

Believability and Purpose of Organizational Gossip

An Empirical Examination

Asuman Akdoğan^a, Selen Oflazer Mirap^b and Ayşe Cingöz^c

^{ab}Erciyes University, The Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences,
P.O. Box 38039, Kayseri Türkiye. Tel: (352) 437 49 37
akdogana@erciyes.edu.tr, oflazer@erciyes.edu.tr

^cNevşehir University, The Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences,
Avanos Yolu, P.O. Box 50300, Nevşehir, Türkiye. Tel: (384) 215 20 07
acingoz@nevsehir.edu.tr

Abstract

Gossip is a way of informal communication in social settings and is a complex phenomenon. Gossip has continued its existence over centuries, against the eradication attempts of various religious and cultural pressures. Non-obligatory talking about absent third persons is called gossip. Although concept of gossip was examined in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology and its antecedents and consequences were attempted to determine. Organizational gossip was not researched enough until Noon and Delbridge (1993) drew attention to its importance and studied this subject. Since then, organizational gossip has been a subject of organizational researches. But most research about workplace gossip is theoretical and there are limited numbers of empirical studies. Gossip was considered to be a “bad” thing and generated negative results. Depending on this approach, it was suggested to eliminate gossip in the workplace. But recently it has been noticed that, gossip can not be eliminated in social environments and also gossip may be a “good” thing and it may have positive functions for the organizations. If organizational gossip is managed effectively, it may have positive effects for the organization. For this reason, workplace gossip should be researched and its antecedents and consequences should be determined.

This study is a threshold in gossip researches. Purpose of the empirical study is to measure the employee’s perceptions about believability of the gossip source, perceptions relating to the purpose of specific gossip messages and perception of politicalism of gossip in the workplace. Results show that employees’ believability toward gossip message in workplace is not high but perception of politicalism is above average. Also, participants believe that gossip in workplace is conducted for influencing others and building intimacy instead of informative and entertaining purpose. According to this result some recommendations are listed for managers to manage gossip in their organizations.

Introduction

There are many ways to transfer information from one person to another. Especially in organizational level, there is an intense effort to control and formalize this information transfer process but the role of informal communication cannot be negligible. Gossip is a way of informal communication in social settings and is a complex phenomenon. Gossip has continued its existence over centuries, against the eradication attempts of various religious and cultural pressures.

Non-obligatory talk about absent third persons is called gossip. Gossip may be defined as the provision of information by one person to another about an absent third person and/or event. Gossip is a social activity, since at least three people are involved in gossip process (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Oxford dictionary* defines gossip as a casual conversation or unsubstantiated reports about other people. Definition of gossip can range from an all encompassing generic term concerning the exchange of social information and knowledge, to a much narrower term relating to evaluative talk about a person not present. The diversity of definition can be attributed to different disciplinary perspectives which focus on varying degrees upon the context, content and function of gossip (Waddington and Fletcher, 2005).

The grapevine is the transmission medium for communication among members of an organization's informal organization thus a prime medium for the spread of gossip (Dowd ve Davidhizar, 1997). The importance of this informal structure is often highlighted by researchers, but it is known that managers do not effort enough to control it. The main reason of this neglect is flexible and resistant structure of informal organization. Although it is often assumed that grapevine circulates only false information, this is not true. Grapevine usually attempts to pass on accurate information, but a number of factors (e.g. management that only gives information "as needed") contribute to spread of false information (Dowd ve Davidhizar, 1997). Managers that want to create an effective and harmonious working environment should not ignore the grapevine and try to make the grapevine useful for their organizations. At this point, some recommendations for the managers are (Dowd ve Davidhizar, 1997): not overusing the grapevine, assessing information from the grapevine with caution, using information judiciously and without recrimination and not substituting the grapevine for other forms of communication. Grapevine is the spreading environment of gossip, thus monitoring grapevine will reduce the negative effects of gossip.

General approach about gossip was that, it is a "bad" thing and it may lead to negative consequences. It was thought that, gossip contains false information, people gossip instead of working by this way it reduces performance of both employees and organization. Depending on this approach, it was suggested to take precautions to eliminate gossip in organization. But recently it has been noticed that, gossip can not be eliminated in social environments such e.g. organizations and it is also understood that, gossip can be a "good" thing. In fact, if gossip is managed effectively it can provide benefits for organizations (Noon ve Delbridge, 1993; Dowd ve Davidhizar, 1997; Wittek ve Wielers, 1998; Johnson ve Indvik, 2003; Michelson ve Mouly, 2004). Consequently, managers -who want to provide an organization with better communication environment- must realize that gossip may have positive functions for their organization and take measures to manage gossip.

Functions and Consequences of Gossip

Rosnow (2001) organized the functions of gossip into categories of information, influence and intimacy. First, the informational function is referred to as the news-bearing function (i.e., knowledge about other individuals and the community). For example, gossip may function as a source of information about what is occurring with co-workers receiving promotions, being fired, etc. In that regard, from a behavioral analytic standpoint, gossip is a function of environmental ambiguity. Rosnow (2001) suggested that gossip is increased when environmental situations (or contingencies) are unclear and organizational rules and information are not precise. According to Rosnow (2001), the second function of gossiping is the influence function which is used to control other people's actions. For instance, a manager may talk to an employee -who needs improvement- about another employee who is an exemplary worker. This type of gossip may influence the behavior of the listener (in this

* www.askoxford.com

case the employee whose performance requires improvement) because the manager is communicating informally the type of behavior he or she expects. Rosnow (2001) identified intimacy as the third function for gossiping. This function promotes the establishment of socialization between individuals that may lead to friendship or a reference group that shares similar values. From a behavior analytic standpoint, the “intimacy function” promotes the establishment of shared history and environmental familiarity between the speaker and listener (Houmanfar ve Johnson, 2003). Gossip can also be used purely for entertainment, as a way to pass the time. Coworkers may gossip about other employees’ habits as they watch the clock, waiting until leaving time from office (Berkos, 2003). Thus entertaining can be expressed as another function of gossip. Briefly gossip may have both positive and negative consequences for the organization. To get benefits from gossip’s functions managers must try to manage and provide a suitable environment for “good” gossip.

There are positive and negative consequences of gossip both at individual and organizational level. Gossip decreases the stress of individuals, helps to obtain the required information quickly, and provides to share feelings, values, opinions and experiences. By this way it helps to satisfy social needs. At the organizational level, gossip drives solidarity and commitment in the working environment, helps adapting to changes, contributes to the solution of problems, transmits information more rapidly than the formal channels. Furthermore managers can often be better placed to measure the early effects of new policies and procedures by gauging workers reaction against them (Dowd ve Davidhizar, 1997; Michelson ve Mouly, 2004). Gossip is also a process by which groups both maintain and perpetuate themselves (Noon ve Delbridge, 1993).

If this process can not be managed well, negative outcomes such as divisiveness, loss of control of top management, ruin of image/reputation, passing on of false information, wastage of time, despondency and formation of negative opinions may appear (Michelson ve Mouly, 2004). Gossip is inevitable for organizations, so the first step to manage this process is to become aware of this reality and its consequences. After this, antecedents of gossip must be determined and precautions must be taken to benefit from this process.

Gossip Research in Organizational Studies

Although concept of gossip was examined in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology and its antecedents and consequences were attempted to determine, gossip in workplace was not researched until Noon and Delbridge (1993) drew attention to its importance. They called for serious analysis and study into organizational gossip raising a number of key questions: Are some organizations more prone to gossip than others? Is there a link between gossip and types of work process or occupational groups? How conscious are individuals of their gossip strategies? Are there different types of organizational gossip/gossipers? Can the gossip process be managed? Could it be, or is it a system of managerial control? Could it be manipulated as a change agent? Since then, some researches have been carried out but there are not enough studies to make generalizations about organizational gossip. Most researches about organizational gossip are theoretical and there are limited numbers of (Leblebici and Yıldız, 2008; Waddington, 2005; Waddington and Fletcher, 2005; Berkos, 2003; Wittek and Wielers, 1998) empirical studies. It is difficult to conceptualize and measure organizational gossip because of its multidisciplinary perspectives and complex structure. For this reason, research for organizational gossip needs to be done step by step. Analysis level and method should be carefully detected. To conceptualize organizational gossip more empirical research should be carried out.

Methodology

Purpose

Purpose of this empirical investigation is to measure the employees' perceptions about believability of the gossip source, perceptions relating to the purpose of specific gossip messages and perceptions of politicalism of gossip in the workplace and look for the differences in these factors according to sectoral and individual characteristics. This research is undertaken as a threshold. Because comprehensive research about organizational gossip has not been conducted yet. The results of this study will provide direction to our next studies in organizational gossip.

Instruments

Data was obtained through survey. The Gossip Source Believability Scale (GSBS), Gossip Purpose Scale (GPS) and Perception of Individual Politics Scale (PIPS) that are developed by Berkos (2003) are used. In the directions part of survey, participants were asked to read a story between two employees to answer the questions of all three scales. The original story in Berkos's (2003) is adopted according to Turkish Culture in order to get more accurate answers.

Believability is the perceptions of truth and the absence of lies of gossip message. The Gossip Source Believability Scale (GSBS) was used to measure perceptions of believability of the gossip source. The GSBS is a 8-item Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In our research Cronbach's alpha for the GSBS was .80.

Individual perceptions of the purpose of specific gossip messages were measured using the gossip Purpose Scale (GPS). The GPS is an 20-item Likert-type scale measuring participant's perceptions of the purpose of a specific gossip message. Four subscales measure the purpose of gossip as informative (news-bearing) (5 items), influencing others (5 items), building intimacy (5 items) and to entertain (5 items). This scale was also ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Cronbach's alpha for the scale measuring the gossip purpose was .86.

Politicalism is the degree of organizational politics that is conducted by an organization, group or an individual. Several political tactics may be enacted through spreading organizational gossip. The PIPS is a 10-item Likert-type scale, also ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Cronbach's alpha for the PIPS scale was .84.

Sampling

The research has been carried on in Kayseri which is one of the industrialized cities of Turkey. 700 questionnaire forms were sent to respondents, 417 forms were filled in and returned (a 59.5 percent response rate). These participants were from manufacturing, banking and health sectors. One hundred and thirty six participants (29.7%) were from manufacturing sector, 187 (44.8%) were from health sector and 107 (25.4%) were from banking sector. Previous research (Michelson ve Mouly, 2004; Waddington, 2005) argued that, there are specific differences between sectors about organizational gossip. So data were obtained from these three sectors.

Females made up 55,4% (n=231), males made up 42,7% (n=178) and 1,9% (n=8) did not indicate their sex. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 57 years, M=29,5 years, SD=6.06 years, with organizational tenure ranging from 1 to 30 years, M=5.57 years, SD=4.84 years. Participants are working for their current organizations from a range 1 to 20 years, M=3.09 years, SD=3.44.

One hundred and eighteen participants (28,3%) selected blue-collar worker as their job title, 116 (27,8%) selected health sector worker, 102 (24,5%) selected administrative staff, 43 (10,3%) selected technical staff, 32 (7,7%) selected management/executive. One hundred and fortyseven (35,3%) of the participants are educated at secondary school level, 140

(33,6%) at university level, 88 (21,1%) at highschool level, 28 (6,7%) at primary level and 11 (2,6%) at graduate level.

Data analysis and results

Means, standard deviations and correlations between variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Between Research Variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Believability	2.48	.79					
2. Informative	2.70	.98	.238(**)				
3. Influencing	3.23	.77	.054	.436(**)			
4. Intimacy	3.04	.93	-.011	.207(**)	.419(**)		
5. Entertain	2.32	1.03	.040	.174(**)	.067	.174(**)	
6. Politicalism	3.17	.67	-.235(**)	.061	.220(**)	.254(**)	.147(**)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 1 participants believability about gossip source in the workplace is low (M=2.48, SD=.79). When result of participant's perceptions of the purpose about specific gossip message evaluated, it is seen that influencing others (M=3.23, SD=.77) and building intimacy (M=3.04, SD=.93) stick out against informative (M=2.70, SD=.98) and entertaining (M=2.32, SD=1.03). Participants perception of politicalism is above average (M=3.17, SD=.67).

According to the correlation analysis, believability has a high and significant relationship both informative purpose (positive relationship) and politicalism (negative relationship). Also, politicalism has positive correlation with influencing, building intimacy, and entertaining purposes in turn.

One-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted to test differences in believability, purpose of gossip and politicalism among sectors and individual characteristics such as sexuality, age, tenure, job title, and education. Factors that have significant differences in between are listed below.

- There is a difference between sectors about influencing others (F=8.140, sig=.000) and building intimacy (F=9.486, sig=.000) purposes. Employees' perceptions are highest in banking sector while lowest in health sector.

- There isn't any difference in believability, purpose of gossip and politicalism according to sexuality.

- There is a difference in building intimacy (F=2.784, sig=.041) purpose according to age. Especially employees' over 40 state that purpose of gossip is to build intimacy in a lower level.

- A significant difference in believability (F=8.396, sig=.000) and politicalism (F=3.873, sig=.022) according to tenure is determined. As tenure increases the believability decreases, at the same time politicalism increases.

- Participants that have higher educational level perceive lower building intimacy purpose (F=2.819, sig=0.25).

- There are significant differences in influencing (F=6.328, sig=.000) purpose and building intimacy (F=4.834, sig=.001) according to job title.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we examined gossip in a theoretical way and researched the employees' perceptions about believability of gossip source, perceptions relating to the purpose of specific gossip messages and perception of politicalism of gossiper in the workplace empirically.

General approach about gossip was that, it is "bad" thing and it may lead to negative consequences. It was thought that gossip contains false information, people gossip instead of working, by this way it reduces performance of both employees and organizations. Depending on this approach, it was suggested to take precautions to eliminate gossip from organization. But recently it has been noticed that, gossip can not be eliminated in social environments e.g. organizations and it is also understood that gossip can be a "good" thing. Because there are positive consequences of gossip both at individual and organizational level. Acquiring these benefits depend on managing gossip process effectively.

According to our analyses results, participants believability about gossip source in the workplace is below average. Notwithstanding, participants perception of politicalism is above average. In addition, believability has a high and significant relationship both informative purpose (positive) and politicalism (negative). In this point it can be said that, if employees' perceive that gossipers behave politically to perform their aims, they don't believe gossip message. Also if they find the believability of gossip message is high they think that gossip is conducted to inform others.

When results of participants' perceptions about the purpose of a specific gossip message evaluated, it is seen that influencing others and building intimacy stick out against informative and entertaining. Informative purpose is important for managing gossip. For this reason, managers should take precautions to draw attention to informative purpose of gossip.

Another striking result is that, there is not any difference in believability and politicalism according to age, but there is a difference in tenure. As tenure increases the believability decreases and politicalism increases. In this context, it may not be wrong to say that, organizational environment influences the individuals' perception about gossip.

Analyses show that the average of manager's responses to informative purpose of gossip is lower than other employee. Managers should be aware of informative function of gossip and try to use this function to benefit from gossip. But in our sample managers are not aware of this function. This result is one of the important contributions that is conducted gossip research through our study.

Several recommendations are presented in the literature about managing organizational grapevine and gossip. Although these are limited for the lack of comprehensive researches in workplace gossip. In this context, we listed some advices for business managers depending on the literature and results of our empirical research. As expressed a few times before, to become aware of importance of gossip in the work place is beginning point to draw benefit from it. Managers should ascertain that, gossip cannot be removed from workplace and gossip is not a "bad" thing, even organization can benefit from gossip.

The most important point in managing grapevine and gossip is to create communication channels that work effectively. Every individual in the organization should easily access the information that he/she needs. Organizational short and long term goals must be identified and shared. Employees' must be informed about important decisions and changes in organizational context continuously. Also it's very important not to substitute the grapevine for other forms of communication, assessing information from the grapevine with caution, using information judiciously and without recrimination and not overusing the grapevine.

We acknowledge our study has some limitations. We cannot make generalizations about sectors, job titles of individual characteristics because our study is held in a specific

environment and limited sample. To make generalizations, more extensive work must be done. This work was a threshold for our gossip research and we are planning to direct our next gossip research according to the result of this study. Also our methodology will be improved in the future according to difficulties that we experienced in this study.

References

- Berkos, K. M. 2003. The Effects Of Message Direction and Sex Differences On The Interpretation of Workplace Gossip, Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College (Doctoral Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2003).
- Dowd, S. B., Davidhizar, R., & Dowd L. P. 1997. Rumors and Gossip: A Guide for the Health Care Supervisor. *The Health Care Supervisor*, 16(1), 65–70.
- Houmanfar, R., & Johnson R. 2003. Organizational Implications of Gossip and Rumor. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour Management*, 23(2/3), 117-138.
- Johnson, P. R., & Indvik, J. 2003. The Virtual Water Cooler: Gossip As Constructive/Destructive Communication in the Workplace. *Proceedings of the Academy of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict*, 7(1), 25-30.
- Leblebici, D. N., & Yıldız, H. H. 2008. Örgütsel Yaşamda Dedikodunun Algılanışı ve Araçsallığı, 16. *Ulusal Yönetim ve Organizasyon Kongresi Bildiriler Kitabı*, 335-339.
- Michelson, G., & Mouly, S. 2000. Rumour and Gossip in Organisations: a Conceptual Study. *Management Decision*, 38(5), 339-346.
- Michelson, G., & Mouly, S. 2002. ‘You Didn’t Hear it From Us But...’: Towards an Understanding of Rumour and Gossip in Organizations. *Australian Journal of Management*, 27, Special Issue, 57-65.
- Michelson, G., & Mouly, S. 2004. Do Loose Lips Sink Ships?: The Meaning, Antecedents and Consequences of Rumour and Gossip In Organizations. *Corporate Communications*, 9(3), 189-201.
- Noon, M., & Delbridge, R. 1993. News From Behind My Hand: Gossip in Organizations. *Organization Studies*, 14(1), 23-36.
- Waddington, K. 2005. Using Diaries to Explore the Characteristics of Work-Related Gossip: Methodological Considerations from Exploratory Multimethod Research. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, (78), 221-236.
- Waddington, K., & Fletcher, C. 2005. Gossip and Emotion in Nursing and Health-Care Organizations. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 19(4/5), 378-394.
- Wittek, R., & Wielers, R. 1998, Gossip in Organizations. *Computational & Mathematical Organization*, 4(2), 189–204.