He said that she said: Gossip in the Workplace

Student: Shimul Melwani, Management department

Faculty Advisor: Sigal Barsade, Management department

Descriptive Summary

All of us find ourselves gossiping- or discussing, hearing or creating evaluative comments about someone who is not present in the conversation. Researchers have suggested that gossip serves many functions both at the individual and group level. At an individual level, to function efficiently in a complex social environment, humans need information about those around them. Because this information is not easily accessible, people may use intermediaries to pick up information about others through gossip (Dunbar, 1996). Other researchers argue that gossip also provides social comparative information (Wert & Salovey, 2004), helps in the formation of group norms (Eder & Enke, 1991), moral principles (Sabini & Silver, 1982) and the development and maintenance of social bonds (Bergmann, 1993; Dunbar, 1996). Indeed, in the complex organizational environment that is characterized by social tension, such as interpersonal competition and strict norms as well as social contact and relationships, gossip may play a significant role. However, in the face of these theorized benefits of gossip, there are numerous social and cultural sanctions against it. In the workplace, gossip is considered to be detrimental to work, is not to be encouraged or condoned, and is something to be 'managed' (e.g. Baker & Jones 1996; Therrien 2004). This pejorative view also assumes that those who gossip develop negative reputations; they are perceived as unprofessional and untrustworthy because they waste time engaging in unproductive activities and engender divisiveness through coalition-building. Often those who speak out against engaging in gossip cite its potential to unjustly harm the reputations of others (Wylen, 1993). These two streams of works are largely disconnected- the first, more positive view focuses on the *intra*personal motives of the gossiper, or how the act of gossiping helps enhance self-esteem (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and belongingness (Dunbar, 1996) while the second, negative view concentrates on the effects of gossip on larger organizational or cultural outcomes. However, for gossiping and the sanctions against it to coexist, there must be some value in engaging gossip that outweighs the strength of the sanctions. Hence, in this dissertation I hope to investigate the positive and negative consequences of engaging in gossip. Is there an advantage conferred to those who take part in gossip and why? Through a laboratory experiment and a field study, I hope to answer these questions and redress this gap.

Description of Studies

Dyadic Consequences of gossip (Study 1). In this study, I will look at how engaging in gossip affects dyadic processes and performance. In this study, I will investigate how gossips are perceived by the recipients of gossip (i.e. the gossip partners) and the affective and cognitive mechanisms that influence these perceptions. Also in this study, I will highlight the effects of gossip on dyadic outcomes like heightened trust and intimacy on existing relationships and task-related outcomes like task conflict and performance.

In this study, participants will be asked to bring a friend with them to the laboratory. The study will involve a between-participants design, in which the dyads will be assigned to one of three experimental conditions: (1) gossip in which they will only be allowed to talk about others (2) neutral (self-disclosing) condition, in which they will not be allowed to discuss others (especially

in an evaluative manner) or (3) no-interaction condition, in which they will not interact with their friend during the initial part of the study. Each pair will first fill out a set of personality and demographic measures (Big 5, PANAS) along with a measure of interpersonal closeness. Individually, they will be asked to spend 5 minutes writing about 4-5 people they know in common. Each pair will then be escorted to a separate room, where they will be videotaped participating in "spontaneous" conversation. Those in the "gossip" condition will be informed that they have to talk about the absent third-parties. I will ask each of the pairs to start with a statement that begins with "did you hear…?" or "X told me that…". These types of statement may jumpstart the gossip interaction and allow the conversation to flow more naturally. At the end of about 10 minutes, participants will complete a series of measures (PANAS, boredom, arousal, trust and closeness). The participants will also engage in four joint tasks: a critical reasoning, brainstorming task that encourages debate and task conflict, a coordination task and an ethical dilemma about out-groups. These will be counter-balanced to prevent any spillover effects. At the end of the tasks, participants will also be asked to complete a survey that asks them to evaluate relationship closeness, desire to work with their partner again, trust, how much they enjoyed the interaction and how interesting the information was. I will also code the interactions to assess levels of positive, negative or neutral gossip, interpersonal synchrony in the dyad and levels of pleasantness in the interactions, discrete emotions (envy, contempt, anger) in the gossip statements, levels of interest and responsiveness

Network Consequences of gossip (Study 2). In a field study of a network, I will study how gossiping and gossipers are perceived in organizations Do people know who the gossips are? Are gossips perceived positively or negatively in a network context? Does gossip help or harm the gossipers' reputations? What is the "sweet spot" of gossip? This will be a network study conducted in a (small) firm/department of about 100 people.