

UNDERSTANDING GOSSIP IN WORK ORGANIZATIONS: FROM AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Until recently gossip has been often portrayed as a trivial and even destructive behavior in work organizations. The purpose of this paper is to provide a more nuanced and balanced understanding of gossip as an adaptive socio-cultural learning practice in the workplace. From a multilevel evolutionary perspective, we emphasize that indirect reciprocity, a mechanism for the evolution of cooperation, underscores the emergence and the selective retention of gossip in the workplace. As evolutionary processes work at both individual and group levels, we also highlight that gossip has played the important roles of controlling free riders and sanctioning defectors by managing their reputations and indirectly enforcing cooperative group norms. Based on our evolutionary functional analysis, we present several propositions for future empirical studies, and discuss practical implications for managing gossip in contemporary work organizations.

Keywords: gossip, informal organizational communication, multilevel evolutionary theory

Talk is at the heart of all organizations. (Boden, 1994, p. 1)

Gossip as an evaluative talk about an absent third person is ubiquitous in our social lives. We spend two thirds of our conversation time gossiping (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994) and gossip often defines a social group (Gluckman, 1963; Tomasello, 2014). It has been proposed that a basic function of language is gossip and it has long been a part of our human nature (Barash, 2012; Dunbar, 1998). It has been also suggested that gossip is crucial for healthy social functioning (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Intriguingly, however, gossip has received little attention among management and organization scholars until quite recently (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017). The lack of attention to gossip may be due to its negative reputation as secretive, superficial and even malicious talk (Emler, 1994).

In fact, almost all of the major religious traditions have reinforced the negative stereotypes of gossip and strongly prohibited gossip in our social lives through moral prohibitions such as “An evil man sows strife; gossip separates the best of friends” (Proverbs 16:28 The Living Bible), “And spy not nor let some of you backbite others” (Qur’an 49:12), and “Avoid idle chatter and abstain from it” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2008, p. 52). There exist even widespread assumptions that gossip is ultimately destructive, and an organization with a considerable amount of gossip tends to be poorly

managed, internally divisive, and never achieves its full potential (Pallotta, 2010). Simply put, gossip has been often treated as a deviant and destructive workplace behavior.

From an evolutionary perspective, however, gossip is fundamental to our communication and social life. It has been suggested that gossip emerged in our evolutionary history as verbal grooming, which is an extended form of social grooming exhibited by other primates (Dunbar, 1998). Like many common human behavioral repertoires – such courting members of the opposite sex, altruism towards kin, deference towards authority figures – gossip was selectively retained due to its contribution to our survival and reproductive fitness. Fitness in this context refers to “a measure of the relative breeding success of an individual or genotype in a given population at a given time” (Oxford Dictionary of Biology, 2008, p. 251). In other words, gossip as a hardwired behavioral trait has an evolutionary base (Giardini & Wittek, 2019).

In terms of its multiple functions, gossip helps us, and helped our distant ancestors, forge social bonds with friends and allies, and avoid cheaters in our social networks, which ultimately increase our chance of survival and reproductive success (Dunbar, 2004; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, gossip is one of the key evolved mechanisms of human cooperation through indirect reciprocity: “if I scratch your back, my good example will encourage others to do the same and, with luck, someone else will scratch mine” (Nowak & Highfield, 2011, p. 54). Gossip as social currency often leads to building and managing good reputation and complex social interactions (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). In this respect, gossip is not frivolous, and it does not deserve the negative connotation it is typically accorded (Barash, 2012). Gossiping well, McAndrew (2019) argued, may be considered an important social skill rather than a tragic character flaw given that its multiple adaptive functions may stem from the pivotal role gossip has played in human evolution (Giardini & Wittek, 2019).

Hence gossip as a social phenomenon needs to be understood in a more nuanced and neutral manner to appreciate its adaptive functions in the workplace. In this paper we claim that gossip is fundamentally a bonding ritual, embedded in the social networks within organizations, and the origins of gossip are firmly rooted in our evolved psychological adaptations. Furthermore, we propose that gossip is essentially an adaptive socio-cultural learning practice which enables organizational members to make sense of social events and social dynamics in the workplace. We first discuss the evolutionary origins of gossip and then we describe adaptive functions of gossip at both individual and group levels. Finally, we discuss both theoretical and practical implications for managing gossip in the workplace.

UNDERSTANDING GOSSIP FROM AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

Gossip and reputation are natural selection’s gift to humanity. (Boehm, 2019, p. 269)

According to evolutionary psychology, which is the scientific understanding of the human mind and human behavior from a Darwinian evolutionary perspective, the human mind is a product of evolution by natural and sexual selection (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Buss, 2011). Over the millions of years of hominid evolution, any neural network that helped our hominid ancestors deal with adaptive problems that were fundamental to their survival and reproductive fitness was selectively retained in our brain (Edelman, 1987). Hence, the human mind is an evolved toolbox

sculpted by natural and sexual selection, consisting of cognitive modules that enabled our ancestors to solve problems successfully in their environment (Barkow et al., 1992; Buss, 2011). For example, our ancestors most likely used a variety of social strategies to attract suitable mates, to make social alliances, and to maintain power and status in the social hierarchy like modern humans do (Kenrick & Griskevicius, 2013).

In this paper we define gossip as the informal or casual talk between at least two people about absent third parties, typically involving socially evaluative information. Gossip is often shared through informal channels of communication (e.g., talk around the water cooler) and consists of information that is explicitly or implicitly evaluative (that is, casts a person in a positive or negative light), with implications for a person's social reputation. Thus, there must be at least three individuals for the exchange of gossip to take place: the gossiper, the listener, and the target person. The gossiper is the individual who transmits the socially relevant, sensitive, or secretive information. The listener is the individual who receives the information from the gossiper. The target person is the individual that the socially evaluative reputational information concerns. In addition, gossip can be either positive or negative and it can also be true or false. A gossiper can provide a listener with valuable social information if gossip turns out to be true, but the gossiper may also become vulnerable if the listener is not trustworthy and, especially when the content of gossip is negative and false.

ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONS OF WORKPLACE GOSSIP: A MULTILEVEL FRAMEWORK

Adaptive Functions of Gossip at the Individual Level

Bonding and forming social alliances. The high degree of sociality in our species suggests that our brains evolved to socially connect with others (Lieberman, 2013), and the emergence of gossip is firmly embedded in the evolution of our social mind (Dunbar, 1998). Gossip is often used interchangeably for other forms of informal communication such as rumor (DeFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Waddington, 2012). An important function of gossip is to bond friendship and social alliances (Brady et al., 2017). Rumor typically occurs in ambiguous or uncertain circumstances and its main function is to make collective sense of the threatening situation (Waddington, 2012). It has also been found that building relationships is one of the key reasons why virtual employees tend to engage in gossip (Blithe, 2014).

In fact, sharing gossip is an efficient way to foster intimacy and develop friendship. As gossip often involves sensitive information about others, it requires a certain amount of interpersonal trust. We are less likely to share personal and sensitive information with someone who is not reliable and trustworthy. Actually, individuals are more likely to share negative gossip with people with whom they have many friends in common (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). The connection between people sharing gossip is so strong that fMRI images of people sharing gossip show activity in the same brain regions (Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010). It is thus very likely that people prefer gossip to official channels of communication especially when they have a strong need for sharing sensitive and secretive information, for instance, regarding the politics of their organizations (Blithe, 2014). Hence we propose that

Proposition 1a: When the level of perceived trust between a gossip and a listener is high, the gossip will be more likely to share negative gossip about a target person with the listener.

Proposition 1b: When the level of perceived trust between a gossip and a listener is low, the gossip will deliberately share only neutral or non-malignant gossip about a target person with the listener.

Sharing reputational information: Gossip is often defined as “critical talk about third parties” (Gilmore, 1978, p. 92) focused on “the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting” (Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p. 25). Thus, gossip is far more than “idle talk” with no specific intentions or external goals (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994). It can be, and often is, strategically deployed to enhance or derogate status in a social context (Rosnow & Fine, 1976).

Gossip also facilitates the sensemaking process, especially in a new social environment. Sensemaking refers to the cognitive process of building internal representations of external worlds and construing the causal relations among people and objects to construct a functional map of social relationships (McAdams, 1993). Sensemaking often starts with chaos (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) followed by developing ideas, putting things into frameworks, and constructing meaning and mutual understanding (Waddington, 2012). It knits together several themes and patterns of social phenomena and reputational information of others into meaningful accounts that have coherence and sequence (Riessman, 1993). Hence the essence of sensemaking process is language and talk: everyday talk – including gossip – and repetition are the primary mediums through which people make sense of their social world (Boden, 1994; Dailey & Browning, 2014). From an evolutionary perspective, gossip also permits the creation of internal representations of others who are like to impact our fitness (Barkow, 1992). Therefore, the information of most concern includes the target persons’ general health (or history of illness), their physical appearance (which signals youthfulness and fertility), history of their short-term or long-term relationships, their social status in the hierarchy of power, their general reputations of competence and dependability, and their relationships with kin, non-kin friends, and social acquaintances. In other words, people tend to transmit the information through gossip that would have the greatest consequences for their survival and reproductive success (Piazza & Bering, 2008). Hence it is very likely that

Proposition 2: People will be most attuned to gossip about a third party of the same sex who is close to them in age.

Sex differences in gossip behavior: Workplace gossip is pivotal in terms of its capacity to help us navigate and even predict the behavior of other people in a social network (McAndrew, 2008). In fact, indirect reciprocity underscores the emergence of gossip as a linguistic device of collecting social reputations about hard-to-observe third parties (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). As those individuals with good reputations tend to get more help from others (Nowak, 2013), gossip allows us to socially discriminate cooperators from defectors, especially in non-recurring social exchange relationships. Therefore, gossip makes it possible to take into account the experience of other people and to acquire social information about third parties – both defectors and cooperators –

without the need for direct observation of them (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007).

Interestingly, however, it has been reported that men and women tend to exhibit different patterns of gossiping behavior. For instance, men, more so than women, typically use conversation as a tool for self-promotion and status enhancement (Dunbar, 2010; Tannen, 1994; Watson, 2012). This is probably due to the fact that men, in general, display their wealth and status when seeking mates. It has also been reported that women tend to exhibit a greater tendency to gossip in comparison to men (Davis et al., 2018), and are more likely to use gossip in an aggressive, competitive manner in order to damage the reputation of potential rivals (McAndrew 2014; Vaillancourt, 2013). Furthermore, younger women are more likely to gossip about rivals than are older women as the competition for mates is more intense during the reproductive phase of a woman's life (Massar, Buunk, & Rempt, 2012).

It is often the case that women tend to talk more about physical beauty and attractiveness in comparison with other women (Watson, 2012). This is the basis of how women compete among one another for men, and thus an important topic of gossip (Engeln, 2017). In other words, men are predicted to use gossip to promote themselves in regards to wealth and resource display more often while women are predicted to use gossip to promote themselves regarding subjects such as youth, physical appearance, and fidelity, which are very relevant to the evolutionary challenges recurrently faced by ancestral women. Therefore, it is likely that, in general,

Proposition 3a: Male targets of gossip will be more talked about in terms of their achievements, general competence, and their social status compared to female counterparts.

Proposition 3b: Female targets of gossip will be more talked about in terms of their relative physical appearance and attractiveness compared to male counterparts.

Managing status through social comparison. The information gleaned through gossip can also be used to make social comparisons. Social comparison is defined as “any process in which individuals relate their own characteristics to those of others” (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000, p. 491). Wert and Salovey (2004) identified four types of comparisons: comparison with similar others, downward social comparisons, upward social comparisons, and ingroup/outgroup comparisons. When one is interested in comparison for the purpose of validating opinions or estimating abilities, one tends to choose comparison persons who are similar to themselves. However, when someone wants to feel better, he can gossip about someone who is “worse off” in order to self-enhance. Conversely, by gossiping about someone who is better off might motivate one to partake in self-improvement.

Gossip also influences the power one individual has over another. Kurland and Pelled (2000) hypothesized that gossiping can affect the gossiper's reward, coercive, expert, and referent power over the listener, and that these relationships would be moderated by several factors including the sign of the gossip (i.e., positive or negative), the message credibility, work-relatedness of the gossip, the relationship quality of the gossiper and listener, and the organizational culture in which the message is transferred. For instance, an individual who is motivated by a desire for self-enhancement could use the influential nature of gossip to stigmatize a rival or influence listeners

by gossiping negatively about the rival in hope that it would damage the rival's reputation (i.e., defamation through indirect assault). Given that "those with less organizational power are more likely to recognize and perceive more ostracism by higher ups" (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013, p. 220), it is very plausible that people with less power tend to engage in gossip more frequently. Furthermore, as our interest in gossip evolved as a strategic tool to acquire fitness-enhancing information that can affect our social standing relative to others, negative information about those lower than us in social status would not be as useful as negative information about high status people or our rivals (McAndrew, 2019). Thus we propose that, in general,

Proposition 4: People tend to gossip more about individuals of higher or equal status than about those of lower status in the hierarchy of power in organizations.

Venting emotions through gossip. Gossip can be an effective means for expressing and managing emotions in organizations. People have often reported that they come to feel better after "letting off steam" through gossip (Waddington, 2012). Previous studies have also shown that individual difference variables influence the frequency of gossip. For instance, high anxiety was found to predict a greater likelihood to gossip (Anthony, 1973; Jaeger, Anthony, & Rosnow, 1980; Jaeger, Skleder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994; Walker & Blaine 1991). According to Altuntas, Altun, and Akyil (2014) who studies gossip among nurses in Turkish hospitals, anger, stress, and anxiety tend to be related to gossip behavior and approximately one third of the nurses in the sample indicated a reduction in the level of stress after having engaged in gossip.

Individuals high on the need for social approval also tend to gossip more frequently than those low on need for social approval (Keefer, 1993). In addition, the socially aloof and stigmatized, as well as their affiliates, are more likely to be the objects of negative gossip while those who exemplify socially championed values are likely to be the objects of positive gossip (Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan, 2008).

Furthermore, emotional arousal increases our tendency to share information with others. When we are physiologically aroused, we are more likely to share information with those around us. For instance, negative emotions such as anxiety and fear are positively related with arousal (Berger, 2011). It has also been reported that employees are more likely to seek information through gossip when communication with management is perceived to be limited, and when they are vulnerable due to increasing environmental uncertainty (Brownell, 1990). Therefore, we propose that:

Proposition 5a: High arousal emotions (e.g., excitement and anger) will lead to more gossip than low arousal emotions (e.g., contentment and depression).

In addition, humans have evolved to be more attuned to negative cues from uncertain environments mainly because negative information often signals unexpected danger or threats (Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2011). From an evolutionary perspective, it is more rational to commit a Type I error (i.e., false positive) than to not raise a false alarm under uncertain environmental contingencies. Thus, in general, workplace gossip will consist of negative blame more frequently than positive praise because negative gossip is often resulted from deviant incidents from expected behavioral rules and norms in organizations (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). In fact, faces paired with negative gossip tend to stay longer in our visual consciousness (Anderson, Siegal, Bliss-Moreau, & Barrett, 2011). Apparently, our brains automatically spotlight people embroiled

in scandal, which provides a strong neurobiological underpinning of gossip. Therefore, we propose that:

Proposition 5b: Negatively high arousal emotions (e.g., frustration, anxiety, and resentment) are expected to lead to more gossip than positively high arousal emotions (e.g., awe and amusement).

Adaptive Functions of Gossip at the Group Level

Evolutionary models of social behavior, including gossip, are likely to include the logic of multilevel – both individual and group – selection (Eldakar & Wilson, 2011). Under the condition of group selection, “the social group becomes a high-level organism and the members of the group acquire an organ-like status” (Wilson, Van Vugt, & O’Gorman, 2008, p. 7). For the efficient group selection to happen, groups need mechanisms to prevent individuals from moving too freely between them and other groups: for instance, cooperative social norms or loyalty to a group will help maintain group cohesiveness (Nowak & Highfield, 2011). We argue that gossip is another evolved mechanism for controlling free riders and sanctioning defectors by reinforcing altruistic group norms at the group-level. Simply put, a group can be a unit of selection, particularly when between-group selection overrides within-group selection (Wilson, 2012).

Sanctioning deviant behaviors to maintain group norms. It is thus likely that gossip has been selectively retained as a functional behavioral trait due to its adaptive functions at the group level, particularly when between-group competition overrides the within- group individual competition (Wilson et al., 2008; Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2000). For instance, if Group A utilizes gossip to identify a defector who fails to meet the implicit norms of mutual cooperation while Group B does not depend on gossip as a social control mechanism to detect a free-rider, then it is very plausible that Group A outcompetes Group B. In this scenario, Group A will have a selective advantage over Group B due to the beneficial contribution of gossip. Under similar conditions, gossip could have evolved as a social controlling device that serves the interests of a group – which outweigh the self-interests of individual group members (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; Wilson et al., 2000). Therefore, individuals may imitate the gossiping behavior of their ingroup members in order to avoid the chance of becoming ostracized and to share the distinctive features of the group.

Gossip also plays a pivotal role of maintaining group values and norms by spreading judgmental information about the perpetrator who violates them (Dunber, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Through gossip, group members learn acceptable behavioral norms more quickly and efficiently. In this way, gossip is “a vital coordinating mechanism for group members by distributing key information” (O’Gorman, Sheldon, & Wilson, 2008, p. 22). It also provides a policing mechanism which allows group members to punish free riders and keep powerful individuals in check (Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008). The threat of being gossiped about deters undesirable behaviors by these individuals, because if word got out, it would cause serious harm to their reputations. Thus we propose that:

Proposition 6: Gossip will be more frequently transmitted during transition periods when new expectations and norms are being negotiated in work groups.

Prosocial gossip shared among ingroup members. Gossip can transmit positive values and prosocial motives such as informing or warning other innocent group members (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Rosnow, 1977). Prosocial gossip in this context refers to “the sharing of negative evaluative information about a target in a way that protects others from antisocial or exploitative behavior” (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012, p.1015). Surprisingly, people would even go so far as to pay money to gossip when they could not affect the selfish person's outcome (Feinberg et al., 2012). In this respect, gossip can be understood as a form of “altruistic punishment,” particularly when strong negative emotions are aroused toward defectors (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). Piazza and Bering (2008), for example, found that the threat of gossip promoted generous behavior when an individual was given the opportunity to enhance their reputation (at the expense of others) because those who violate group norms run the risk of being stigmatized through gossip. Wu, Balliet, and Van Lage (2015) also reported that gossip tends to promote generosity “when one shares future interdependence with the gossip recipient(s)” (p. 928). In analyses of three case studies in different contexts, Kniffin and Wilson (2010) found that group-level rewards can facilitate group-beneficial gossip. Therefore, negative gossip can also be prosocial when it warns others about those individuals with hostile intentions and bad reputations. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 7: Pro-social altruistic gossip tends to be shared more frequently among members of closely-knit ingroups than those of loosely-knit outgroups.

DISCUSSION

From an evolutionary perspective, we have underscored that gossip is an evolved psychological adaption that has helped our ancestors to explore their social terrain and make sense of their social environments, including the dominance hierarchy and power dynamics. We consider workplace gossip to be functional, as it provides an indirect way to imitate social strategies exhibited by successful group members, thus helping nascent members to collect reputational information about other group members through vicarious social learning. In this way, gossip is a natural way of learning of a social world indirectly to get ready for action in dynamic social networks and thus provides an important mechanism for socio-cultural learning in organizations (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004).

The ubiquity of gossip can be attributed to the fact that it satisfies many basic human needs. Gossip satisfies the need for friendship and for belonging by fostering intimacy, the need for sense-making by reducing the ambiguity of the social environment, and the need for control by providing power to individuals. Hence, the informative nature of gossip allows all individuals involved to more rapidly develop a sufficient and accurate understanding of self, others, and their social environments. Gossip has also shown to be adaptive at serving the group-interests such as communicating and enforcing group norms, assisting cultural and organizational learning, and maintaining close networks of friends and social alliances, all contributing to enhanced ingroup cohesion.

Although we have highlighted positive functions of gossip in the workplace, this does not suggest that gossip *necessarily* makes a group or a community more cohesive or functional. Instead, as we argued, gossip provides a mechanism that prevents the dominance and exploitation of a powerful

figure in the group or free riders who easily abuse the goodwill and costly contributions of other members of the collective. This is why gossip can be a powerful and adaptive mechanism of social control and regulation, particularly in small group settings (Hafen, 2004).

Until quite recently, gossip has been still a contested subject with tainted reputation in the field of management and organization studies (Brady et al., 2017). Gossip is often perceived to be the unmanaged – or unmanageable – dark side of an organization (Gabriel, 1995) and it has been treated like “toxic gas” (Waddington, 2012). The presumption that even a low level of toxicity is harmful to individual and organizational health is widespread. It is undeniable that there exists harmful and toxic gossip in organizations which threatens the viability of work groups (Beersma, Van Kleef, & Dijkstra, 2019). And gossip may be inaccurate and may have originated from malicious intentions or pure jealousy. Paradoxically, however, the metaphor of gossip as a toxin reveals a positive function of gossip. If rampant gossip reflects a high level of toxicity in organizations, then it may indicate dysfunctional organizational climate and malfunctioning organizing processes and practices. In this respect, gossip is a barometer of organizational health because it functions as an early warning system because excessive gossip “may be a surface manifestation of underlying organizational problems” (Waddington, 2012, p. 124).

There are still questions that we hope future studies would shed more light on. For instance, what factors facilitate prosocial altruistic gossip in organizations? Does the gender composition of a group affect its proclivity to gossip? What workplace characteristics foster toxic gossip? Under what conditions does gossip intensify our almost built-in predisposition for ingroup and outgroup classification? And under what conditions does gossip become organizational tacit knowledge? In other words, could gossip be leveraged in the organization’s favor as a means of transmitting vital information? Furthermore, there should be some investigation on the role that gossip might play in the process of sensemaking at work. For instance, given that we tend to make social meaning out of interpersonal exchanges and interpretive rumination of those social interactions, gossip may be used as raw materials for constructing meaning in organizations (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

From an evolutionary psychological perspective, one of the key practical implications is that it is almost impossible to control or eliminate gossip completely in the workplace (Labianca, 2010; Nicholson, 1997, 2000). As Boden (1994, p. 4) succinctly summarized, “most organizations run in the ‘informal mode’ *all the time*” (emphasis in original). Gossip is part of human nature, firmly embedded in our adapted emotional reactions against social isolation and perceived unfairness and injustice. Practically speaking, therefore, it may be unrealistic or even undesirable for organizations to stop employees from gossiping. The apparent irrelevance of gossip as idle talk may have unexpected positive consequences such as “maintaining connections among parts of the organizations that require few regular connections” (March & Savon, 1988, p. 432).

Furthermore, given that fear of social ostracism is firmly rooted in our evolutionary history of living in small foraging groups (Dunbar, 2004; Lenski, 2005), it is not surprising that we negotiate our social relationships by making sense of our social world by constantly utilizing our inherited “mind-reading” capacity—that is, our capacity to infer the intentions and emotions of others (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Our social environments are not pre-given or fixed; instead, our social environments are enacted upon by us with specific intentions and goals in mind. In this regard,

gossip as an informal medium of organizational communication also provides a socio-cultural learning mechanism for a collective reconstruction of reality (March & Savon, 1988) in which existing explanations are modified and new interpretations are elaborated.

One of the key managerial challenges is therefore “to detect, discern, and differentiate good, bad, and toxic gossip” (Waddington, 2012, p. 130). One helpful approach to this challenge is to regard gossip as potentially valuable and useful “soft” information for collective awareness of underlying organizational problems. It would help shift attention away from thinking of gossip as a problem to be ignored or silenced to treating it as raw materials that could be transformed into organizational tacit knowledge. Therefore, practitioners are advised to develop a more nuanced view of gossip because people use gossip for noble purposes (i.e., prosocial and group serving) under specific conditions (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). We believe that this approach would be more realistic and professional than adopting a blanket ‘do not gossip’ policy in contemporary work organizations.

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