

Relational Ruin or Social Glue? The Joint Effect of Relationship Type and Gossip Valence on Liking, Trust, and Expertise

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Abstract: Although scholars have discussed the occurrence of gossip in social situations, gossip's function as a social influence tool has received little theoretical attention. Of particular interest is the issue of whether gossip is untrustworthy, leading to relational demise, or whether gossip can lead to perceived liking, trust, and expertise. The prediction was made that whether gossip acts as relational ruin or social glue depends on the valence of the gossip and the type of relationship among the communicators. It was proposed that source cue perceptions will be the function of an interaction between relationship type and gossip valence. Specifically, friends' judgments will not be affected by gossip valence, but strangers' assessments of liking, trust, and expertise will increase when gossip is positive and will decrease when gossip is negative (when controlling for propensity to gossip). An experiment was designed to test these predictions. The data indicated that both positive and negative gossip are perceived negatively for both friends and strangers.

Communication researchers have long preached the importance of the source of information. Communicators should be seen as likeable, expert, and trustworthy—especially given the impact that source cues have on subsequent attitude change and on perceptions of the communicator. In fact, studies have shown that the credibility of the source of information affects message receptivity, processing, and persuasion (Benoit, 1991; Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981; DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Hass, 1981; Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983; McCracken, 1989; Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978a; Sternthal, Phillips, & Dholakia, 1978b). In general, messages delivered by high, compared to low, credibility sources tend to elicit greater persuasion from audience members, as revealed by a number of reviews of the literature (Hass, 1981; Sternthal et al., 1978a).

Although research is clear that source cues such as liking, expertise, and trustworthiness are important, research is not as clear on how everyday interpersonal interactions build, change, and affect such perceptions. In fact, most research on the impact of source cues induces characteristics of the source and subsequently examines the effect of that experimental induction on attitudes (for example, see Heesaker et al., 1983). More rarely are source cues examined as the primary dependent variable(s) (except see Addington, 1971; Calhoun, Cann, Selby, & Magee, 1981; Duangkamol, 1993). Understanding how everyday interpersonal communication affects, even builds, perceptions of a source is important. Specifically, it is argued that message strategies employed by the source will impact perceptions of that source.

Although gossip is one of the most common forms of communication, it is one of the least studied. A possible explanation is that defining gossip is challenging. Although the Oxford English Dictionary defines gossip as, "The conversation of (a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattle); idle talk, groundless rumor, tittle-tattle," this definition ignores the positive consequences of gossip. Indeed, gossip may facilitate or inform important outcomes depending upon the surrounding circumstances. Thus, a more neutral definition of gossip is adopted, one that marks the kind of communication transaction without valence. For the purpose of this study, gossip is defined as evaluative talk about a person who is not present (Eder & Enke, 1991).

Gossip is a prevalent part of social life (Mettetal, 1983; Nicholson, 2001) and organizational behavior (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998). Across economic, social, and cultural divides there may be but one cultural truism: we gossip about one another. Yet, gossip's function as a social influence tool has received little theoretical attention. People gossip with little or no idea of its impact on their perceived expertise, liking, or trustworthiness. And, although scholars agree that gossip is a persistent and prevalent part of social life, there is disagreement on the affect of gossip on perceptions of the gossiper. Whether gossip is a communicative taboo or whether gossip functions to build positive perceptions is moot. In this paper it is posited that gossip can function as both social glue and relational ruin depending on the kind of gossip employed and the target of the gossip. Nonetheless, both paradigms are reviewed subsequently.

Gossip as Relational Ruin

Originally developing out of the practice of sharing information or news with a good family friend, for some gossip evolved into a negative term most often referring to an act conducted by women (Rysman, 1976, 1977). Rysman (1977) claims that gossip is distinguishable from other forms of communication in that it is not trustworthy. He argues that both the sender and the receiver share this distinction. Rysman contends, "both sender and receiver must suspend their normal standards of credulousness in order for there to be a competent exchange of gossip" (p. 64). Further, Nicholson (2001) writes about the dark side of gossip:

Negative gossip about third parties, who of course have no opportunity to defend themselves, is a dangerous game that can rebound on the gossiper. To be good at malicious gossip requires a high degree of subtlety and skill. The trick is to appear to be sympathetic to the victim while holding him below the waterline with implicit denigration. Most people find this distasteful (p. 44).

Given this perspective, one can infer how receivers perceive the level of trustworthiness and expertise of a gossiper. That is, if the information relayed is viewed as untrustworthy, perhaps so is the communicator of the information. According to McCroskey (1966), credible communicators are persons who are not only experts on the topic, but also send this knowledge in a truthful and honest manner. Hence, gossipers might be viewed as non-credible communicators. Additionally, although gossip can function both to compliment and derogate another, "gossip is often perceived as a dangerous weapon, one that can ruin reputations, poison relationships and halt careers. A gossip can be referred to eruditely as a quindnunc or colloquially—and disdainfully—as a *yenta*" (Westen, 1996, p. 46).

Gossip as Social Glue

Another theoretical viewpoint presents gossip as a healthy social activity (see Dunbar, 1992, 1996) serving to bring people together and build cohesion. In fact, extant data indicate that gossip strengthens group bonds, creates stronger group identification, clarifies group boundaries (Colson, 1953; Gluckman, 1963; Hannerz, 1967), provides social comparison tools, raises perceived status and power of self, and is entertaining (Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 1994). Scholars have also discussed the pleasures people experience from performing the act of gossip, such as being the source of information and being humorous (Nicholson, 2001). It has also been noted that making others laugh is a socially valued accomplishment (Morreall, 1994). Therefore, if persons who gossip are viewed as building group cohesion and interpersonal ties, it also stands that they will be viewed as more likeable. Likeability is tied to perceptions of expertise (see Cialdini, 1993).

Whether gossip leads to relational ruin or social glue depends on several factors. Subsequently, it is argued that the effect gossip has on liking, expertise, and trustworthiness will be affected by the valence of the gossip, who is doing it, and whether or not the target has a high or low propensity to gossip.

Relationship Type

One of the key distinctions affecting perceptions of gossip is the relationship between the gossiper and the receiver. In particular, gossip will be perceived differentially depending on whether a relationship is communal or exchange. Although Hannerz (1967) proffered that similar information may or may not be considered gossip depending on the source of the information, and it is often assumed that people only share gossip with those to whom they are close, this is unlikely. Yerkovich (1977) stated, "To be able to gossip together, individuals must know one another. They need not be friends or intimates, but they must be familiar" (p. 192). But, gossip can be shared with strangers, although the gossip will have a different effect than it does when gossiping with a friend. Given that gossip is talk about a non-present third party, it is similar to self-disclosure; in fact, one might term it other disclosure. Research indicates that persons (especially the non-lonely) do self-disclose to strangers (Schwab, Scalise, Ginter, & Whipple, 1998). Even though the case can be made that persons do gossip with strangers, it is likely that the overall impact of gossip interacts with such relational differences. This effect is hypothesized to be similar to the effect that self-disclosing to strangers has on initial interactions. That is, people can self-disclose to others with whom they are not familiar, but if the communicators are close, the content of the communication can be personal without the situation becoming awkward. On the other hand, if the communicators are not close, personal disclosures are awkward and unwarranted, thus decreasing perceptions of liking, trust, and expertise.

According to Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) information can differ on both dimensions of breadth (how much information is shared) and depth (how personal is the information). Typically, people self-disclose slowly and incrementally. Personal information, such as opinions and feelings, are usually not shared in an initial interaction. When this kind of information is shared initially, it can produce negative attributions of the communicator. According to Altman and Taylor, opinionated information is more personal than facts or clichés. By definition, gossip is information whereby persons share their opinion(s) about a third party who is not present. Gossip also differs in the kinds of information that is shared. According to Rosnow (1977), gossip can be informative (news trading), influential (A tries to persuade B to change an opinion of C), or entertaining (information is simply amusing instead of influential).

Moreover, the type of relationship shared with the person with whom gossip is shared is critical, due to impression management functions. When persons are in initial interactions, they engage in impression formation. During impression formation, those who gossip will create a particular kind of impression. On the other hand, when one gossips with friends, one may assume that they already have a formed impression. With friends, communicators are engaging in maintaining their im-pression—not forming a new impression. Hence, if one gossips to strangers, it is likely that their judgments of liking, trust, and expertise will be affected. In particular, it is posited that strangers will like others less if they gossip, because the information is too personal to share in an initial interaction. On the other hand, friends' judgments are posited to be unaffected because they have past information to make judgments, and the information will not be judged as personal.

Valence of Gossip

A second, critical, moderating variable is gossip valence. Traditionally, gossip has been studied from a sociological or anthropological viewpoint. From this vantage point researchers have noted that there are different kinds of gossip. Positive gossip is information about socially approved behavior. Such gossip acts as a positive sanction (Levine, Mody-Desbureau, & Arluke, 1988). On the other hand, people can also provide negative gossip, which deals with socially disapproved behavior and acts as a negative sanction. In fact, Mettetal's (1983) research has uncovered information about adolescent gossip behavior. She found that adolescent gossip contains both positive and negative evaluations of the other. In younger age groups, however, gossip was mainly negative (Eder & Enke, 1991).

Gossip valence is predicted to be a key distinction, given the effect negative information can have during impression formation and maintenance. The negativity effect (Anderson, 1965) occurs when disproportionate weight is given to negative information during formation of

judgments about another person. The effect has been demonstrated in other impression formation and person perception studies (Hamilton & Huffman, 1971; Kellerman, 1984). According to Kellerman, "Given sets of favorable, neutral and unfavorable attributes such that the mean affective values of the favorable and unfavorable sets are equidistant from a neutral set, negative information is accorded greater weight in the assessment of likableness" (p. 37). Further, a negative impression is more resistant to change than a positive first impression (see Hamilton & Huffman, 1971). The negativity effect has even been established under conditions in which the explicitly stated instructions indicate the absence of any future interactions. According to Briscoe, Woodward, and Shaw (1967) negative information exhibits a greater capacity to alter already existing impressions. Therefore, whether gossipers are communicating gossip to friends or strangers, if the gossip is perceived as negative, it is likely to have a negative effect on the perceptions of the gossiper—particularly liking.

An important covariate to consider in research of this ilk is propensity to gossip, because of the likelihood that it interacts with type of gossip to affect perceptions of source cues. Propensity to gossip is a psychological predisposition whereby people are more likely to talk about others when they are not present. People with a high propensity to gossip are more likely to have a positive attitude toward gossip. According to Nevo et al. (1994), when people gossip they bring their own needs and interests into the situation. Hence, it is critical to consider if they perceive benefits from being a gossiper, such as entertainment value or raised status. Such persons might be more likely to gossip in general and not think as poorly of others who gossip.

Thus, if gossip receivers have a pro-gossip attitude, they will be more inclined to like someone else who gossips—regardless of their relationship. In fact, scholars have suggested that attitude similarity affects liking positively and linearly (see Byrne, 1969, 1971). Thus, it should hold that if persons have a positive attitude toward gossip, then they would like others who gossip also, regardless of relationship type. Certainly, persons who enjoy gossiping, and gossip, often will produce different kinds of perceptions of gossipers than those who do not approve of gossiping. It is predicted that liking, expertise, and trustworthiness perceptions will decrease as others' propensity to gossip decreases. On the other hand, source perceptions will not be affected by valence of gossip for those who have a high propensity to gossip. Because the impact of relationship and gossip valence on source perceptions is being examined, it is critical to examine propensity to gossip as a covariate. That is, the interest is not in the impact of propensity to gossip, yet due to its potential impact on the variables of interest, it will be controlled.

Based on this literature it is proposed that source cue perceptions will be a function of relationship type and gossip valence. Specifically, friends' source cue judgments will not be affected by gossip valence, but strangers' perceptions will increase when gossip is positive and will decrease when gossip is negative (when controlling for propensity to gossip). In sum, it is posited that gossip is consistent with the relational ruin paradigm when negative and communicated to strangers. Gossip is social glue, however, when communicated to friends, when positive, or both. An experiment was designed to test these predictions.

Method

Participants

Participants (Ps, N = 148) were recruited from undergraduate communication classes at a large Midwestern university. Females composed 70% of the sample. The average age was 21 years (SD = 3.32), and the range was from 17 to 46 years.

Design and Procedure

A 2 (relationship type: friend, stranger) X 3 (gossip valence: control, positive, negative) independent groups factorial design was employed. In order to manipulate experimentally the person to whom the gossip was targeted (friend/stranger) confederates were instructed to bring a friend with them

to the laboratory. Friends were defined as a non-family member known by the confederate on a psychological level (see Miller & Steinberg, 1975) for more than 1 year. In the stranger condition the confederates were paired with a student from a communication class who they did not know. In order to control for cross-sex friendship effects, all confederates were instructed to bring a same-sex friend. In the stranger condition persons were paired by sex.

Thus, the same sex friend or stranger served as the participants for this study. A researcher greeted Ps individually and seated them in the laboratory. Immediately, the researcher (with whom the confederate and the participant were not friends and did not know) would state that she forgot the survey materials and would return in a few minutes. At this time the confederate would initiate a conversation about the experimenter. In the positive gossip condition the confederate said, "Did you know that she [referring to the researcher] was just accepted into Harvard Law School? She really deserves it; she is very smart." In the negative gossip condition the confederate said, "Did you know that she [referring to the researcher] was just rejected by Harvard Law School? I can't believe she even applied, she is not smart enough!" In the control group the confederates did not gossip with the friend/stranger. Confederates were instructed that the friend/stranger might want to continue this conversation, but if pressed for more information the confederates were trained to say, "I don't know anything more than that. That's all I've heard."

Subsequently, the experimenter would return to the research room with the surveys and ask for a volunteer to accompany her to the adjacent research room to complete one. The confederate would volunteer, leaving the participant alone to complete the survey. After participants completed the questionnaire, they would be debriefed about the nature of the experiment.

It should be noted that the experimenters were female graduate students in the Department of Communication. The student participants were not students enrolled in their courses.

Instrumentation

After the experimental induction Ps were asked to complete a battery of questions assessing their perceptions of the confederate. These measures are discussed subsequently.

Gossip induction check. The researchers developed the five-item gossip induction check to ensure that gossip occurred in the positive and negative gossip conditions. Participants responded to statements like "This person tends to gossip" and "This person talks about other people." Each statement was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale with (1) indicating strongly disagree to (7) indicating strongly agree.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was measured using 15 items from Wheelless and Grotz's (1977).

Individualized Trust Scale. This instrument uses a 7-point semantic differential scale that asks the participant to rate the trustworthiness of a conversational partner.

Expertise. Expertise was measured via the expertise sub-dimension of Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz's (1969) Source Credibility scale. This instrument asks participants to rate their conversation partner on a set of 7-point semantic differential scales.

Liking. Six items were created to measure how much the participant liked the confederate. Items were statements like, "We share a lot in common" and "I like this person." The participants were asked to rate each statement on a 7-point Likert-type scale with (1) indicating strongly disagree to (7) indicating strongly agree.

Propensity to gossip. Propensity to gossip was measured with 10 items from Nevo et al.'s (1994) tendency to gossip scale. Participants were asked to rate their tendency to gossip on a 7-point Likert-type scale with (1) indicating never to (7) indicating always.

Discussion

It was predicted that the effect of gossip is consistent with the relational ruin paradigm when negative and communicated to strangers. Further, it was suggested that gossip is social glue when communicated to friends, when positive, or both. These data were consistent with some of these assertions.

Overall, the data are more consistent with the gossip as relational ruin paradigm. Patterns of means suggest that source judgments will be negative when sources gossip—regardless of valence. Interestingly, source perceptions dropped even when persons shared nice information about others. Most fascinating, however, was that persons' source assessments of their friends not only dropped when they heard positive gossip, but these perceptions plummeted when gossip was negative.

On the other hand, for strangers valence of gossip had less of an impact than it did for friendship relationships. This outcome is the opposite of what was predicted. In fact, with strangers any kind of gossip affected communicator perceptions negatively.

The emergent pattern might be explained via expectancy violations, although this theory did not contribute to hypotheses. Perhaps friends have high expectations of each other. For example, the means of trust, expertise, and liking were high in the control group—but decreased when the confederate gossiped. It was predicted that friends would not be surprised by gossip (given the social glue perspective), and thus gossip would not have a dramatic effect on perceptions. But, it is possible that when individuals gossip positively the act is viewed as less than socially approved behavior. Moreover, negative gossip might be viewed even more negatively because one expects one's friends to behave nicely. And, it appears that the negativity effect holds regardless of relationship type. Indeed, it might be that negative information stands out when provided by our friends because more is expected of them.

For strangers though, sharing personal information might be seen as a negative expectancy violation regardless of the valence of the gossip because one does not know the other person well enough. In fact, in such conditions the Ps might have become suspicious given the confederate's odd actions, regardless of whether the shared information was positive or negative. Therefore, the Ps might have questioned the motives of the confederates, and thus their perceived trust decreased.

These data are inconsistent with the viewpoint that gossip builds relational ties. Such investigations have indicated that gossiping among friends builds trust and cohesion. Thus, this investigation elicits several important questions that further research might explore. First, perceptions of our friends might lower incrementally as they gossip. Perhaps the negative effects of gossip erode at a faster rate for friends than they do for strangers, which might explain the discrepancy between this study and past research. To examine this possibility the effects of gossip need to be examined longitudinally.

These data indicate that gossip has important effects on the persuasive source cues of a communicator. Communicators who gossip, regardless of type of gossip, are less likely to be viewed as likeable, trustworthy, and credible. These effects are moderated by relationship type, though, and they have several implications for communicators in persuasive situations. Past research indicates that people are more likely to rely on source cues when they are not motivated to think deeply about a topic (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). In interactions with strangers, persuaders must be aware that gossip, regardless of valence, may not build cohesion or liking between the communicators. In fact, gossiping with the target of a persuasive message may negatively impact persuasion in situations in which the target is not motivated to scrutinize the message. If the target of persuasion is less likely to like, trust, or believe that the persuader is credible as a consequence of sharing gossip, then the persuasive message is less likely to be effective. Furthermore, in friendships, if an attempt at persuasion is made directly after gossiping, the persuader may be less likely to comply because of the decrease in liking, trust, and expertise. Future research would profit by examining the impact of gossip on attitude and behavior change.

When, however, targets of persuasion are motivated to process the persuasive message, gossip may have little persuasive impact. Instead the target would choose to accept or reject the message based upon sound argumentation. Conversely, the targets of persuasion may call into question the expertise of

the evidence and the soundness of the argument presented by persuaders because they are perceived as gossips. Thus, if persons are perceived as gossips, the evidence they present may be less persuasive because the targets may think if they are willing to participate in gossip they may also be willing to fabricate or alter evidence. Future research could examine the effect of gossip on persuasive messages in which the targets of persuasion systematically process a persuasive message versus relying on source cues.

Although this study provides important information about the effects of gossip on communicator perceptions, future research is still needed. Studies need to examine the effects of gossip on the friendship itself. For example, it is important to know the effect of gossip on the closeness of the relationship or the desire to remain friends.

There are also limitations to the present study. First, although the gossip induction worked well, to some extent it lacked ecological validity. To begin, the confederates gossiped about someone known from a class. It might be that, typically, people gossip about others they know well (regardless of whether they are gossiping to a friend or a stranger). Thus, when the confederate gossiped, the information might have been perceived as odd or even elitist. Perhaps the gossip receivers perceived the strength of the gossip to be strong given the target of the communication. Future research needs to examine the differential effects of gossip when gossipers discuss persons highly involved in their own lives (e.g., their mother) versus gossiping about someone not highly involved in their lives (e.g., a classmate).

Second, the topic of the gossip in the present study regarded law school entry. Again, this topic was not an issue that personally affected the gossiper's life. Instead, this topic was gossip for the sake of gossiping. Perhaps it is more common to gossip when events occur (via a third person) that impact the communicator's life (for example, "My boss was late to work today because she was fighting with her spouse"). In this case, whether or not the researcher was accepted for law school has no impact on communicators' lives.

To begin providing answers to the questions, data are being collected on many of the moderating factors illuminated by this investigation (topic relevance, target relationship). Perhaps these studies will aid in sorting out the impact that gossip has on source perceptions, relational maintenance, and attitude and behavior change. In any case, this study provides an important first step to understanding the effects of gossip on social influence and friendships.

Many investigations examine source cues in their induction checks, but this dependent variable is not the kind in question. Moreover, although each of the aforementioned studies examined source cues as an outcome variable, these studies did not examine everyday interpersonal communication. Instead, the authors examined voice quality, writing style, and emotional expressiveness (respectively). This lacuna indicates a gap in our knowledge of the impact of interpersonal situations on expertise assessments.