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Introduction: Gossip and Reputation—A Multidisciplinary Research Program

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The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation

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Abstract and Keywords

This introductory chapter sketches the contours of an emerging multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research program on the conceptual foundations, antecedents, dynamics, and consequences of gossip and reputation. It argues that this research agenda should be developed along three interrelated dimensions. First, gossip and reputation are *multifaceted theoretical constructs* that share at least six key characteristics. Both are relational and triadic, morally laden, multifunctional, and context-dependent social phenomena that have an evolutionary base and are subject to strategic behavior. Each of the chapters in this Handbook touches upon at least one of these facets. Second, in order to adequately capture this complexity, a multidisciplinary and eventually interdisciplinary approach is needed. *Intradisciplinary progress* is a precondition for high-quality multidisciplinary scholarship. Third, the frontier of much current research crystallizes around six substantive *problem domains*, capturing different levels of analysis and their interplay.

Keywords: gossip, reputation, interdisciplinarity, intraindividual, interindividual, evolution, market, organizations, society

Introduction

GOSSIP and reputation are core processes in all human societies. Consequently, humans invest a great amount of effort to keep track of others' reputation and to effectively manage their own. This is especially true in the contemporary world. New technologies increased the number of potential partners and interactions and changed the way we deal with information about others. Reputation management companies and specialists are no longer employed only by movie stars and firms' CEOs, but these services are required by more and more people. According to Forbes, 82% of executive recruiters report that positive information found online can improve a candidate's job prospects, but also that firms risk losing more than 20% of business when potential customers find a negative review

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on their first page of search results. In the offline world, positive or negative reputations result from gossip, which is a primary source of information about others, and it is also a very popular activity, widespread across time and culture.

Gossip and reputation are multifaceted social phenomena. As theoretical constructs, they share several characteristics that pose a challenge for attempts to get a grip on them. First and foremost, both are part of a *triadic relation*, in which at least three types of actors “engage” with each other. Gossiping requires somebody (a *sender*) conveying information about a third party (*object*) to somebody else (*receiver*); having a reputation implies that the information we receive about someone’s presumed qualities has been generated by somebody else. It involves at least three relational acts: an act of attribution, in which someone attaches an (evaluative) quality to someone else (e.g., Vaidyanathan, Khalsa, & Ecklund, 2016); an act of sharing, in which this attribution is communicated (Hallett, Harger, & Eder, 2009) to others; and an act of perception in which this attribution is recognized and understood as such by a receiver (p. 2) (Kuttler, Parker, & LaGreca, 2002). In the case of gossip, an additional condition is that it requires the absence of the third party, that is, secrecy at the moment of transmission. Any attempt to systematically observe these phenomena in real-life or in the lab will have to find a way to capture this combination of attribution, communication, and perception in triadic structures. In addition to psychological complexity, the triadic and relational aspects of gossip and reputation also come with structural complexity. For example, for the individuals involved to disclose sensitive or evaluative third-party information, power differences matter (Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012; Jeuken et al., 2015).

Second, in most societies the act of gossiping, but also of strategically “managing” one’s own reputation or “damaging” the reputation of others, tends to be normatively regulated and *morally laden* (Alfano & Robinson, 2017; Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014; Fernandes, Kapoor, & Karandikar, 2017; Peters & Kashima, 2015; Radzik, 2016). The discourse on gossip illustrates this nicely, since for each negative view on gossip, there is a positive one. According to the philosopher Henry Lanz: “In gossip we are pleased to discuss other people’s faults, seldom their merits. We thus seem to enjoy evil for evil’s sake. For we are pleased by faults and errors. We are content to see them endure and grow. We are eager to augment their number and to exaggerate their importance” (Lanz, 1936, p. 494). In contrast, Robin Dunbar, who posited that gossip could have played a major role in the evolution of language, believes that gossip is “the central plank on which human sociality is founded” (2004, p. 109). Similarly, whereas many emphasize effective reputation management as the key to success for individuals and firms, others point to the “dangerous art of impression management.”

Third, the moral connotation of both phenomena is related to the fact that they require agency of those involved and therefore allow *strategic behavior*. Individuals may deliberately spread lies about others (Seki & Nakamaru, 2016), or they may attempt to manipulate the image others have about them. Although gossip has been described as “cheap talk” (Coleman, 1990), it is evident that not everybody will share everything about any third party with anyone else: selective disclosure can be of tremendous strategic value for

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furthering the interests of oneself or one's group (Burt, 1992). Consequently, assessing the veracity of gossip (Hess & Hagen, 2006; Kuttler, Parker, & La Greca, 2002) becomes a challenge of its own.

Fourth, judging from the evidence that has been compiled so far, gossip and reputation are truly *multipurpose* social phenomena. As the chapters in this Handbook also demonstrate, the list of their potential "functions" for individuals and groups is impressive, ranging from their impact on emotions and the fulfilment of basic human needs to the cohesion of groups and human sociality in general.

Fifth, the wide-ranging impact of gossip and reputation may stem from the pivotal role they have played in human evolution (e.g., Massar, Buunk, & Rempt, 2012). Their *evolutionary base* may explain not only the strong emotional and neurophysiological reactions they can trigger (Anderson et al., 2011; Brondino, Fusar-Poli, & Politi, 2017; Peng et al., 2015), but also account for the distinct variations in their behavioral base and impact between the sexes or along social hierarchies.

(p. 3) Finally, whereas recent research provides evidence for cross-cultural measurement invariance for (workplace) gossip (Brady, Brown & Liang, 2017) and for reputation as a "universal currency for human social interactions" (Milinski, 2016), the antecedents, processes, and consequences of gossip and reputation are highly *context dependent*. This holds not only for differences across cultures (Henrich et al., 2006; Marlowe et al., 2008), but also across other kinds of social collectives. For example, the incidence, content, form, and function of gossip and reputation may vary depending on the social-structural environment, such as the kind and degree of (inter)dependence in organizations or communities or the socioeconomic position of those involved.

Despite their importance in social life, academic interest in gossip and reputation has developed relatively recently. In 1993, Bromley wrote, "Reputation is a phenomenon of considerable social and scientific importance, but the interest shown in it by writers and by ordinary people has not been paralleled by an equivalent degree of interest shown by social and behavioural scientists" (Bromley, 1993, p. 8). A similar concern was shared by Goodman (1994), who wrote in the introduction to his edited volume on gossip that "until recently, philosophers and social scientists have paid scant attention to gossip" (p. 1). Still in 2004, Wert and Salovey wrote in their introduction to the Special Issue on Gossip published by the *Review of General Psychology* that "Gossip matters to all things social, yet social scientists have been slow to pursue its secrets" (p. 76).

This Handbook aims at filling the gap. Its main aim is to delineate the contours of the emerging multidisciplinary research agenda on gossip and reputation. As the preceding brief sketch suggests, such a multidisciplinary approach is key to tackling the broad range of problems inherent to the six key dimensions underlying gossip and reputation. The twenty-six chapters of this Handbook present the state-of-the-art of academic research on gossip and reputation, but they also lay the foundation for new models and theories by pointing to open questions and missing links to new and unexplored territories.

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The remainder of this introductory chapter briefly introduces the seven main parts of the book. Each part reflects a set of substantive challenges that current scholarship faces.

Part 1, “Disciplinary Foundations,” collects overviews on the state of the art of research on gossip and reputation in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, and ethnography. Insights from other disciplines, such as biology or economics, are incorporated in other chapters. The diversity of disciplines is featured not only in Part 1, but it is also a common thread running throughout the book.

Part 2, “Individual Cognition and Emotion,” focuses on the individual, capturing the dimension of psychological complexity in triadic structures. It explores the neurobiological substrate of gossip and reputation, their development during childhood, and the multiple ways in which they are linked to emotions.

Part 3, “Strategic Interdependencies,” analyzes gossip and reputation as part of goal-directed strategic behavior of interdependent individuals. Strategic rationality means that individuals take into consideration the potential moves of other self-interested individuals. The point of departure for the chapters in Part 3 is the assumption of strategically rational individuals who try to maximize their personal benefits in a variety of social dilemmas.

(p. 4) Part 4, “Evolution, Competition, Gender,” explores current advances informed by evolutionary approaches, with their emphasis on intra-sexual and in-group competition.

In Part 5, “Power and Status,” the focus shifts to the question of how social hierarchies affect and are affected by gossip and reputation. Hierarchies can be rooted in formal and informal power differences, as they are based on dependence resulting from unequal access to resources, but also in differences in social status and prestige.

Variations in the societal context of gossip and reputation take center stage in the final two parts. Part 6, “Markets, Organizations, and Networks,” focuses on the role of specific social institutions as settings for gossip and reputation. Part 7, “The Web, Computers, and Technology,” shifts the emphasis to the technological environment. It provides more detailed insights into the opportunities and challenges resulting from the introduction of computational systems and the World Wide Web in general.

Disciplinary Foundations

The first part of this Handbook maps the research questions, findings, and theories coming from behavioral and social scientists. Understanding the impact on individuals and groups of exchanging evaluative information about an absent third party, but also the causes and consequences of these evaluations, is part of the scientific tradition of sociology, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology, as well as other disciplines.

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This difference between research traditions and the fact that gossip and reputation are multifaceted and complex resulted in a multitude of disciplinary theories and findings. This is especially evident in the case of gossip, as pointed out by Gambetta (1994, p. 199): “It is hard to find a phenomenon which has been attributed as many functions as gossip has, individual and collective, positive and negative, mean and noble alike.” Just as an illustration, gossip might have exerted positive selection pressure favoring the evolution of traits associated with altruism (Boehm, 2012) and cooperative behaviors (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Piazza, & Bering, 2008). At the group level, it disciplines minor norm violations in groups, such as among the US cattle ranchers observed by Ellickson (1991) or in rowing teams (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). Gossip also facilitates bonding with colleagues (Rosnow, 2001), entertainment, and information seeking (Rosnow & Fine, 1976).

Drawing on the experimental literature in behavioral economics and social psychology, on the one hand, and the field and survey traditions in sociology and social anthropology, on the other hand, Giardini and Wittek (this volume) apply an analytical perspective in order to single out and understand the links between gossip, reputation, and cooperation. In their chapter, “Gossip, Reputation, and Sustainable Cooperation: Sociological Foundations,” they describe and disentangle four key mechanisms and the conditions under which gossip and reputation sustain or undermine cooperation.

(p. 5) Psychology is another discipline whose scholars have greatly contributed to the study of gossip and reputation, pointing to the individual and group benefits of gossip. For example, gossip can be an inexpensive and indirect way of acquiring information through social comparison (Wert & Salovey, 2004), creating and strengthening social bonds (Dunbar, 1996), and learning group norms and conventions (Barkow, 1992). Gossip provides emotional relief because it helps frustrated individuals vent their negative emotions (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005), even if negative gossip induces painful feelings of being excluded (Martinescu, Janssen, & Beersma, 2017). Gossip is also related to bullying in the workplace (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). Reviewing a century of psychological research, Emler’s chapter, “Human Sociality and Psychological Foundations” (this volume), makes a case for gossip and reputation as serving fundamental needs of adaptation to an uncertain and complex social environment. Social complexity, high-level intellect and language use represent the foundations of his psychological account of gossip. Emler points out that high-quality descriptions of reputation and gossip are still missing, and that too often commonly held beliefs are taken as starting point for research.

According to the philosopher Ronald de Sousa (de Sousa, 1994), gossip gives access to the power of knowledge. The epistemological value of gossip has been advocated by another philosopher, Karen Adkins, who suggests that “the informal and more playful arena that is gossip allows us to consider more casually possibilities that might in more formal settings seem implausible or ridiculous” (Adkins, 2017, p. 60). Origgi (this volume) focuses more on reputation than on gossip. In an encompassing view on the epistemology and ontology of reputation, she analyzes the sociocognitive and motivational side of this theoretical construct. Drawing on the views of several moral philosophers, Origgi’s chapter,

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“Reputation in Moral Philosophy and Epistemology,” attributes a very positive role to reputation and puts it at the core of a philosophical theory of human actions and beliefs.

Language is, obviously, an essential part of gossiping. According to Dunbar (1996), language evolved to allow individuals to function more effectively within large social groups. Language is related to gossip and reputation in several ways. It is the means for transmitting and exchanging information about the speaker’s or someone else’s behavior or relationships (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997), for offering advice on how to handle new social situations (Suls, 1977), and for enacting social control (Enquist & Leimar, 1993). There are many other ways in which language is related to gossip and reputation, as Mangardich and Fitneva (this volume) explain in their chapter, “Gossip, Reputation, and Language,” in which they survey the most important aspects of linguistic communication, and the role they play in reputation management, in particular epistemic modals, conversation flow, and speech acts such as apologies. Emphasizing the flexibility and power of linguistic cues, their framework provides a novel perspective on reputation dynamics; for example, on how individuals restore reputation through apologies.

Gossip as a form of power is also well-documented in the ethnographic record, where it is also hotly contested. The debate between Gluckman and Paine exemplifies one of the main tensions in the research on gossip and reputation. Paine defined gossip as a (p. 6) “cultural device used by the individual to forward his own interest” (Paine, 1967, p. 282), whereas Gluckman saw gossip as a form of social control that contributes to the unity of the group. Since then, several other functions have been attributed to gossip, but this tension is still not resolved. Several ethnographic studies suggest that gossip is related to accusations of witchcraft (Stewart & Strathern, 2003). In contrast, “to be talked of in one’s absence, in however derogatory terms, is to be conceded a measure of social importance in the gossip set; not to be talked about is the mark of social insignificance, of exclusion from the set” (Epstein, 1969, p. 113).

Anthropologists have considerably enriched our knowledge on the contexts of gossip. It plays a major role in everyday conversations in populations as geographically diverse as the Nukulaelae islanders of Tuvalu in Central Pacific (Besnier, 1995), the Zinacantan of Mexico (Haviland, 1977), and the Hopi of North America (Cox, 1970), among others. Besnier’s chapter “Gossip in Ethnographic Perspective” (this volume) provides a thorough description of the main characteristics of ethnography as a methodology for the collection and analysis of gossip data, while also outlining the limitations of this kind of research. He also stresses the importance of embedding gossip “in a larger context of social life” and focusing on local understandings of gossip and reputation.

Individual Cognition and Emotion

The study of gossip and reputation can be approached from different angles, depending on the level of description chosen. Even if the first and most elementary unit of analysis is the individual, research on the biological, developmental, and emotional aspects of gossip and reputation is surprisingly recent. Are there any specific neural correlates of gossip or

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reputational decision making? At what age do children start to gossip and how? How do emotions affect the gossiper or the target? These are only few of the questions that are still open, and they deserve further attention, as the chapters in the second section of the Handbook clearly indicate. Experimental evidence shows that cooperative actions are more likely when real observers are present, but they are also prompted by subtle cues of being watched by others (Haley & Fessler, 2005; Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006). Individuals can maximize their performance of generous acts in situations in which there is an audience present to witness their actions, thus investing in positive reputation building (Piazza & Bering, 2008). This suggests the existence of specialized reputation management abilities in humans. In order to be effective, these abilities need to be flexible and responsive to changing conditions and environments, thus requiring the involvement of several brain areas (Izuma, 2012; Knoch et al., 2009). Looking into the activation of different brain areas improves our understanding of the decision-making processes behind reputation and gossip. Decomposing reputation management into a set of different and separate actions that can be tested by means of functional imaging or transcranial magnetic stimulation is not easy, and this could (p. 7) partially explain the limited number of contributions on the topic, as Boero (this volume) points out. In his chapter “Neuroscientific Methods,” Boero reviews the evidence from neuroscientific studies about the role of three main brain networks linked to reputation: the reward system, the mentalizing network, and the self-control system. By highlighting the limited number of findings about the neural substrate of these complex phenomena, Boero points to limitations and suggests open questions about this methodology.

Understanding how the brain processes reputational concerns and the decision to gossip could also explain the late onset of gossip in children. Even if children spontaneously provide information to adults and peers from a young age (Beier, Over, & Carpenter, 2014; Liskowski, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2008), few studies have addressed the developmental trajectory of gossip and reputation management. Like other social skills, the ability to actively manage one’s reputation develops during ontogeny. The progressive achievement of a complete Theory of Mind (Apperly, 2012; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985) and the maturation of the reward system (Panksepp, 2003) may provide the bases for the development of a capacity to track others’ reputation and to manage one’s own. Five-year-old humans, but not chimpanzees, behave more cooperatively when observed by a peer (Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2012), and they are also consistently more generous when their actions are transparent and visible (Leimgruber, Shaw, Santos, & Olson, 2012). Engelmann and colleagues (2016) investigated prosocial gossip in preschoolers, finding an age effect on the amount of gossip provided: 3-year-old children spontaneously gossip and offer helpful reputational information, but much less than 5-year-old children. Ingram’s chapter, “Gossip and Reputation in Childhood” (this volume), brings together the scattered evidence on the developmental aspects of gossip and reputation. It describes the ontogeny of gossip and reputation across five stages through which children and adolescents pass during development: infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, preadolescence and early adolescence, and middle to late adolescence. The changes in cognition and behavior during development show the importance of acquiring an under-

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standing of gossip and reputation in childhood. This understanding not only helps improve children's behaviors, such as the ability to manage conflicts, but also has implications for the study of adult cognition.

Emotions are another fundamental aspect of gossip and reputation. Since both are generally described in the context of rational, strategic decision making, gossip and reputation research has paid little systematic attention so far to the role of emotions. Emotional states can be an intrinsic aspect of gossiping, but they can also arise in response to a gossip message or discovering that you have been gossiped about. Emotions can be linked to gossip in different ways: feeling a particular emotion, like anger or fear, might motivate people to engage in gossip, thereby the emotion operates as an antecedent of gossip, but emotions can also result from gossip. Drawing on theories of human cognition and emotion, the chapter by Martinescu, Janssen, and Nijstad, "Gossip and Emotion" (this volume), explores the interplay between gossip and emotion for all three actors in the gossip triad.

(p. 8) Strategic Interdependencies

Many social situations are characterized by some form of interdependence. Members of work teams may depend on each other's joint effort to reach production targets. Employees depend on their supervisor's evaluations in order to get promoted. Buyers depend on their suppliers for timely delivery of products. Neighbors in rural communities depend on each other's efforts to prevent and mitigate damages caused by their livestock. In all these cases, gossip and reputation can play a decisive role in successfully managing these interdependencies (e.g., Rooks, Tazelaar, & Snijders, 2010; Ellickson, 1991).

Depending on each other's contribution is not a modern phenomenon, and our ancestors were heavily depending on each other's help for survival. This reliance could explain the importance of gossip as an evolutionary adaptation to interdependence, as posited in the chapter "Gossip as a Social Skill" by McAndrew (this volume). The chapter reviews the main findings in evolutionary psychology and argues that natural selection favored individuals who were more skilled in spreading information about themselves and others, because through this skill they acquired more social bonds and resources. Through gossip, humans could manage their own reputations but also affect those of their allies and competitors.

Social skills become very important in situations characterized by mixed-motive interdependence, the so-called social dilemmas. In a social dilemma, it is individually rational to defect, whereas everybody would be better off through cooperation. Several solutions have been offered to the "puzzle of cooperation" (Rand & Nowak, 2013), and gossip and reputation are among them. Both solutions are reviewed in Milinski's chapter, "Gossip and Reputation in Social Dilemmas" (this volume), which links evolutionary biology and experimental economics. Milinski discusses experimental evidence showing how gossip

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and reputation have been used in controlled environments and to what extent they can provide low-cost and effective solutions to the problem of cooperation.

The structural aspects of interdependence can be also conceptualized as a “game,” a term that was used to identify a branch of mathematics dealing with cooperation and conflict. In his chapter titled “Reputation and Gossip in Game Theory,” Roddie (this volume) discusses how game theoretic modeling has helped us understand the process of reputation-formation and the effect of reputations in social and market settings. A key assumption in this literature is that individuals can be classified according to their “behavioral type”; that is, whether they are prosocial cooperators or egoistic defectors, thus suggesting an interplay between the structural aspects of the setting (e.g., interdependence in a work team) and the individual traits.

The same structure of interdependent relationships can have different effects on different people, depending for instance on their status. Maintaining a positive reputation and being insulated from the consequences of gossip depends on one’s position on the social ladder (Engle Merry, 1984): in small-scale communities, those in the middle of the status hierarchy are most concerned about their reputations, and therefore most affected by gossip. Unlike high-ranking individuals and those at the bottom of the (p. 9) social ladder, who can ignore gossip for completely different reasons, the individuals in the middle can see their prospects of social success severely hampered by negative gossip about them. Along this line, Grow and Flache’s chapter, “Agent-Based Computational Models of Reputation and Status Dynamics” (this volume), argues that reputational processes may be one of the main reasons that most human groups tend to develop status hierarchies, even if there are no objective differences in skills or competences (Gould, 2002). The results of a computational study support their hypotheses. Their contribution also illustrates the added value of agent-based computer models and simulations. This tool has been applied to the study of gossip and reputation (Giardini, Di Tosto, & Conte, 2008; Giardini et al., 2015; Giardini & Vilone, 2016; Sabater, Paolucci, & Conte, 2006; Smith, 2014), and it allows us to get a better grip on the interplay between “micro-motives and macro-behaviors” (Schelling, 1978).

Evolution, Competition, and Gender

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have stressed the important role of gossip and reputation in the evolution of modern humans. They view negative gossip as an informal policing device (Enquist & Leimar, 1993) that is fundamental for gathering information with “fitness-related” value. In this perspective, gossip is a tool for improving control of resources, providing a competitive edge with regard to building alliances, and assessing the reliability of potential partners (Barkow, 1992; De Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, & McAndrew, 2007; Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Though an evolutionary framework is used for analyzing phenomena in modern society, such as contemporary workplaces (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), its major testbed is among small-scale hunter gatherer societies. The latter are the focus of

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Boehm's chapter, "Gossip and Reputation in Small-scale Societies: A View from Evolutionary Anthropology" (this volume). It describes how gossip and reputation help define a social niche characterized by symbols and morality. Based on his reconstruction of a "natural history of gossip and reputation," Boehm argues that gossip and reputation result in an efficient exchange of information that benefits individuals in societies. This claim raises important questions about the link between gossip and inequality. Is this benefit equally distributed among all the members of the society? Are there any categories that can be regarded as more inclined to or more affected by gossip or reputation? In evolutionary terms, how would gossip and reputation benefit societies and their members?

Gossip can also be used as a strategy for conflict, as suggested by Hess and Hagen (this volume) in their chapter "Gossip, Reputation, and Friendship in within-group Competition: An Evolutionary Perspective." They compare gossip with physical aggression as an alternative strategy for deterring competitors. They argue that under conditions of resource competition, gossip—in particular, if supported by allies—is superior to physical aggression as a competitive strategy. Within-group physical aggression is extremely **(p. 10)** dangerous, because it affects the ability of the group to resist attacks from other groups. In their account of "information warfare," Hess and Hagen (2006) outlined a strategic approach to coalitional indirect aggression, showing that coalitions might be effective in indirect aggression. Having multiple informers means having more opportunities to collect and analyze information and greater effectiveness in disseminating it, especially for retaliatory purposes.

This coalitional approach is often mentioned in studies about the prevalence of gossip in women's circles. In a seminal study on this topic, Levin and Arluke (1987) recorded gossip conversations of male and female students in a US college. Females were found to be more likely than males to socially exclude others—a difference that is visible also in children from the age of six (Benenson, 2013). In fact, gossip has often been portrayed as an instrument of last resort for women, a form of inquiry that remains available when other opportunities are closed to them by circumstance or convention (Ayim, 1994; Collins, 1994). Reviewing major findings in this field, Davis, Vaillancourt, Arnocky, and Doyel (this volume) show in their chapter "Women's Gossip as an Intrasexual Competition Strategy: An Evolutionary Approach to sex and Discrimination" that women prefer to use gossip "as their weapon of choice to derogate same-sex rivals in order to damage their reputation and render them less desirable as mates to the opposite sex." Going beyond the stereotypical representation of women as gossipmongers, these authors analyze how gossip may have evolved as a low-cost form of indirect aggression that is particularly efficient as a strategy for intrasexual competition among women.

Power and Status

Gossip and reputation have long been linked to power and status. More specifically, whereas research on reputation mainly explores its interrelationship with status, prestige, or esteem (Brennan & Pettit, 2004), gossip researchers have long been intrigued by

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the question to what degree talking about third parties can be effective as a power strategy—particularly of the “weak.” “Gossip is typically a subversive form of power: an attempt by the weak, and often, though far from exclusively, by women, to use the power of knowledge independently of those who wield more conventional power” (de Sousa, 1994, p. 25; see also Scott, 1986). But whether gossip primarily serves the powerful or the powerless is still a matter of debate.

However, surprisingly little is known about the impact of *positive* gossip on status and power. Celebrity gossip is an exception, as De Backer, Van Der Bulk, Fisher, and Ouvrein (this volume) show in their chapter “Gossip and Reputation in the Media: How Celebrities Emerge and Evolve by Means of Mass-Mediated Gossip.” Though targeting individuals who are not among our personal contacts, celebrity gossip can serve two distinct functions. In addition to facilitating the detection of potential allies or threats (reputation gossip), gossip about the achievements of celebrities is a form of vicarious learning of what is considered appropriate or desirable and what is not (strategy learning gossip).

(p. 11) The complexity of the relationship between gossip, reputation, and power is underlined also by Farley in “On the Nature of Gossip, Reputation, and Power Inequality” (this volume), who reviews the psychological literature on the topic. Her chapter disentangles five well-documented psychological key mechanisms affecting power and reputation: group protection, social comparison, status enhancement, negative influence, and social bonding. Her discussion of gossip helps shed light on how gossip serves as both an agent and outcome of power inequality.

There is also growing evidence that gossip and reputation play a key role in the construction of status hierarchies during cognitive development in early childhood (see Ingram, “Gossip and Reputation in Childhood,” this volume) and in adolescence (McDonald, 2012). During adolescence, peer groups are extremely influential in developing, internalizing, and putting into practice socially accepted norms and behaviors. In their chapter “Gossip and Reputation in Adolescent Networks,” Kisfalusi, Takács, and Pál (this volume) analyze how gossip not only contributes to the development and maintenance of beneficial group norms, coalition formation, and ostracism, but also shapes the reputational hierarchy among adolescents. Drawing on a network study in Hungarian classrooms, they show that being disdained increases the likelihood of becoming the target of negative gossip.

Although power and status are often mentioned in studies on gossip and reputation, the evidence about them as motivations or functions, and the circumstances that might facilitate them, is still limited, as the chapters in this section show.

Markets, Organizations, and Networks

Sociologists have long stressed the social embeddedness of markets (Polanyi, 1944). Gossip and reputation are key mechanisms through which social embeddedness facilitates economic transactions. One of the main reasons for this is their role in reducing uncertainty about the trustworthiness of potential exchange partners: “If two would-be collabo-

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rators are members of a tightly knit community, they are likely to encounter one another in the future—or to hear about one another through the grapevine. Thus, they have reputations at stake that are almost surely worth more than gains from momentary treachery. In that sense, honesty is encouraged by dense social networks” (Putnam, 2000, p. 136). Reputation mechanisms can play a vital role in sustaining the trust that is required to facilitate a wide array of economic transactions inside and outside organizational contexts. Gossip serves to constantly assess, revise, and update the reliability of these reputations.

The effectiveness of formal and informal reputation systems in promoting collective welfare depends on the quality of the information. The chapter “Trust and Reputation in Markets” (Diekmann & Przepiorka, this volume) warns against the risks of a “reputation society” in which individuals, organizations, and communities are assessed through some form of rating system. Quantifying reputations has its merits, as their use (p. 12) by online platforms like TripAdvisor or eBay shows. But there is also increasing awareness about the vulnerabilities and potential downsides of such reputation systems, and their broader implications for the functioning of markets and organizations are still little understood.

In some markets, reputation is a collective good that is created and enforced by a community of individuals who share an interest in having a positive reputation. Drawing on examples from agro-food markets, Boffa and Castriota (“The Economics of Gossip and Collective Reputation,” this volume) explain why such collective reputations are harder to preserve than individual or institutional ones. They also discuss the implications that word-of-mouth, gossip, and reputation management have for the design of appropriate incentives and the functioning of markets.

Gossip is pervasive within all kinds of collectives and organizations. It is related to different types of outcomes for work groups, including performance (Loughry & Tosi, 2008), inclusion, and team viability. Reviewing the psychological literature on the topic, Beersma, Van Kleef, and Dijkstra (“Antecedents and Consequences of Gossip in Work Groups,” this volume) focus on two questions: “What motivates group members to engage in gossip?” and “What effects does gossip have on members of a work group?” As in other domains, gossip may lead to beneficial or dangerous outcomes for the individuals or the group, but the impact of gossip on organizations can be quite significant, as these authors show.

Social network analysis has emerged as a particularly powerful tool to map variations in social embeddedness. It allows assessment of the complex interplay of gossip and reputation with network structure (Burt, 2005), the quality of ties (Parigi et al., 2013), and the actors’ position (Bruggeman, 2008). Advocating a social network perspective, Ellwardt (“Gossip and Reputation in Social Networks,” this volume) conceives gossip and reputation as coevolving relational phenomena. For example, since social ties can be both an antecedent and a consequence of gossiping, the informal structure and potential outcomes of work groups need to be considered dynamic.

The Web, Computers, and Technology

The creation of the World Wide Web provided a major impulse for the study of reputation. Partner selection supported by reputation is the main principle inspiring web-based “reputation systems.” In the online world, evaluations mediate and facilitate the process of assessing reputations within a given community of users (Dellarocas, 2003). Since face-to-face interactions are often not feasible and direct sanctioning not an option in online markets (Dellarocas, 2011), such reputation systems are essential to create and maintain trust (Utz, Matzat, & Snijders, 2009). The resulting “reputational surcharge” (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002) is essential for successful business (Przepiorka, 2013). The proliferation of online companies devoted to tracking and polishing the reputation of individuals and firms shows that a good reputation has become a valuable asset on its own.

(p. 13) The three chapters in this section address different aspects of the interplay between web-based technology and gossip and reputation. Sabater-Mir (“Gossip and Reputation in Computational Systems,” this volume) describes how Computer Science studies gossip as a solution to engineering problems. The chapter points to a whole range of innovative questions for the study of gossip and reputation. Can we design “virtual gossipers”; that is, artificial agents endowed with the ability to gossip? Can we solve algorithmic problems by looking at the way in which reputations are built, and conversely, can we grasp a better understanding of gossip and reputation through modeling computational systems?

The chapter “Online Reputation Systems” (Snijders & Matzat, this volume) follows this interdisciplinary lead. The authors critically review the current literature on the effects of reputation scores and the (statistical) techniques used to assess the “value of reputation.” One of their conclusions is that current approaches grossly underestimate the importance of semantic feedback, and they point to interesting directions for future research.

Finally, Picci’s concluding essay (“Gossip, Internet-based Reputation Systems, and Governance,” this volume) suggests that notwithstanding their difference, gossip and Internet-based reputation systems are equally valuable. Both generate information with high reputational value that might affect the distribution of resources and thereby also power differences. In a way, internet-based reputation systems have the potential to “democratize” gossip, and this calls for a careful design of these systems, particularly in applications to public governance.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter sketched the contours of an emerging multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research program on the conceptual foundations, antecedents, dynamics, and consequences of gossip and reputation. This program is rooted in the belief that progress in this field requires a much closer inspection of the interrelation between the

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two phenomena, which until now often have been studied in isolation. We make three interrelated arguments.

First, both gossip and reputation are *multifaceted theoretical constructs* that share at least six key characteristics. Both are (1) relational and triadic, (2) morally laden, (3) multipurpose (or multifunctional), and (4) context dependent social phenomena that (5) have an evolutionary base and (6) are subject to strategic behavior. Each of the chapters in this Handbook touches upon at least one of these facets.

Second, in order to adequately capture this complexity, a multidisciplinary and eventually interdisciplinary approach is needed. *Intradisciplinary progress* is a precondition for high-quality multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship. As the contributions to this Handbook demonstrate, many disciplines have made progress over the past two decades or so in their attempt to capture the complexities of gossip and reputation; (p. 14) unravel their causes; and model their interplay, dynamics, and consequences. These advances within disciplinary boundaries provide an excellent foundation on which to build the next generation of research of gossip and reputation. Disciplines represented in this Handbook cover cognitive neurosciences, linguistics, psychology (in particular its social, experimental, and developmental aspects), cultural anthropology, sociology, philosophy, economics, computer science, organization science, and communication studies. Furthermore, a variety of data collection and analysis methods are addressed, including ethnography, text analysis, conceptual analysis, observations, surveys, lab experiments, statistics, stochastic actor-oriented modeling, agent-based computer simulations, and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Each chapter in this Handbook is strongly rooted in at least one discipline, and some make a first deliberate effort toward multidisciplinary synthesis.

Third, besides advances within their respective disciplines, the frontier of much current scholarship crystallizes around a set of six substantive *problem domains*, which also provide the main categories into which the contributions to this Handbook are clustered. These can roughly be ordered along a micro-macro continuum capturing different levels of analysis and their interplay. At the *intraindividual* level, considerable progress is made in the study of the neural, cognitive, and emotional correlates of gossip and reputation. At the *interindividual* level, scholarly interest centers around three issues related to dependence: rational choice approaches to strategic interdependence, evolutionary approaches to (intrasexual and intragroup) competition, and exchange theoretic approaches to status inequalities. At the *level of groups and societies*, a growing body of scholarship acknowledges the importance of three interrelated contexts or environments in which gossip and reputation unfold: the institutional context of markets and organizations, the social context of personal networks, and the technological context of the World Wide Web.

It is these three pillars that define the contours of the multidisciplinary research agenda advocated by this Handbook: the multidimensionality of the gossip and reputation constructs, a problem domain and related level of analysis, and a sound disciplinary base on which to build cross-disciplinary synthesis. The contributions to this volume cover a great

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deal of ground and provide a unique point of departure for the next generation of scholarship. But they also make clear that what has been covered is only a small fraction of the complex and multidimensional landscape created by gossip and reputation.

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