plausibility of the social situation (Weick 1995; 2001) and so third parties who perceive violations of fairness in organizations may discern threats to their understandings of justice (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). The link between gossip and violations of fairness is hinted at by Jones and Skarlicki when they wrote:

“Consider, for example, a new employee who overhears other employees discussing whether their supervisor is fair. The new employee might construct a fairness heuristic on the basis of these social cues, which can bias his or her interpretation of future interactions with that supervisor. Other relevant situations include those in which an employee hears coworkers gossiping about a newly hired manager or about an existing supervisor of a group to which an employee has been recently assigned.” (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005: 364).

If being subject to gossip at work potentially constitutes a violation of fairness heuristics and thus of an understanding of justice at the organizational level, retribution in an effort to “balance the scales” seems likely.

Conceptually, retributive justice is seen as being “concerned with people's reactions to rule-breaking behavior” (Skarlicki, Ellard & Kelln, 1998:121) and the retributive intentions scale measures behavioral intentions towards organizations vis-à-vis violations of normative rules. Skarlicki & Folger (1997) found that there was a relationship between distributive justice and retaliation when there was both low procedural and interactional justice, and Jones and Skarlicki (2005) found that retaliation was predicted based upon an interaction between an authority figures behavior and the concomitant social cues. The implications of these studies are such that an examination of vicarious exposure to gossip in a workplace and individual behavioral intentions towards the organization where the gossip took place is useful. Indeed, this idea of vicarious exposure to gossip at a workplace addresses some of the research opportunities described by Skarlicki & Kulik (2005) when they suggest that a greater focus upon social networks and communication would aid in understanding third party reactions to employee mistreatment (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005: 215). Moreover, an experimental design to investigate third party effects of fairness heuristic violations manages Skarlicki and Kulik’s noted challenge of gaining access to third parties, which they suggest is likely best solved through the use of laboratory experiments (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005: 216). Consequently, the retributive intentions construct allows me to operationalize individual level consequential intentions as an outcome of the implicit organizational

sanctioning of rule breaking behavior across a variety of conditions, in this case the various conditions of gossiping at work.

To summarize, I am specifically interrogating what happens when one is vicariously exposed to gossip in the workplace. Based upon insights from study one, I am interested in how the relationship of the people involved in the gossiping, the valence of the content of the gossip to the work environment, and the perceived trustworthiness and positive or negative content of the gossip relate to perceptions of the workplace. I next specify what specific hypotheses were tested in the research design.

Hypotheses

The hypothesized relationships explored in this study are informed by some of the findings from the first grounded theory interview study. In the first study I found that the source of the gossip at work was important and this was reflected in how participants understood the veracity of the information contained within the gossip. This seemingly allowed the social liminal space for managers to engaging in gossip with employees and not just other managers; a sort of firsthand informal information source in the work place. In essence, participants see gossip at work as more credible and more acceptable when they hear it from a firsthand source. Thus I propose that:

H1: Perceived veracity of the gossip at work will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the content is based upon firsthand knowledge.

H2: Perceived acceptability of the gossip at work will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the content is based upon firsthand knowledge.

Another finding of the first study was that gossip at work in which the content is seen as been workplace focused was acceptable whereas gossip at work which was clearly personal in nature was seen as unacceptable. In short, participants see a distinction between personal and work-related gossip in the workplace context. This leads to the third hypothesis, that work related gossip is more acceptable than personal gossip in the workplace. I therefore propose that:

H3: Perceived acceptability of the gossip at work will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the gossip is workplace focused.

It became quite clear during the interview study that gossip at work (or indeed elsewhere) was vilified and seen as being negative in nature. Interviewees did, however, offer examples of gossip at work which contained positive content in follow up interview questions. Consequently, the “common sense” notions of gossip at work being both negative in content and negative in terms of outcomes were challenged. Presumably if a workplace is seen as a viper’s pit of negative gossiping, one would not think highly of such a place. This would likely manifest itself in terms of how one would act towards such an organization. In short, I wish to test that there is a distinction between negative

and positive gossip, leading to the hypothesis that the former correlates with retributive justice intentions toward the organization; thus:

H4: Retributive intent towards the organization will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the content of the gossip is negative.

Method

Research design. I made use of a video-based vignette experiment to examine attributes of workplace gossip and how participants respond to them. This was accomplished using a combined between and within factorial design in which randomly assigned subjects were each given two short video segments. In essence, the participants were vicariously exposed to an example of workplace gossip in each video segment. The video vignette illustrated a situation in which specific information is offered from one individual to another. Each vignette was composed of a condition in which the content of the gossip is either explicitly of consequence in the workplace or not, and the information is either firsthand or not. Within each cell of this design the content of the gossip is furthermore either be positive or negative. Thus, the design was a 2 (work related or not) X 2 (firsthand or not) X 2 (negative or positive) between and within factorial design in which the *between* treatment independent variables were the nature of the gossip (either personal or work related) and certainty (either first hand or “friend of a friend” based gossip). The *within* treatment independent variable was the positive or negative nature of the gossip.

Each participant viewed two video vignettes, one showing positive gossip and one showing negative gossip (the within independent variable condition). The order of the viewing of these two conditions was counterbalanced. Figure 1 illustrates the possible conditions to which a survey respondent would be subject. The vignette scripts and the questionnaire that was administered after each vignette was viewed are found in Appendices C & D respectively.

Figure 1: Study 2 Between and Within Factorial Design

	Personal Gossip	Work-focused Gossip
Firsthand knowledge	Positive Information Or Negative Information	Positive Information Or Negative Information
“Friend of a Friend told me”	Positive Information Or Negative Information	Positive Information Or Negative Information

Sample. Subjects were recruited from a population of students at Mount Saint Vincent University who are in the Faculty of Professional Studies (business, tourism and public relations) and business school students at Saint Mary’s University. The recruitment strategies, study procedures and experiment materials were vetted and approved by both the relevant university research ethics boards.

The sample size was driven by the anticipated data analytic techniques to be used and I followed the suggestions of Meyers, Gamst & Guarino (2006: 375), Tabachnick & Fidell (2001: 329) and St. Jean (2001) when they recommend that each cell of an experimental design which will use MANOVA analysis have at least 20 cases and that the minimum number of cases exceed the number of dependant variables. This would result in a minimum suggested total sample size of 80 subjects. Anticipating the potential for some missing data, I collected data from a total of 181 participants – after listwise deletion of missing data, the sample available for analysis consisted of 158 participants. The minimum cell size was in the work related and secondhand gossip condition (n=30) and the maximum cell size was in the personal and secondhand gossip condition (n=51).

Measures. To confirm that the experimental conditions (thus the independent variables) were correctly perceived by the participants, I conducted a manipulation check. The manipulations were measured using one item measures. The survey item that measured work related content was phrased as: “The content of the gossip was work related” and the survey item that measured first person content was phrased as: “The person who told the gossip had first-hand knowledge of the information”. Each item was rated on a seven point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. These manipulation check items are presented in Appendix D and MANOVA assessment of the manipulations is detailed in the results section of this chapter.

Perceived veracity was measured with a three item scale created for this study. Each item was rated on a seven point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree with higher scores indicating greater perceived veracity of the gossip. I

produced scale variables for the perceived veracity of the gossip in positive gossip condition (Veracity Positive, n=158, 3 items, alpha = .82) and for the negative experimental conditions (Veracity Negative, n=158, 3 items, alpha = .73). Exploratory factor analyses of the items suggested that they formed unidimensional scales, accounting for 74% of the total item variance in the case of the positive veracity scale and accounting for 66% of the total item variance in the case of the negative veracity scale. Scale items are presented in Appendix D.

Perceived acceptability was measured with the five item (alpha = .83) scale created for this study. Each item was rated on a seven point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree with higher scores indicating greater perceived acceptability of the gossip. I undertook a similar procedure as above and produced measures for each of experimental conditions the perceived acceptability of the gossip, one for the positive gossip condition (Acceptability Positive, n=158, 5 items, alpha = .84) and likewise one for the negative gossip condition (Acceptability Negative, n=158, 5 items, alpha = .78). Exploratory factor analyses of the items suggested that they formed unidimensional scales, accounting for 61% of the total item variance in the case of the positive acceptability scale and accounting for 55% of the total item variance in the case of the negative acceptability scale. Scale items are presented in Appendix D.

Retributive intent was measured with the five item scale developed by Skarlicki et al (1998) and Skarlicki (personal communication). Each item was rated on a seven point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree with higher scores indicating more retributive intent. After recoding for reverse coded items, I collapsed individual items into their respective scales. The retributive intentions scale was

comprised of 5 items and being that my research design and analysis would differentiate between retributive intentions for either negative or positive gossip at work conditions (the *between* aspect of the design), I in turn created two variables; one representing retributive intentions in the case of a positive gossip treatment condition (Retributive Intent Positive: n=158, 5 items, alpha = .82) and the other representing retributive intentions in the case of a negative gossip treatment condition (Retributive Intent Negative, n=158, 5 items, alpha = .82). The retributive intentions scale is established, however I did also subject the items to the same procedure as above and exploratory factor analyses of the items suggested that they also formed unidimensional scales, accounting for 64% of the total item variance in the case of the retributive intent positive scale and accounting for 61% of the total item variance in the case of the retributive intent negative scale. Scale items are presented in Appendix D.

Demographic data comprised of sex, age in years and hours worked per week were collected as well. The subjects had an average age of 23.5 years (n=151) and the distribution in terms of sex was more females than males (n=49 for males, n=108 for females, total n=157). Of the sample of 158 students, 142 of them were employed at the time of the study and they worked an average of 25.26 hours per week (mean=26.25, s.d. 16.3).

The descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of these variables are found in Table 3.

Table 3: Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Retributive Intent Positive	158	2.73	1.04	1								
2 Retributive Intent Negative	158	3.19	1.09	.635**	1							
3 Acceptability Positive	158	4.18	1.17	-.301**	-.238**	1						
4 Acceptability Negative	158	3.50	1.29	-.055	-.236**	.425**	1					
5 Veracity Positive	158	4.38	1.29	-.305**	-.173*	.626**	.243**	1				
6 Veracity Negative	158	3.76	1.23	-.181**	-.193*	.405**	.546**	.621**	1			
7 Sex	157	1.69	0.47	-.167*	-.120	-.054	-.110	.046	-.038	1		
8 Age	151	23.5	5.73	-.039	-.014	-.084	-.017	-.293**	-.184**	-0.117	1	
9 Hours worked weekly		25.26	16.25	-.187*	-.214*	-.126	.032	-.105	-.004	0.031	.275**	1
N=158, **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)												

Results

Manipulation Check. To assess the accuracy with which respondents read the between-group experimental conditions I conducted a 2 X 2 MANOVA with the two single item manipulation checks as dependent variables. Significant multivariate effects were found for both the personal/work related ($F(2,153) = 140.30, p < .05$) and first person/secondhand ($F(2,153) = 60.52, p < .05$) conditions with no significant interactions. As expected, respondents saw the gossip as being more work-related in the work-related ($M = 5.98$) versus the personal ($M = 2.34$) conditions, $F(1, 154) = 504.29, p < .05$. Similarly, respondents saw the gossip as emanating from a first-hand ($M = 4.97$) rather than a secondhand ($M = 2.22$) source, $F(1, 154) = 286.50, p < .05$.

MANOVA analysis. I conducted 2 X 2 X 2 between-within MANOVA analyses for each of the dependant variables specified above using a doubly multivariate setup in SPSSX. Significant multivariate effects were obtained for work-related gossip ($F(3, 152) = 4.25, p < .01$), first-hand gossip ($F(3, 152) = 7.02, p < .05$), and whether the gossip was positive or negative ($F(3, 152) = 27.49, p < .05$). The two-way interaction between positive/negative and personal/work related also attained significance, $F(3, 152) = 4.34, p < .05$ as did the three-way interaction of all experimental conditions, $F(3, 152) = 3.16, p < .05$. The results of this analysis are summarized below in Table 4:

Table 4: MANOVA Results Study Two					
Effect	Value (λ)	Hypothesis df	Error df	F	Sig.
Between Subjects					
Intercept	0.023	3.000	152.000	2112.690	0.000
Personal	0.923	3.000	152.000	4.254	0.006
Firsthand	0.878	3.000	152.000	7.015	0.006
Personal*Firsthand	0.985	3.000	152.000	0.767	0.514
Within Subjects					
Posneg	0.648	3.000	152.000	27.489	0.000
Posneg*Personal	0.921	3.000	152.000	4.339	0.006
Posneg*Firsthand	0.995	3.000	152.000	0.276	0.842
Posneg*Personal*Firsthand	0.941	3.000	152.000	3.161	0.026

I then proceeded to examine the specific ANOVAs associated with the hypothesized effects as well as additional findings that emerged from the analyses. Table 5 presents the summarized results of these ANOVA analyses.

Hypothesis one. As hypothesized, gossip was seen as having more veracity when it was obtained from a first-hand ($M = 4.30$) as opposed to a second-hand ($M = 3.80$) source, $F(1, 154) = 8.50, p < .05$.

Hypothesis two. Hypothesis two was not supported – there was no significant relationship between the source of the gossip and perceived acceptability, $F(1, 154) = 3.02, ns$.

Hypothesis three. Similarly there was no significant association between the acceptability of gossip and whether or not the gossip was work-related, $F(1, 154) = 1.63$, ns.

Table 5: ANOVA Results Study Two						
Source	Measure	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Posneg	Retributive Intent	16.480	1	16.480	42.896	0.000
	Appropriate	38.343	1	38.343	49.053	0.000
	Veracity	30.390	1	30.390	50.442	0.000
Posneg*Personal	Retributive Intent	3.229	1	3.229	8.403	0.004
	Appropriate	1.065	1	1.065	1.362	0.245
	Veracity	0.439	1	0.439	0.729	0.395
Posneg*Firsthand	Retributive Intent	0.015	1	0.015	0.038	0.846
	Appropriate	0.160	1	0.160	0.204	0.652
	Veracity	0.502	1	0.502	0.833	0.363
Posneg*Personal*Firsthand	Retributive Intent	2.211	1	2.211	5.755	0.018
	Appropriate	0.736	1	0.736	0.942	0.333
	Veracity	0.814	1	0.814	1.352	0.247
Error	Retributive Intent	59.165	154	0.384		
	Appropriate	120.377	154	0.782		
	Veracity	92.782	154	0.602		

Hypothesis four. As predicted, retributive intent was higher when the gossip was negative ($M = 3.18$) than when gossip was positive ($M = 2.72$), $F(1, 154) = 42.90$, $p < .05$.

Additional effects and interactions. Several other effects emerged from the analysis. Most notably, the three-way interaction of all study variables was significant for retributive intent, $F(1, 154) = 5.76$, $p < .05$. In an effort to decompose these interactions and understand which specific influences were driving them, I undertook conditional means testing for both the 2 way significant interactions and also the 3 way

significant interactions. Summarized results of the conditional means tests for retributive intent and two way interactions are found in Tables 6:

(I) twowaytreat	(J) twowaytreat	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
negative work related gossip	negative personal gossip	.15727	.16967	.835	-.3196	.6342
	positive work related gossip	.69714*	.17908	.002	.1938	1.2005
	positive personal gossip	.44136	.16967	.082	-.0356	.9183
negative personal gossip	negative work related gossip	-.15727	.16967	.835	-.6342	.3196
	positive work related gossip	.53987*	.16967	.019	.0629	1.0168
	positive personal gossip	.28409	.15972	.369	-.1648	.7330

Notes: Scheffe Post hoc testing, * indicates significant at p<.05

Table 6 clearly shows that retributive intent is significantly higher when the gossip is negative and work related compared with when it is positive and work related.

Furthermore, when the gossip is negative and personal in nature, retributive intent was significantly greater than when the gossip was positive and work related.

Summarized significant conditional means tests for retributive intent and the three way interactions are found in Table 7:

Table 7: Retributive Intent by Experimental Condition for significant 3-way Interactions			
Experimental treatment A Mean	Experimental treatment B Mean	Mean Difference (A-B)	Sig.
Positive, Work Focussed Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge (Mean=2.420)	Negative, Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge (Mean =2.9067)	-1.14000*	.006
Negative, Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge (Mean =2.9067)	Positive, Work Focussed Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge (Mean=2.420)	1.14000*	.006
Positive, Personal Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge (Mean=2.6588)	Negative, Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge (Mean=3.5600)	-.90118*	.022
Negative, Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge (Mean=3.5600)	Positive, Personal Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge (Mean=2.6588)	.90118*	.022

Notes: Scheffe Post hoc testing, * indicates significant at $p < .05$

Table 7 reports that there was a significant difference between retributive intent when gossip at work is negative, work related and first hand compared with when gossip was positive, work related and second hand. Furthermore, there was also a significant increase in retributive intent when gossip is negative, work related and first hand compared with when it was positive personal and second hand in nature.

Finally, in addition to the relationship between retributive intent and the positive/negative gossip condition which was tested in hypothesis 4, there were significant effects with both the veracity and the acceptability of the gossip and the positive/negative gossip condition. Veracity of gossip was significantly different between the positive and negative gossip conditions with veracity being higher when the gossip was positive ($M = 4.36$) than when gossip was negative ($M = 3.73$), $F(1, 154) = 50.44$, $p < .05$. Moreover, the acceptability of the gossip was significantly different between the

positive and negative gossip conditions as well, with acceptability being higher when the gossip was positive ($M = 4.20$) than when gossip was negative ($M = 3.49$), $F(1, 154) = 49.05$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Based upon the initial findings that I reported in the first interview study, I articulated four hypotheses and then tested them. Hypothesis 1 (“Perceived veracity of the gossip at work will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the content is based upon firsthand knowledge”) was confirmed. However hypotheses 2 and 3 (“Perceived acceptability of the gossip at work will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the content is based upon firsthand knowledge” and “Perceived acceptability of the gossip at work will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the gossip is workplace focused”) were disconfirmed. Additional effects regarding both the acceptability and the veracity of gossip at work were uncovered and found to be related to the positive or negative nature of the gossip itself. Simply put, positive gossip is understood to be of greater veracity and of greater acceptability in the workplace environment.

The confirmation of hypothesis 4 (“Retributive intent towards the organization will be significantly and positively associated with conditions where the content of the gossip is negative”) supports the notion that vicarious exposure to workplace gossip that is negative in content has potential implications for the organization. Retributive intent relates to perceived violations of justice which then manifest in actions such as speaking

poorly of the organization, not recommending the organization to others, or being unwilling to work for an organization. This finding represents the first time that experimental quantitative results point to specific ramifications for organizations when someone is vicariously exposed to certain workplace gossip.

Because the support of hypothesis 4 is so salient for practitioners in organizations, it warranted some further exploration. This was accomplished through examination of the interaction effects for the various experimental conditions when predicting retributive intent. The three-way interaction between all of the experimental conditions offers detailed insights into what conditions provoke the greatest retributive intent when someone is vicariously exposed to gossip in a workplace.

According to my data, negative gossip results in greater retributive intent than does positive gossip. But the interactions between the positive/negative, work related or personal content, and first or second hand sources offers fine distinctions. When gossip was positive in nature, personal gossip, be it first or second hand in nature, resulted in greater retributive intent towards the organization than workplace related gossip, regardless of whether it was first or second hand. Conversely, when the gossip was negative, it was work related gossip, either first or second hand that produced the highest levels of retributive intent.

Finally, in more absolute terms, positive, secondhand work related gossip results in the least retributive intent, whereas negative, firsthand work related gossip garnered the greatest amount of retributive intent.

The practitioner literature's focus upon stamping out gossip at work because of negative implications for the organization is thus partially well founded, however the interactions uncovered in this study show how details matter.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this second study that should be noted. The first relates to the experimental design itself. Factorial experiments are classically well understood to be high in internal validity, both because of the random assignment of subject to treatments and also because of the highly artificial constraints applied to the design. In other words, using McGrath's (1981) terminology, I maximized control at the expense of generalizability. I note the challenges in terms of external validity; the dissertation program of study design is intended to address this through a third study.

The second limitation relates to the use of students as a sample. One could argue that students when presented with a workplace situation would not be able to respond to the treatment in a realistic way. To address this, I recruited students engaged in professional areas of study, asked that they have prior work experience and then quantified their present work experience¹.

Finally, the use of vignettes may initially seem to be a limitation of this study. In fact through the use of video vignettes, I was able to ensure that subjects were exposed to a visual and auditory portrayal of each condition. Consistent use of the same actors,

¹ Being that I had demographic data concerning the sex of the subjects and also the average hours per week they worked, I did rerun the analyses earlier described, this time controlling for both of these demographic attributes. The results in all cases were the same.

scripted exchanges, and videoing of the vignettes in the same environment and from the same camera position ensured that I was treating the subjects with a realistic vicarious experiencing of workplace gossiping while maintaining appropriate consistency between conditions.

Conclusions and Links to the Third Study

In this second study I was able to conclude that experiencing vicarious exposure to workplace gossiping has implications for individuals and for organizations. The acceptability of workplace gossip to it being workplace focused and positive in content. Also, negative content gossip significantly correlated to retributive intent towards the organization. Furthermore, when this negative gossip was also work related in nature, the effect of the positive or negative content was enhanced in terms of retributive intent towards the organization.

Recall that the design of this dissertation, through a multi method multi study design, is to *discover* what individuals believe about gossiping in the workplace, *test* some of these assertions, and finally *examine* predicted causal relationships regarding workplace gossiping and its consequences. The first exploratory study was focused upon discovery and subsequently led to a high internal validity factorial design experiment. In this second study I tested some of the emergent themes found through grounded theory techniques. I made use of self reported quantitative data collected in an experimental design in an effort to focus upon McGrath's "point of maximum concern with precision

of measurement of behavior” or, in this case intended behavior. The next step in this dissertation is to complete a final study which will examine the causality of some outcomes related to exposure to workplace gossiping. In study three, I use a longitudinal self report survey method which collects quantitative data from individuals over time. This last study is an attempt to focus upon McGrath’s “point of maximum concern with generality over actors”.

This final study will also be designed to incrementally improve upon the potential external validity of the body of work taken as a whole. To do this, the third and final study of this dissertation is longitudinal and participants were recruited to be presently working full time and thus able to report upon their actual, indeed ongoing workplace experiences.

Chapter 4: A Quantitative Diary Study of Gossip at Work

Being that early results indicate that there are some potential organizational outcomes (namely retributive intent) to individual level vicarious exposure to workplace gossip, I wanted to deepen my understanding of how individual level variables are influenced by vicarious exposure to gossip at work. The construct of retributive intent measures intentions towards an organization, however the salience of day-to-day individual level variables that relate to the organization and its members should not be denied. Constructs such as job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, and individual mood are all of consequence for individuals and their organizations.

The individual level outcome variables that I investigate in this study are situated in a work and mental health framework. Gossip at work has typically been situated in both the practitioner and academic literatures as a counterproductive workplace behaviour. Instead of labelling the gossiping as counterproductive, I am more interested in the nature of the context of work and consequential implications for mental health. Warr's (1994; 1987) understanding of mental health and employment draws a distinction between context specific mental health and context free mental health. For Warr (1987) context specific mental health refers to the workplace related mental health, and "...individual perceptions of work/organizational characteristics give rise to job-related affective well being and perceptions of competence at work." (Kelloway & Barling, 1991: 292). These workplace effects are of material interest for individuals beyond their workplace, for "In turn, these context-specific reactions predict context-free mental health." (Kelloway & Barling,

1991: 292). Workplace context specific mental health is a focus in this study, as I continue to investigate the phenomenon of gossip at work.

In this chapter, I report upon a third study in which I build upon the findings in the previous two studies.

Independent variables

The independent variables in this study are daily self reported measures of exposure to gossip at work which were derived from the conditions that participants were exposed to in study two. Specifically I asked participants to report exposure to gossip at work which was positive and negative, work related and containing personal content, and firsthand and second hand gossip.

Outcomes

Daily affective organizational commitment. In their seminal work *Commitment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Application*, Meyer & Allen (1997) highlight the evidence linking perceived socialization experiences and organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997: 72-75). Specifically, the authors discuss some of the relationships uncovered between Van Maanen & Schein's (1979) six organizational socialization dimensions and organizational commitment. Allen & Meyer's work (1997; 1990) suggests that organizational use of informal socialization tactics has an initial (6 months)

negative relationship with organizational commitment (although specifically in the case of organizational newcomers).

Based upon my work in study one, gossip at work is neither clearly sanctioned nor vilified by management. On the other hand, the findings in study two which show how retributive intent is influenced through vicarious exposure to gossip in a workplace suggest that someone witnessing types of gossip at work makes attribution about the workplace and perceived violations of fairness, with consequences for their retributive intent towards that organization. This suggests that perceived tacit organizational support of individually enacted informal socialization processes, such as gossip, does not contribute to employee commitment.

In study two when an individual witnessed gossiping at work which was both negative and personal in nature, there was an increase in retributive intent over when the gossip was positive whether it is workplace or personal in nature. I wanted to extend this finding to individuals exposed to workplace gossiping at their own workplace and how they consequently felt towards their own organization. The choice of affective organizational commitment rather than normative or continuance organizational commitment was purposeful. Normative organizational commitment is not clearly distinguished from affective organizational commitment, and continuance organizational commitment is based upon individuals pragmatic and instrumental assessment of the situation they find themselves in (Meyer & Allen, 1979). One would not expect that such pragmatism would be shifted based upon gossip. Moreover, Allen and Meyer's work

shows the importance of affective commitment in predicting a wide variety of outcomes and Warr suggests that affective commitment (i.e., the way I feel about the organization) is an index of context specific wellbeing. My examination of affective organizational commitment and gossip at work is thus derivative of the findings of study two and the work of Meyer & Allen (1997), situated in Warr's (1987) understanding of context specific and context free mental health.

Daily job satisfaction. In his review of the organizational justice literature, Colquitt (2008) reports that early organizational justice studies from the 1980's focussed upon job satisfaction as one of the salient outcomes (p 79). Retributive intent is also conceptually related to both affective organizational commitment (see above) and fairness, so the findings of study two lend weight to the idea that the relationship between gossip at work and job satisfaction are worth examining. Furthermore, the modelling of work satisfaction as an aspect of job related affective well being (see Kelloway & Barling 1991: 298) under the larger umbrella concept of job related mental health suggests that job satisfaction is a useful outcome variable to measure. Essentially, Warr (1987) and Kelloway & Barling (1991) argue that job satisfaction is a measure of context specific wellbeing. Study two offered some support, through the retributive intent construct, that gossip at work may be deleterious to perceptions of the organization. Consequently, job satisfaction as an indicator of job related, and thus context specific, mental health build upon inferences found in study two.

Daily negative affect. Relying upon the findings for study two, leads me to consider emotional outcomes of exposure to gossip at work. Study two framed the retributive justice findings within a fairness framework, and Barclay, Skarlicki & Pugh (2005) identify the “...dearth of justice research examining emotions as an outcome variable.” (Barclay et al., 2005: 629). Emotions are an important facet of individuals within organized life (see Grandey, 2008) and positive affect is linked with decreased absenteeism (Johns, 2008: 165). Gossip is often thought of as bad, disgusting or minimum socially acceptable. Consequently it makes sense that exposure to gossip at work may well trigger negative emotional states in individuals. Tellegen, Watson & Clark (1988) define negative affect as “a general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear, and nervousness, with low NA being a state of calmness and serenity.” (Tellegen, Watson & Clark, 1988;1063). I chose to measure negative affect because of the presumptions about gossip as a negative influence but also because gossip at work in could be seen as a characteristic of the workplace context of subsequent interest to the related context free well being of an individual.

Hypotheses

Affective organizational commitment is conceptually linked with the findings in study two in which negative gossip was linked with increased retributive intent.

Furthermore, affective organizational commitment is understood by Warr as an index of

context specific (i.e. workplace) mental health. Consequently, in this study, I hypothesized that:

H1: Affective organizational commitment will be significantly and negatively associated with individuals reported exposure to negative gossip at work.

Likewise, one of the findings in study two highlighted an interaction effect between gossip at work which is both negative in content and also personal in nature, so in this present study I further hypothesized that:

H2: Affective organizational commitment will be significantly and negatively associated with individuals reported exposure to gossip at work which is both personal and negative in content.

In this study I also examined hypotheses concerning job satisfaction and exposure to workplace gossip. The model of job related mental health examined by Kelloway & Barling (1991) as a test of Warr's (1987) framework for job related and context-free mental health identified feedback from coworkers as a type of job characteristic, and work satisfaction as a part of job related affective well being. Gossip at work can be understood as a type of informal feedback mechanism and so I hypothesized that:

H3: Job satisfaction will be significantly and positively associated with individuals reported exposure to gossip at work which is work related.

Furthermore, given that the acceptability of gossip at work was significantly higher when the content was positive in study two, I also hypothesized that:

H4: Job satisfaction will be significantly and negatively associated with individuals reported exposure to gossip at work which is negative in content.

As earlier detailed, the overarching rationale for this study is that exposure to gossip at work might have consequences for mental health. This being the case, I was also interested in how individuals reported negative affect on a daily basis. This might allow me to uncover any links between gossip content and an individual's reported mental state. When taken in concert with the previously articulated hypotheses, this could link gossip at work as a type of organization characteristic and job related affective wellbeing. Thus Hypotheses 4 and 5 of this study are:

H5: An individual's daily reported negative affect will be significantly and positively associated with reported exposure to gossip at work which is personal in content.

and

H6: An individual's daily reported negative affect will be significantly and positively associated with reported exposure to gossip at work which is negative in content.

Method

Research design. This third study is a type of quantitative diary study in which observations are nested within an individual. In order to make the study robust, I chose to employ a repeated measures design over a three week period using a sample taken from a population of full time employed individuals. These repeated measurements constitute nested longitudinal measures of an individual and thus implicitly allow me to interrogate some implications of exposure to gossip at work and also to discern any larger, more generalizable trends. Each individual provided a total of 9 surveys which were completed at the end of the workday which they reported upon. This longitudinal design constitutes a nested data set which requires a multilevel modeling approach to data analysis.

Sample. I used an email snowball recruitment strategy. I surveyed individuals who responded to a call to participate which was disseminated via email (with a request of the email recipient to also share the invitation with others that they knew). I then surveyed individuals on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of each of three weeks. The nature of a snowball recruitment method is such that I cannot report a response rate as the

number of requests to participate is ultimately unknown. The total number of participants was 32 (n=32).

Measures. For each of the repeated measures surveys, I measured participants reported exposure to gossip which conformed to the conditions tested in the experiment in study two. Items included questions concerning positive and negative gossip, work related and personal content gossip, and firsthand and second hand gossip. Typical wording of each question was: “Today I have heard positive and first hand work-related information about other people”. Participants used a 5 point Likert type scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Disagree/Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree) to indicate their level of agreement with each question. These measures are found in the survey presented in Appendix F. I should further note that while my survey does contain questions which relate to first and second hand gossip, I did not choose to pursue any hypothesis testing which reflected this additional nuance. This is largely because the outcome measures I was interested in (described below) and the framework of context free mental health described above do not unambiguously suggest any compelling theoretical linkage.

I surveyed participants regarding affective organizational commitment (Fields, 2002; Meyer& Allen, 1997) using the single item measure: “The way I feel today, I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization”. Participants used a 5 point Likert type scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Disagree/Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree) to indicate their level of agreement with the question. The measure is found in the survey presented in Appendix F

I also surveyed participants, regarding their overall job satisfaction (Fields, 2002; Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins & Klesh, 1983) using the single item measure: “All in all, I am satisfied with my job”. Participants used a 5 point Likert type scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Disagree/Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree) to indicate their level of agreement with the question. This measure is found in the survey presented in Appendix F.

Finally, to assess the negative affect of the participants on each of the surveyed days, I used the PANAS instrument (Crawford & Henry, 2004; Brief, Burke, George, Robinson & Webster, 1988). Participants reported each negative affect with a rating on a 5-point scale according to the following scheme: 1 ‘very slightly or not at all’, 2 ‘a little’, 3 ‘moderately’, 4 ‘quite a bit’ and 5 ‘very much’. Negative affect was measured with a ten item (Negative Affect, n=270, 10 items, alpha = .92) scale.

Demographic data comprised of sex, age in years and time spent in present workplace position were collected. The mean age of participants was 38.63 years (N=32), and the mean time they had spent in their present position of employment was 5.55 years (n=31). The sample was composed of more women than men with 11 men and 21 women (n=32). There was a range of professions represented in the sample as well. Reported sectors were: banking, business, construction, education, fast food, finance/financial, government and public sector/service, manufacturing, publishing, service, veterinary healthcare, and wholesale.

The descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all these variables are found in Table 8.

Results

This nested longitudinal design constitutes a data set which required a multilevel modeling approach to data analysis. To this end, I inputted the data from each survey as its own case in the SPSS software package, conforming to the “person-period data, one record for each period” format required (Sheck & Ma, 2011:48). I computed variables that represented daily negative affect measured from the PANAS instrument and variables which represented the reported exposure to gossip at work that was positive or negative in nature, as well as gossip which was either personal or work related. I took the daily measures of gossip as reported by participants and summed them across conditions. For example, I treated all types of positive gossip as being simply positive gossip for that measure and likewise did so for each of the categories of gossip reported. A consequence of this procedure is that high inter-scale correlations are introduced in that one item contributes to more than one scale. This difficulty is managed within the mixed regression analysis I used because the estimates are controlled for everything else in the equation. As a consequence of this, the overlap of such residualized effects is effectively removed.

Being that I was interested in gossip as independent variables and I had repeated daily measures, I centered the data for these measures (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). I did this by calculating the mean for any given individual and then subtracted this mean from each of the daily reported measures of gossip. This is in effect a person-centered approach which corresponds to group-centering in the multi-level literature. It also

removes between person differences through forcing individual means to zero. This had the effect of treating each participant's range of observations as an individualized baseline from which daily fluctuations could be measured.

Table 8: Study 3 Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

	Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Gossip Work	287	0	0.8	1									
2	Gossip Positive	286	0	0.91	.66**	1								
3	Gossip Negative	287	0	0.9	.86**	.51**	1							
4	Gossip Personal	286	0	0.96	.61**	.88**	.71**	1						
5	Affective Org Commit	278	3.35	1.08	-0.06	0.01	-0.1	-0.03	1					
6	Job Satisfaction	280	3.73	0.91	-0.11	0	-.15*	-0.05	.76**	1				
7	Negative Affect	276	1.53	0.71	0.1	0.04	.13*	0.07	-.46**	-.56**	1			
8	Age	32	38.63	9.07	0	0	0	0	.23**	.20**	-0.09	1		
9	Sex	32	1.66	0.48	0	0	0	0	-0.09	-0.06	.12*	0	1	
10	Years in Position	31	5.55	4.53	0	0	0	0	-0.09	-.14*	.15*	.27**	-0.08	1

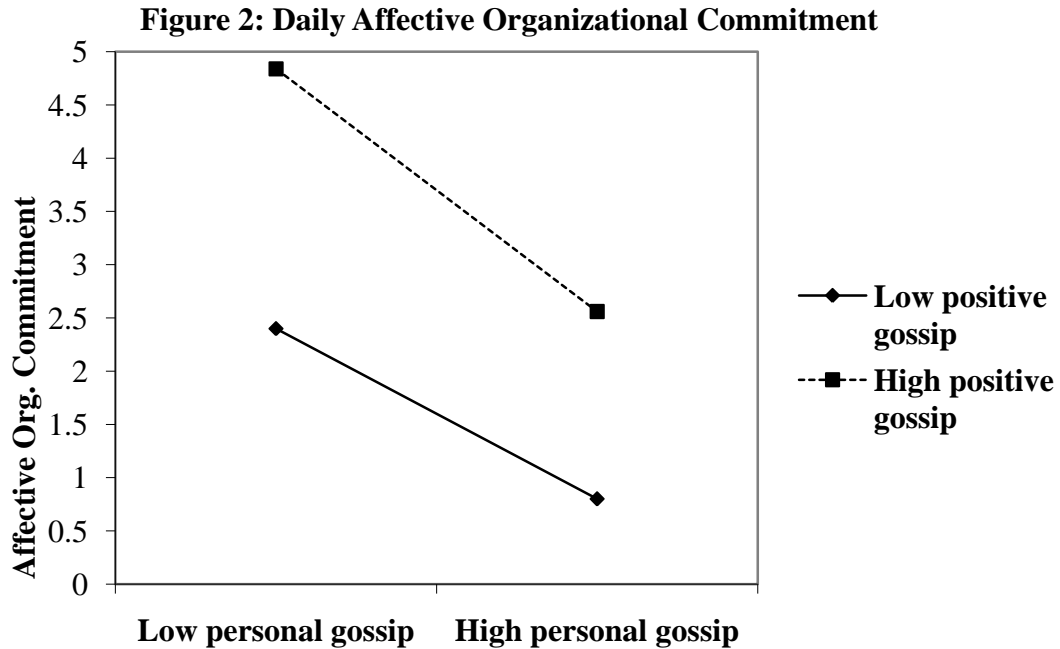
(N=32 participants, N=288 observations), **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), * Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

I ran 3 models in the mixed models module of SPSS. Each of these models represented the same independent variables and their interactions (i.e. centered measures of work related gossip, personal content gossip, negative gossip, and positive gossip) but in turn examines a different dependent variable based upon my stated hypotheses (i.e. affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and negative affect). Naturally, I nested the observations by participant, and also treated the participant related variable grouping as having a random intercept. This treats the intercept of the regression line for each individual's observations as independent from other study participants. Likewise, I chose to treat variance components of the random effects (the intercept) as unstructured, reflecting my conceptualization of the nested observations within each participant unit. Restricted maximum likelihood estimation was specified in all cases.

Daily affective organizational commitment. Recall that hypotheses one and two were concerned with affective organizational commitment as the dependent variable. As illustrated in the results found in Table 9, daily affective organizational commitment was significant correlated with an interaction effect between personal and positive content daily gossip ($df = 192.2$, $F = 3.98$, $p < .05$). To aid in interpretation, I plotted the interaction effect using Dawson's macro for Excel (Dawson, 2013). The resultant chart is displayed below in Figure 2.

Table 9: Dependent Variable = Daily Affective Organizational Commitment

Parameter	Estimate	df	F	Sig.
Intercept	2.65	26.96	6.35	0.02 *
Age of Participant	0.03	26.36	2.52	0.12
Sex of Participant (Male=1, Female=2)	-0.19	26.90	0.28	0.60
Years in Current Position	-0.04	26.38	1.01	0.32
Work Gossip	-0.90	60.02	0.21	0.65
Positive Gossip	1.05	59.71	0.28	0.60
Negative Gossip	0.76	60.27	0.15	0.70
Personal Gossip	-0.97	60.08	0.23	0.63
Work * Positive	-0.07	165.46	0.11	0.74
Work * Negative	0.21	199.36	2.26	0.13
Work * Personal	-0.20	194.26	0.41	0.53
Positive * Negative	0.25	148.52	1.83	0.18
Positive * Personal	-0.17	192.20	3.98	0.05 *
Negative * Personal	-0.03	191.10	0.03	0.87
Work * Positive * Negative	0.38	165.88	2.95	0.09
Work * Positive * Personal	-0.26	171.25	3.43	0.07
Work * Negative * Personal	-0.14	124.20	2.28	0.13
Positive * Negative * Personal	0.06	135.55	0.24	0.63
Work * Positive * Negative * Personal	-0.01	164.81	1.29	0.26
* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level				



Hypothesis one. Hypothesis one (“Affective organizational commitment will be significantly and negatively associated with individuals reported exposure to negative gossip at work”) was disconfirmed.

Hypothesis two. This hypothesis (“Affective organizational commitment will be significantly and negatively associated with individuals reported exposure to gossip at work which is both personal and negative in content”) was also disconfirmed.

Daily job satisfaction. I also examined the effect of workplace gossip effect upon job satisfaction. Table 10 reports daily job satisfaction was significantly correlated in two different two way interactions: work and negative content gossip (df = 190.70, F = 5.46, p < .05) and negative and personal gossip (df = 208.96, F = 4.25, p < .05). To aid in interpretation, I plotted these interaction effects using Dawson’s Excel macros (Dawson, 2013). The resultant charts are displayed below in Figures 3 and 4 respectively.

Hypothesis three. Hypothesis three (“Job satisfaction will be significantly and positively associated with individuals reported exposure to gossip at work which is work related) was partially supported, but only through a significant interaction between gossip at work which was both negative and work related.

Hypothesis four. Results decomposed in Figure 4 show that hypothesis four (“Job satisfaction would be significantly and negatively associated with individuals reported exposure to gossip at work which is both personal and negative in content) was not supported. There was a significant interaction between gossip which was both personal and negative, although not in exactly the manner hypothesized. This does offer insight which I consider in the discussion section of this chapter.

Daily negative affect. I also tested some relationships between daily negative affect and gossip at work. Table 11 reports that I uncovered two significant two way interactions, one being a significant interaction effect between negative and personal content gossip as pertains to daily negative affect. The other was a significant interaction effect between work and personal gossip. Once more I used Dawson’s Excel charting macros (Dawson, 2013) to produce interaction charts to aid in interpretation of these interactions. These are displayed in Figures 5 and 6 respectively.

Table 10: Dependent Variable = Daily Job Satisfaction

Parameter	Estimate	df	F	Sig.
Intercept	3.39	26.33	15.62	0.00 *
Age of Participant	0.02	25.64	1.70	0.20
Sex of Participant (Male=1, Female=2)	-0.16	26.23	0.29	0.59
Years in Current Position	-0.04	25.59	1.61	0.22
Work Gossip	-2.09	65.20	1.26	0.27
Positive Gossip	2.14	65.08	1.32	0.26
Negative Gossip	1.82	64.94	0.96	0.33
Personal Gossip	-2.06	65.26	1.22	0.27
Work * Positive	-0.23	113.66	1.60	0.21
Work * Negative	0.31	190.70	5.46	0.02 *
Work * Personal	0.32	179.94	1.30	0.26
Positive * Negative	-0.01	168.77	0.00	0.95
Positive * Personal	0.01	195.46	0.02	0.88
Negative * Personal	-0.32	208.96	4.25	0.04 *
Work * Positive * Negative	0.08	169.31	0.14	0.71
Work * Positive * Personal	0.05	189.41	0.13	0.72
Work * Negative * Personal	0.08	123.02	0.88	0.35
Positive * Negative * Personal	-0.18	142.30	3.15	0.08
Work * Positive * Negative * Personal	-0.01	177.14	1.14	0.29
* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level				

Figure 3: Daily Job Satisfaction A

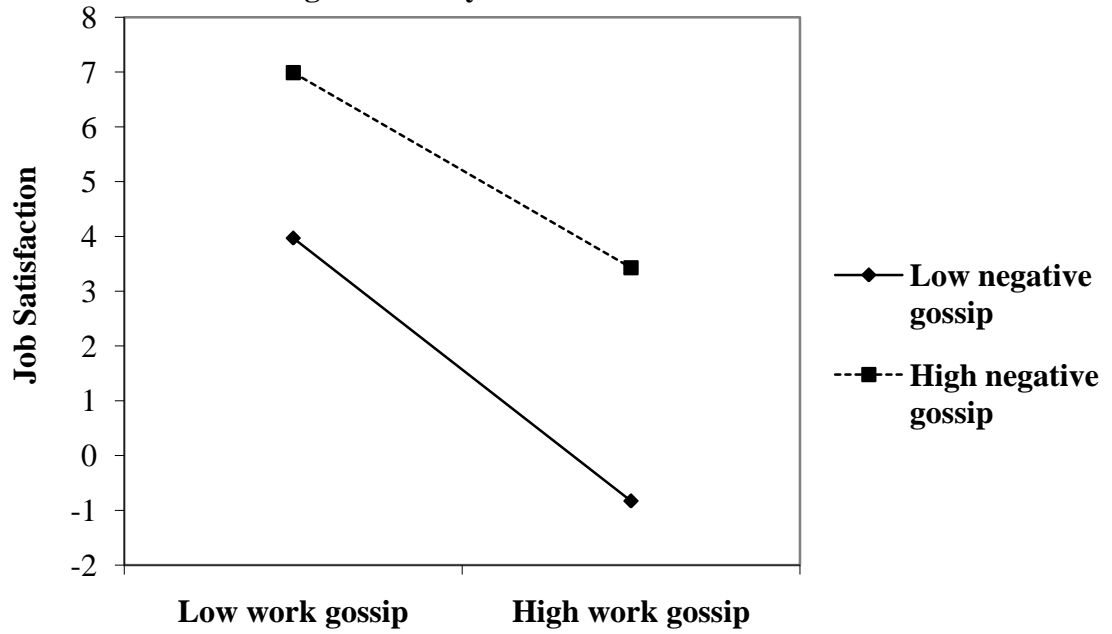
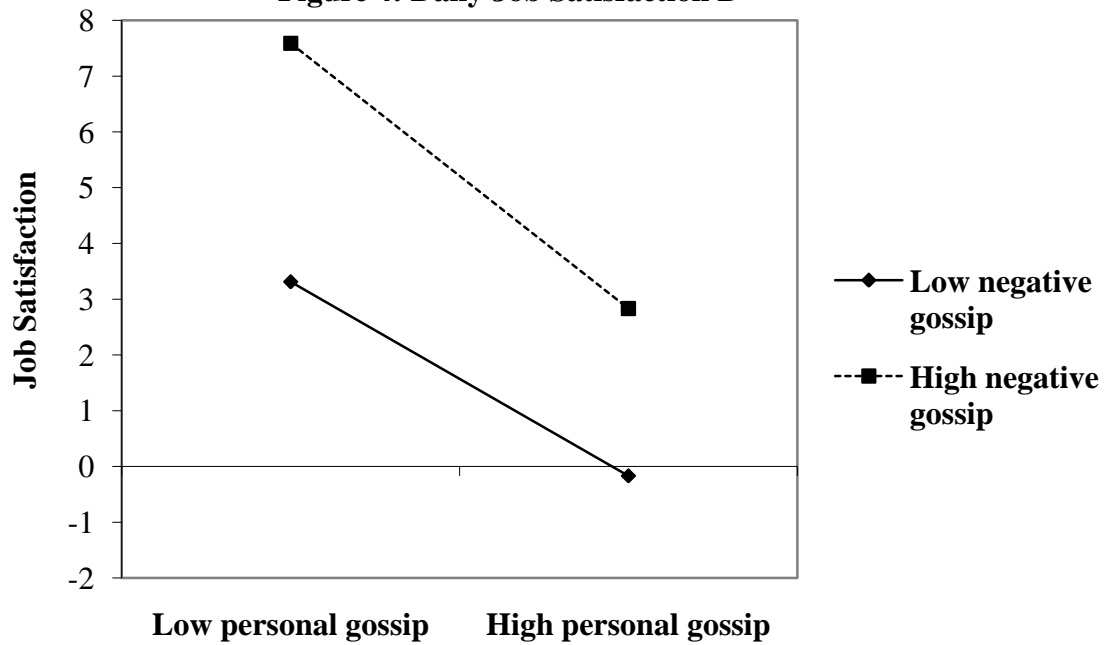


Figure 4: Daily Job Satisfaction B



Hypothesis five. I hypothesized that an individual's daily reported negative affect would be significantly and positively associated with reported exposure to gossip at work which is personal in content. This hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis six. Again, with daily negative affect as the dependent variable, hypothesis six ("An individual's daily reported negative affect will be significantly and positively associated with reported exposure to gossip at work which is negative in content") was examined. This hypothesis was disconfirmed, although the interaction between negative gossip and personal gossip being significantly associated with negative affect deserves some further discussion, which I undertake below.

Table 11: Dependent Variable = Daily Negative Affect				
Parameter	Estimate	df	F	Sig.
Intercept	1.25	25.02	3.04	0.09
Age of Participant	-0.01	24.64	0.76	0.39
Sex of Participant (Male=1, Female=2)	0.29	25.22	1.39	0.25
Years in Current Position	0.04	25.48	2.51	0.13
Work Gossip	-0.59	49.41	0.18	0.68
Positive Gossip	0.56	49.37	0.16	0.69
Negative Gossip	0.82	49.19	0.34	0.56
Personal Gossip	-0.68	49.43	0.24	0.63
Work * Positive	0.19	71.54	2.19	0.14
Work * Negative	0.00	119.04	0.00	0.98
Work * Personal	-0.41	104.87	4.33	0.04 *
Positive * Negative	-0.01	82.24	0.01	0.93
Positive * Personal	0.07	108.20	1.52	0.22
Negative * Personal	0.24	136.75	4.28	0.04 *
Work * Positive * Negative	-0.21	102.28	1.95	0.17
Work * Positive * Personal	0.08	92.10	0.86	0.36
Work * Negative * Personal	0.02	103.91	0.09	0.77
Positive * Negative * Personal	0.10	143.10	1.44	0.23
Work * Positive * Negative * Personal	0.00	162.35	0.31	0.58
* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level				

Figure 5: Daily Negative Affect A

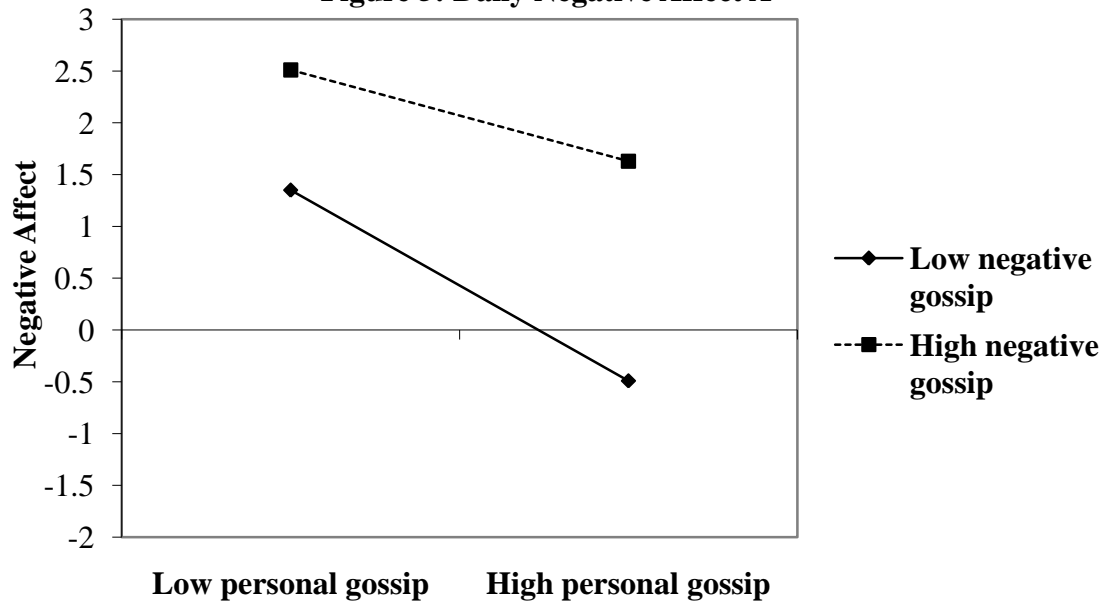
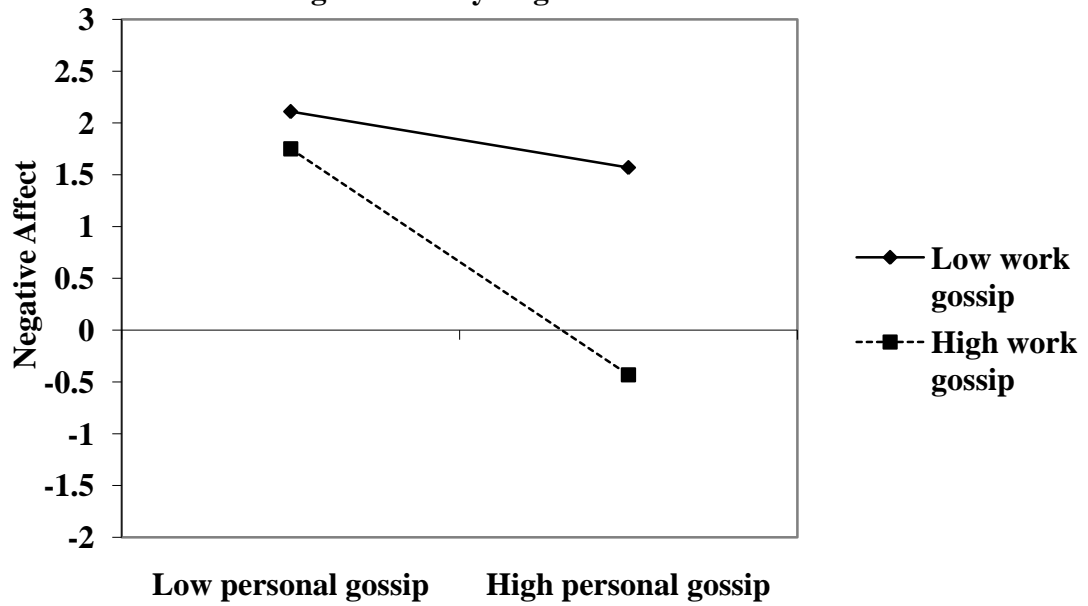


Figure 6: Daily Negative Affect B



Discussion

Hypotheses one, two, four, five and six were disconfirmed. Through the uncovering of interaction effects, hypothesis three was partially confirmed.

The lack of confirmation of effects upon affective organizational commitment when gossip at work was either negative (hypothesis one) or negative and personal (hypothesis two) was puzzling to me. However there was some nuance found in that the significant interaction effects of gossip which was personal and positive which give refinement to the conditions under which gossip at work influences affective organizational commitment. According to data in study three, low positive gossip results in lower affective organizational commitment than does higher positive gossip, when the gossip is personal in nature. When gossip was highly positive in nature but low in personal gossip content, affective organizational commitment was highest. Conversely, affective organizational commitment was lowest when the gossip was highly personal and low in positivity. It seems that positive gossip is more welcome as an acceptable workplace feature when it is personal, but not too personal. In this respect, aspects of the results of this study augment study two in which I found that when an individual witnessed gossiping at work which was both negative and personal in nature, there was an increase in retributive intent. In study three the nuance concerns how positive the gossip is rather than if it is, strictly speaking, positive or negative in nature.

Job satisfaction is an outcome which has consequences for the organization and for the individual. The initially confusing results concerning job satisfaction are interesting. When workplace gossip was work related and negative, job satisfaction was

affected. The highest levels of job satisfaction were when the gossip at work was less work related and highly negative in nature. The lowest reported job satisfaction occurred when the gossip was highly work-related and not very negative. This suggests a “bad is stronger than good” effect upon job satisfaction when the gossip is seen as relevant to the workplace. Furthermore, job satisfaction was also influenced by the interaction between personal and negative content gossip. The highest levels of job satisfaction occurred when the gossip was low on the personal scale and also highly negative. Lowest levels of job satisfaction occurred when the gossip was highly personal and not very negative. I surmise that this might be related to the idea of gossip as entertainment (see Foster, 2004) and that there are threshold limits as to how so called “juicy” information contributes to general satisfaction with the job and workplace .

Daily affect is an important construct as an outcome measure because it points towards mental health outcomes related to exposure to gossip at work. Findings relating to the context of work and the potential adverse effects of exposure to gossip within this context are important first steps in moving towards a broader understanding of how gossip at work affects people beyond the workplace. Warr’s work to theorize context specific mental health and its relationship to context free mental health (Warr, 1994; 1987) was empirically tested in terms of job characteristics, role stress, job related mental health and context free mental health by Kelloway & Barling in 1991. Gossip at work could be construed to be a type of feedback mechanism, and as such a factor in job related affective well being as proposed by Kelloway & Barling (1991).

The interaction between gossip at work which was negative and personal in nature shows that when low personal content is highly negative the effect is increased negative affect. Highly personal and low negative gossip produced lower negative affect.

Highly personal and highly work related gossip produced the lowest negative affect. These two interaction effects hint at the intriguing possibility that what is going on is an assessment of comparisons with other people or indeed with alternative situations, either expected or counterfactual. Gossip is typically understood as evaluative talk, and Warr, (2006) proposes a two component framework to enhance present understandings of external stimuli driven employee well being. In particular his identification of categories of comparison and judgment used by individuals (e.g. comparison with other people, comparison with other times, etc) links well with my findings concerning the interaction effects of good/bad and personal/work related gossip upon negative affect. In short, gossip at work could be understood to be a source of rich material for a variety of categories of comparison which in turn I suggest relate to a sense of self, of self efficacy and understandings of the relative novelty of a situation (Warr, 2006).

Taken as a whole these findings are salient for organizations as well as for the individuals who work in them. Organizations are generally concerned with many different outcomes in the workplace. Outcomes associated with efficiency or instrumental performances of the organization are often seen as particularly salient. In addition to the conceptual linkage between the workplace context and negative affect predicated by gossip at work, Patterson, Warr & West, (2004) also showed that affect has implications for company productivity and job satisfaction (e.g. Ostroff, 1992; Koys, 2001). These two outcomes were significantly associated with exposure to gossip at work.

Conclusions

In this study I sought to deepen my understanding of relationships between gossip at work and individual level measured outcomes of constructs salient to both individuals and to organizations. I did this by testing hypotheses that were derived from findings in both study one and study two. Significant interaction between types of gossip had implications for affective organization commitment, job satisfaction and negative affectivity.

Limitations

Of course, there are some limitations that need to be identified with regards to this study. The number of respondents is low, although this limitation is mitigated through the use of repeated measures data collection over time. The use of single item measures of some constructs was governed by the practical need to keep a repeated measures survey as short as possible. The time span that was examined was three weeks and consequently, some of the constructs examined may well be relatively stable over such a period of time, and consequently be undetectable. If anything, this contributes to the conservative nature of the study and offers research design level support for the significant findings that were observed. Overall, the limitations of this study when balanced against the entire program of research approach taken across the three studies of this dissertation are acceptable.

Concern with generality over actors

This third study was predicated upon the idea that a program of study should reasonably also address the third horn of McGrath's three horned dilemma of research design. Thus I set out to move from the first study with its emphasis upon ecologic (Bryman et al, 2011: 78-79) or existential validity (McGrath, 1981; McGrath et al, 1982) and the second study with its emphasis upon precision of measurement of behaviour (McGrath, 1981) to this present study with its concern over external validity (Bryman et al, 2011: 91-92; Yue , 2010; Yin, 1989) or as McGrath writes "maximum concern with generality over actors (McGrath, 1981; McGrath et al, 1982: 73).

It now falls to the final chapter of this dissertation for a review, synthesis and summary of the substantive findings, research design, future research directions, and practical implications concerning my research into gossip at work.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In this final chapter I review the substantive findings of the three studies of this thesis. I also revisit the research design to allow articulation of future directions as well as to make some tentative suggestions for practical implications of my work.

Findings concerning gossip at work

Study one. In the first interview study I was focused upon uncovering how interviewees understood and reported gossip at work. This was because the literature suggested that definitions of gossip were both taken for granted and potentially problematic when unthinkingly applied to the workplace context. Also there was the interesting juxtaposition between the prohibitions concerning gossiping at work and at the same time a sense of the possible social utility of the behavior. Pragmatically, I needed to see if there was a phenomenon worth studying and if so, gain some insight into what research questions were salient.

Three main categories of findings emerged from my coding of the long semi-structured interviews in study one. The first concerned the definitions of gossip when in the workplace context, with evidence to support the blurring of lines between definitions of gossip and of rumor and also whether or not gossip was good or bad based upon content which was material to the workplace. When compounded by the reported sense that gossip was understood to not be solely negative comments, it became clear based upon my interview data, that the phenomenon was more complex than presupposed.

The second category of findings in study one related to the veracity of the gossip at work. Participants told competing accounts of how the same type of gossip was either useful, accurate or how it was to be distrusted. In particular, the relative certainty of the veracity of the information seemed related to who tells the gossip at work.

Finally, the third category of findings in study one related to the antecedents and effects of the phenomenon. My interviewees understood a number of complex relationships between the functioning of a workplace, information scarcity, and the sanctioned use of gossip to bridge the information gap. The fact that the instrumental need for gossip at work overlaps with more formal definitions of rumor plus the range of reported effects of gossip in the workplace highlighted the need to explore this multiplicity of understandings.

Study two. The results of study one identified that gossip is not a unitary phenomenon. That is, the content and context of the gossip matter in determining the acceptability of gossip at work. Consequently I now began to more fully realize the difficulty in examining the phenomenon in a meaningful way. A vilified and yet tacitly socially sanctioned behaviour at work was not something easily observed or counted. It was at this point that the notion of focusing upon exposure to gossip at work became central to the dissertation. Relying upon the findings of study one, I used video vignettes to examine how subjects responded to witnessing acts of gossip at work across various conditions. I examined how they felt about appropriateness of the gossip and trustworthiness of the gossip and also was interested in any retributive intentions towards the organization being portrayed as the site of the workplace gossiping. In this way I

could begin to test for organizational implications as a consequence of the exposure to workplace gossip.

I tested a number of hypotheses which were derived from the findings of study one and found support for two of the relationships I tested for. I was able to determine that gossip at work was significantly more acceptable when the content of the gossip was workplace focused and not personal in nature, but only in cases where the gossip was positive in nature. I also found that when the content of the gossip was negative, there was a significant increase in the measured retributive intent towards the organization. A third finding was that there was a significant two-way interaction for predicting retributive intent when the gossip at work was negative *and* personal in nature.

I now had experimental data which supported the fact that the content of the gossip related to its perceived acceptability. Furthermore, when certain content was present it had implications for how an observer reported they would act towards the organization in which gossip was observed. I could now move to a third study and final study which would make use of individuals reporting upon their present workplaces.

Study three. Experiments may have high internal validity, but with such a tightly controlled context, the question as to applicability in the real world environment naturally arises. Also, the hypothetical nature of retributive intent as employed in study two warranted even more grounding in constructs and measures which reflected the intersection between individual variables and organizational outcomes. In study three I used multiple observations nested within individuals and so was able to model the relationships between reported exposure to different types of gossip at work and some salient outcomes. I found a significant interaction between personal and positive gossip

when predicting affective organizational commitment. I also found support for a relationship between job satisfaction and work related gossip through an interaction between work and negative content gossip. Job satisfaction was also significantly predicted based upon an interaction effect between personal and negative content of gossip at work.

I also investigated an individual level variable that related to mood through the positive and negative affect construct. I found a significant interaction between negative and personal content gossip predicting negative affect. Also, with negative affect as the outcome, there was a significant interaction when the reported exposure to gossip at work is both work related and personal in nature.

A working definition. An outcome of all three studies taken in concert is that I can now define gossip at work using empirical evidence. It is still the case that I define gossip as being informal and evaluative talk between individuals about a third party not present at the time. I can also now state that gossip may be positive or negative evaluative talk. Furthermore, the effects of such positive or negative evaluative talk are nuanced and contingent upon not only the content (positive or negative and first hand or second hand) but also the context (work related or not). Thus gossip at work exists in the intersectionality of the participants, observers and the context. Moreover, the effects of this seem to extend beyond only the context of the exchange.

Summary

There are clear implications to being exposed to gossip at work. Certain content has more valence than other content. This is not only a function of the instrumentality of

the gossiping, but also a complex sense of what is acceptable in terms of workplace gossiping. Gossip is acceptable at work when it is work related, but when it is negative and particularly if it is personal and negative it seems that some sense of justice has been violated and retributive intent goes up. This speaks to a sense of a violation of a norm that is widely held across individuals, that when faced with observing negative and personal gossip, at work one is viewing something unseemly.

This sense of what gossip is acceptable at work furthermore affects the satisfaction that one has with ones job and the affective commitment that one feels towards the organization. In the case of affective organization commitment, the interaction between positive and personal gossip negatively influenced affective organization commitment. Decomposing this interaction showed that highly positive gossip has less of a detrimental effect both when the gossip was highly and less highly personal in nature.

The interaction between negative and work related gossip improved job satisfaction and further investigation revealed that highly negative gossip mitigated the decrease in job satisfaction in cases of both high and low work based content. Moreover, the interaction between negative and personal related gossip decreased job satisfaction, but further decomposition of the interaction showed again that highly negative gossip mitigated this downward effect of highly personal gossip upon job satisfaction. It seems that the instrumental salience of the content is not enough; the negativity of the content is important as well.

Affect is also influenced by exposure to gossip at work. The interaction between negative and personal gossip was found to increase negative affect, with highly negative

content having a greater magnitude of influence, however the interaction of work and personal gossip shows that when work content was high and personal content was also high the effect was lower reported negative affect. This may well speak to the idea that when gossip of both a work and a personal nature are high, mood is not as affected because the behaviour of gossiping is a norm, perhaps even tentative evidence of a social bonding or grooming effect as described by Dunbar (1996).

I submit that Kniffin and Wilson's (2005) examination of rowing teams does offer some insights which are transferrable to questions about how gossip functions at work, however in the workplace context we have more clear delineations of what constitutes acceptable gossip. Kniffin and Wilson showed how both creating social connection and also policing behaviors was intertwined in the gossiping of a rowing team. In the workplace context, violation of the work/personal divide in terms of content seems salient and particularly so when the content is negative.

Revisiting the Research Design

From the beginning I have articulated my approach to this dissertation on gossip at work as a program of study. In this way, I believed that I would be able to manage some of the various limitations of individual methods such that the whole would be synergistic of the parts. Thus, through using a multi-method multi-study research design I sought to *discover* what individuals believe about gossiping in the workplace, *test* some of these assertions and *examine* predicted causal relationships regarding workplace gossiping and its consequences. This approach has been informed through the idea of the dilemmatics of research design, as articulated by McGrath in particular (McGrath et al,

1982; McGrath, 1981). McGrath's understanding of the inevitability of shortcomings in terms of any single research project has certain overlaps with the concepts of internal and external validity. Moreover, his "three horned dilemma" of research design also incorporates a broader sense of ecologic/existential validity and is compatible with my chosen mix of inductive/ deductive methods applied to qualitative and quantitative data across my program of research.

The first study used in-depth interviews and grounded theory technique to uncover some specific themes found in the data. This was an inductive method applied to qualitative data, and situated in a constructivist paradigm as applied to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In this regard, I strategically avoided ideas of grand theorizing, and yet could also accept participant's reports in the interviews as being factual reports of their own experiences and theorizing about their world. This light appropriation of grounded theory is consistent with substantive theorizing, which is inherently contextual. I wanted to examine gossiping in workplaces, not gossiping in general. Thus the context of work is salient, and findings are not totalizing.

I focused upon workplace contexts and limited substantive theorizing with awareness. The context of work is important, for much time is spent by individuals at work, and it is salient to them for many reasons, both social and instrumental. Also, in chapter one, I earlier highlighted the problems related to definitions of gossip. While I do not purport to have solved this tricky issue, nevertheless I have not started from a stance of assumption whereby I could assume that everyone would regard gossip at work as the same. In short, I attempted to remain open to the key grounded theory question which is "What is going on here".

Study one offered results in three key areas or themes, these being: differing and contested definitions of gossip at work (containing both positive and negative possibilities), nuanced views of the veracity and acceptability of gossip at work, and understanding gossip as embedded in a nomology of antecedents and consequences at work. Aspects of these themes were then tentatively operationalized for use in study two.

Study two was designed to take these early findings and to test some of them in the very high internal validity context of a between/within factorial design experiment. One important and intuitive finding in the first study was the realization that creativity in investigating gossip at work was required. This is because the social prohibitions against gossip reasonably preclude observational methods such as participant observation and may also result in under reportage of one's own behavior. Essentially a social desirability bias could reasonably be expected to hamper research efforts. Consequently, in study two the concept of examining vicarious exposure to gossip emerged as an important idea and strategy. Asking participants in the experiment to respond to witnessing others gossip at work was a way to interrogate various constructs without putting participants in the situation of having to report their own (potentially) socially deviant behaviors. This had the consequence of requiring a realistic way to control conditions of this vicarious exposure to gossip at work in an effort to maintain consistency and thus preserve internal validity. This led to the use of filmed video vignettes which were scripted and shot in such a way as to ensure that the experimental manipulations were distinct. Participants then responded to short surveys concerning what they saw and how they felt as a consequence of their exposure to gossip in a workplace.

Building upon the findings of study two I wished to deepen my understandings of the consequences of some of the construct relationship tested in the vignette experiment. This was done with the awareness that question of external validity would arise from both the experimental method as well as the use of a working student sample for participants. Again, gossip is challenging to research because of social prohibitions and the dissertation had evolved to the point where I was now examining exposure to workplace gossip as a strategic way to maintain salient research questions while still taking a broad organizational behavior approach to the topic. Because gossip at work might conceivably be a random or even possibly a low base rate phenomenon, time and multiple observations seemed important issues to address in a third study. To this end, study three involved a nested data design. Participants kept a type of structured diary over a period of three weeks, with self report surveys filled out three times a week. Multilevel modeling allowed for the testing of hypotheses with observations nested within each individual. Organizational behavior research is often criticized for existing at the intersection of individual and group or organizational level analysis. However, this conflation of levels of analysis and subsequent constructs is precisely what makes for interesting and contextually situated research. Moreover, a frequent critique of positivist research is that it omits much of the substantive context of a phenomenon. However, nested data sets, when considered appropriately, are able to partially incorporate a sense of context within the analysis. At the same time, with appropriate analytic techniques we may usefully examine the very problematic intersection of different levels of analysis. In the case of study three, the “context” is the time-bound series of observations nested within an individual, thus an individual temporal consideration of the situation.

Taken together these three studies offer strong internal validity with moves towards greater external validity for the workplace context. This dissertation has been a sustained attempt to use a multi-method multi-study program of research to offer increasingly sophisticated findings of veracity to the topic of gossip at work. It is challenging to balance epistemological concerns with salient, creative and incrementally progressive research methods. The reward in such research is nuanced understanding, and interesting research which goes beyond the simple filling in of gaps in the literature, which is increasingly described as becoming problematic (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Another consequence of undertaking this type of research is also that there is some possibility that the findings could be of utility in workplaces. The next section reviews the findings obtained through this lens of utility.

Practical Implications

Practicing managers are concerned with outcomes and yet are poorly placed to shape and control attitudes towards a socially ubiquitous behavior such as gossiping. It is the content of the gossip and the workplace context intertwined which creates nuance not typically found in the prescriptive advice given to practitioners concerning workplace gossiping. Moreover, beyond ideas of banning or eliminating gossip, we also have evidence of managers using gossip as a tool for information acquisition. In so far as one can see gossip as a informal socializing mechanism (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Dunbar, 1996), and given the work of Meyer & Allen (1997, 1990) which illustrates a potential for negative effects on organizational commitment when organizations use informal socializing techniques on newcomers to the organization, managers use of gossip may be

an issue. This is an interesting because much of the propositional work in the limited literature regarding workplace gossiping tends towards a critical management studies bent, in that power is central to the analysis. Gossip is often seen as resistance or reclaiming of power in an organized content (Clegg & Itonson, 2009) extending to issues of class, gender and structure (e.g. Itonson & Clegg, 2008; Yue, 2008c; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Collins, 1994). It remains for future empirical inquires to determine the extent to which this is an issue of power, but the findings of this program of research suggest at a minimum that non work related gossip is understood as inappropriate and has consequences for job satisfaction, mental health, and the reputation of the organization itself. So what is a manager to do?

Being that one can presumably control one's own behavior, managers themselves should refrain from using personal gossip in the workplace. In terms of offering more than simple prohibitions, it makes sense to consider proactive ways in which a manger might model the type of behaviors which are acceptable. That is, perhaps the manager could use informal story telling (gossiping) about work related issues. In this regard, gossiping about work related content might usefully be compared to storytelling, and certain types of storytelling are linked with effective leadership practices.

Transformational leadership (see Bass & Avolio, 1994) and Collins' concept of level 5 leadership (Collins, 2006; 2001) are notable examples in which good leaders make use of compelling and salient stories linking the work context with other actors who are not necessarily present at the time. This process can be so compelling that the story lives on in the organization beyond the actors who initially told it and the context in which it was told (e.g. MacAulay, Yue, & Thurlow, 2010). This process has certain

features of similarity when compared with urban legends, which themselves are often cast in a sort of continuum with gossip and rumor (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007).

In short, the problem of controlling gossip in the workplace is that gossip as a form of anti managerial or organizational resistance might conceivably increase in response to attempts to control it. The use of the conceptual overlap between storytelling and gossip, particularly within a rubric of transformational and/or level 5 leadership, may be a way to successfully socially model appropriate gossip at work.

Future Directions

There are material effects upon people and organizations when gossip is conducted at work. In her recent book *Gossip and Organizations*, Waddington (2012) offers a framework for future directions in the gossip and organization field which clearly is a synthesis of earlier works such as that of Michelson, Itersen & Waddington (2010). In her book she outlines the case for the overlapping concepts of ethics, emotion, sensemaking, identity and power as situated within the boundary conditions of organizational communication and knowledge. For my part, I have not assumed particular constructs and instead, in a program of research, mimicked much of the classic scientific method process. Through induction and then later deductive testing across designs of varying internal and external validity I have asked basic questions about exposure to gossip at work.

In some ways the contribution of this thesis to the field is purposely mundane. In the rush to build theory and framework, and furthermore incorporate a critical management studies perspective into the study of gossip in organizations, I find that the

academy may have missed out on the benefits of more simplistic inquiry. Is it the context organized life that we are examining? I suggest that the totalizing nature of organization in modern life makes this perhaps too all inclusive. Instead I asked about workplaces, in fact places of paid employment. By narrowing the context to that which is salient and reflects the location aspect of a social space, I restrained myself from making the dissertation studies span such large conceptual domains. This has the benefit of offering a relatively high ecologic validity (Bryman et al, 2011: 78-79), meaning that individuals can recognize their own experiences in the results I have found.

In future work I can see the value of pursuing what can broadly be described as an antecedents and consequences model approach to the empirical study of gossip at work. In this way, we might incrementally build a nomology which is both theoretically rich and also maintains the closeness to the lived experience that I believe is useful in this area of research. Interestingly, this may also opens the door for more refined critical perspectives concerning gossip at work, in so far as critique of dominant perspectives often is best undertaken when there is an extant body of work to act as a counterpoise.

I furthermore see that interrogation of the intersections between storytelling and gossip at work are potentially both theoretically and practically useful. As Gabriel reminds us “Storytelling has always been an art of the people, of ordinary folk” (Gabriel, 2000: 9). He further goes on to illustrate that stories are founded in entertainment and are substantially performance based. His distinctions between stories, myths, fables and legends further illustrate that stories have much more in common with conventional notions of gossip than they would with, for example, rumours. This is of note, for his argument then extends to showing how stories are poetic in nature, in the

Aristotelian sense of poetic license (Gabriel, 2000: 10). This informs Gabriel's identification of four generic, and a further four secondary, poetic modes of storytelling (Gabriel, 2000: Tables 3.1 & 3.2, pages 84-85).

The study of organizational stories and storytelling spans a variety of epistemological and ontological understandings and consequently offers a rich variety of perspectives and findings concerning stories and the act of telling them. David Boje in particular has offered postmodern examinations of the performativity of telling stories in and about organizations in the mainstream management literature. His examination of stories about Disney through the lens of Tamaraland (Boje, 1995) situates competing discourses about the organization within the stories which are told. In this way a plurivocality is achieved in the sense that the stories are not specifically held to account for their particular veracity, but rather as multiple and shifting understandings of the individuals.

Boje's interest in the ongoing process of storytelling in organizations forms an important link with sensemaking (Boyce, 1996; Boje, 1991). As Boyce writes when summarizing Boje's 1991 work:

“He [Boje] demonstrated the management of sense making as storytellers and listeners send cues and make decisions about how much of the story to tell, how much to reference, and which interpretation is applied (p. 124). Skilled storytellers and story interpreters are effective organizational communicators, demonstrate understanding of organizational culture and history, and possess

skills that managers dealing with rapid change might well develop (Boje, 1989, 1991).” (Boyce, 1996: 18).

Indeed, the persistence and influence of networks contained within organizational stories is profound, to the extent that such stories ‘take on a life of their own’ in some cases with no particular requirement for the original storyteller to even be explicitly connected with the content or telling of the story (MacAulay, Yue & Thurlow, 2010).

If stories within organizations are persistent, powerful and far from being completely congruent, then so also the conceptual links between gossip and storytelling become much clearer. Gossip also is seen as existing in a contested, indeed unmanageable, organizational space (Gabriel, 1995; Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; van Iterson & Clegg, 2008) as are organizational stories (Gabriel 1995; Boje, 1995).

The literature concerning the telling of stories at work is clear: storytelling done well is fundamental to good communication and leadership (e.g. Driscoll & McKee, 2006). The extant gossip literature largely overlooks that the *form* of the exchange and consequently, storytelling could offer important insights. Many researchers have illustrated that organizational stories are powerful sensemaking (indeed sensegiving) devices, but the description of such stories often takes on a reified form, such that we forget that the site of communication/negotiation of stories is typically person to person and the transmission oral in nature. If gossip at work is power laden, and gossip is a fundamental to social organization, then the persistence or lack of persistence of certain narrative forms of gossip is an important factor to understand.

Given this thesis' investigation of gossip at work and organizational commitment, I see value in the empirical evidence concerning the link between storytelling in organizations and organizational commitment. McCarthy (2008) was able to uncover significant positive relationships between an individual's propensities for storytelling in organizations with their level of organizational commitment. Interestingly, his work then went on to examine stories content in terms of value congruence with organizational values and demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between the content of the story (congruence-wise) and the level of organizational commitment. These findings are conceptually compatible with my findings concerning gossip and affective organizational commitment and my pre thesis work concerning workplace gossip and organizational citizenship behaviours and friendliness (Yue & Kelloway, 2008b; Yue, 2007). Of note, however, is that in all these cases, the content of the gossip (and stories) is the focus. I am suggesting that the poetic/autopoetic (Gabriel, 2000; Cunliffe, 2002) form of the communications, rather than strictly the content of the gossip bear examination.

This dissertation began with the desire to examine gossip at work in an empirical manner. My overarching goal was to build a worthy foundation for future work in the domain. Through using a combination of inductive and deductive methods across qualitative and quantitative data, interesting results and strong ecologic validity have offered salient outcomes. At work, the implication of what gets said around the water cooler does not stay at the water cooler.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide for Study One

1. Tell me a bit about where you work and what your job is.
2. Please tell me about your experiences with workplace gossip.
 - a. What is it?
 - b. What isn't it?
 - c. Where does it happen?
 - d. Where doesn't it happen?
 - e. When does it happen?
 - f. With whom ?
3. Is gossip at work different from gossip elsewhere?
 - a. How?
 - b. Why?
4. What is your opinion of gossip at work-is it good or bad?
 - a. Why?
5. Why do people gossip?
 - a. Why do they gossip at work?
6. What is the content of gossip at work?
 - a. What do you talk about?
 - b. What do others talk about?
7. What do you think about people who gossip?
 - a. At work?
8. What are the outcomes of gossip at work?
 - a. For individuals?
 - b. For the organization?
9. What would happen if gossip at work were banned?
10. Do you have any final thought to share about workplace gossip?

Appendix B

Vignette Scripts for Study Two

- [1.a] Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Positive Content
- [1.b] Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Negative Content
- [2.a] Personal Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Positive Content
- [2.b] Personal Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Negative Content
- [3.a] Work Focused Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Positive Content
- [3.b] Work Focused Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Negative Content
- [4.a] Personal Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Positive Content
- [4.b] Personal Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Negative Content

Script [1.a]
[1.a] Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Positive Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was there and heard it myself... and he is definitely going to get the promotion.

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, he worked really hard on the Brooks account and finally got their business. The general manager was impressed with his efforts and said that there was no doubt that the senior associate position would be his.

Worker Two: Wow, good news for [third party]...

Script [1.b]

[1.b] Work Focused Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Negative Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was there and heard it myself... and he is going to get demoted if he is lucky... maybe even fired.

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, he dragged his heels on the Rivers account and eventually they just took their business elsewhere. The general manager was furious with his lack of effort and said that there was no place for that kind of incompetence here.

Worker Two: Wow, what an awful situation for [third party]...

Script [2.a]

[2.a] Personal Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Positive Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was there and heard it myself... and he and his wife are really happy and excited to be expecting a baby early next year!

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, they have wanted to have a family for years and he just can't stop talking about how happy they are.

Worker Two: Wow, good news for [third party]...

Script [2.b]

[2.b] Personal Gossip, Firsthand Knowledge, Negative Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was there and heard it myself... he and his wife are absolutely devastated that his father in law has got a really serious illness

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, they are getting the best medical help for her father, but things don't look so good...

Worker Two: Wow, what an awful situation for [third party]...

Script [3.a]

[3.a] Work Focused Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Positive Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was talking with Jim in accounting and he told me that [third party] is definitely going to get the promotion.

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, Jim told me that [third party] worked really hard on the Brooks account and finally got their business. Apparently, the general manager was impressed with [third party's] efforts and Jim said that there was no doubt that the senior associate position would be [third party's].

Worker Two: Wow, good news for [third party]...

Script [3.b]

[3.b] Work Focused Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Negative Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was talking with Jim in accounting and he told me that [third party] is going to get demoted if he is lucky... maybe even fired.

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, Jim told me that [third party] dragged his heels on the Rivers account and eventually they just took their business elsewhere. Apparently, the general manager was furious with his lack of effort and Jim said that said that the GM said there was no place for that kind of incompetence here.

Worker Two: Wow, what an awful situation for [third party]...

Script [4.a]

[4.a] Personal Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Positive Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was talking with Jim in accounting and he told me that [third party] and his wife are really happy and excited to be expecting a baby early next year!

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, Jim told me that they have wanted to have a family for years and [third party] just can't stop talking about how happy he and his wife are.

Worker Two: Wow, good news for [third party]...

Script [4.b]
[4.b] Personal Gossip, Second-hand Knowledge, Negative Content

Narrator: The following is a conversation between two workers which you observe taking place around the water cooler at a bank:

Worker One: Hey, [worker two] how was your weekend?

Worker Two: The usual...but I got a chance to check out the new golf course on Sunday...

Worker One: Any good?

Worker Two: Not bad, but I still like the Auburn Course better.

Worker One: You're not the only one...So have you the heard the latest about [third party]?

Worker Two: No-What's the story?

Worker One: Well, I was talking with Jim in accounting and he told me that [third party] and his wife are absolutely devastated that his father in law has got a really serious illness.

Worker Two: Really?

Worker One: Yup, Jim told me that they are getting the best medical help for her father, but things don't look so good...

Worker One: Worker Two: Wow, what an awful situation for [third party]...

Appendix C

Questionnaire Items for Study Two

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The content of the gossip was work related	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The content of the gossip was negative towards the person who was being gossiped about	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The person who told the gossip had first-hand knowledge of the information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
If an appropriate job in this bank was offered to me, I would accept the position ®	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
If I was considering a career in a bank, I would look at other banks before applying to this bank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would not be interested in this bank as a place of employment except as a last resort	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would actively discourage my friends from applying to this bank as a place to work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Based on this information, I would avoid this bank as a place of employment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It was appropriate to share this information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I could see myself doing the same thing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is important to share this sort of news	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would want to know this kind of information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
This sort of thing should NOT be talked about at work ®	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would trust that the information was true	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The information seems accurate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would be willing to repeat this information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sex	Male	Female					
Age	in Years						
Average hours worked in a week	in Hours						

Appendix D

Repeated Measures Questionnaire Items for Study Three

For the following questions please answer using the following scale below and circle the response which best applies to you:

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neither Disagree/Agree 4=Agree
5=Strongly Agree

Today I have heard positive and first hand work-related information about other people:

<u>From management/supervisors</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>From coworkers</u>	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard positive and second hand work-related information about other people:

<u>From management/supervisors</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>From coworkers</u>	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard positive and first hand personal information about other people:

<u>From management/supervisors</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>From coworkers</u>	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard positive and second hand personal information about other people:

<u>From management/supervisors</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>From coworkers</u>	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard negative and first hand work-related information about other people:

<u>From management/supervisors</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>From coworkers</u>	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard negative and second hand work-related information about other people:

From management/supervisors	1	2	3	4	5
From coworkers	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard negative and first hand personal information about other people:

From management/supervisors	1	2	3	4	5
From coworkers	1	2	3	4	5

Today I have heard negative and second hand personal information about other people:

From management/supervisors	1	2	3	4	5
From coworkers	1	2	3	4	5

Today my job got to me more than it should

1 2 3 4 5

The way I feel today, I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.

1 2 3 4 5

All in all, I am satisfied with my job.

1 2 3 4 5

Today I feel that I am really a part of my work group.

1 2 3 4 5

This section consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then circle the response which best applies to you. Indicate to what extent you feel this way right now, that is, at the present moment.

1=very slightly/not at all 2=a little 3=moderately 4=quite a bit
5=extremely

Interested	1	2	3	4	5
Distressed	1	2	3	4	5
Excited	1	2	3	4	5
Upset	1	2	3	4	5
Strong	1	2	3	4	5
Guilty	1	2	3	4	5

Scared	1	2	3	4	5
Hostile	1	2	3	4	5
Enthusiastic	1	2	3	4	5
Proud	1	2	3	4	5
Irritable	1	2	3	4	5
Alert	1	2	3	4	5
Ashamed	1	2	3	4	5
Inspired	1	2	3	4	5
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5
Determined	1	2	3	4	5
Attentive	1	2	3	4	5
Jittery	1	2	3	4	5
Active	1	2	3	4	5
Afraid	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix E

Research Ethics Board Approval Certificates



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