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# Talking About the Boss: Effects of Generalized and Interpersonal Trust on Workplace Gossip

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## Abstract

This study developed and tested a relational theory of positive and negative gossip about managers. It is argued that spreading information about managers depends on trust in organizations, more specifically the employees' generalized and interpersonal trust in managers and colleagues. Hypotheses were tested by conducting two studies in a medium-sized Dutch child care organization, namely, an employee survey ( $N = 132$ ) and a network study at two sites ( $N = 58$ ). Multiple regressions and cross-sectional social network analysis (exponential random graph modeling [ERGM]) revealed that negative gossip about managers increases when employees have low trust, nonfriendly relationships, and infrequent contact with the managers. This effect is further enhanced when contacts *between employees* are trusting and frequent. Implications for theories about management and organizations are discussed.

## Keywords

organizations, gossip, trust, relationships, social network analysis

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Organizational researchers have been showing an increased interest in the antecedents of workplace gossip because the patterns of talking about absent third parties appear to offer a key to understanding organizational processes. For example, gossip supports the diffusion of information, thereby stimulating sense making, learning, and reputation in organizations (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Blau, 1964; Gambetta, 1988; McAllister, 1995; Mills, 2010). It also stimulates the emergence and sustenance of cooperative relationships. During the past decade, a considerable number of studies have helped researchers to understand the occurrence of gossip in general (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; De Backer & Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004) and within organizations in particular (e.g., Burt & Knez, 1996; Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2011; Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Myers, 2002; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008). Workplace gossip is defined as “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429) and can have either positive or negative contents.

Although workplace gossip hardly seems to depend on personal characteristics (e.g., no differences depending on age, education, or gender; Foster, 2004), its antecedents can be found in the social relationships between organizational members (Burt, 2005; Ellwardt et al., 2012). We build on Burt’s introduction and methodological elaboration of a network perspective on gossip (Burt, 1992, 2005; Burt & Knez, 1996). His application of a network approach has led to insights that could not be produced by multivariate analyses of individual behavior and, therefore, have proven to be powerful in the analysis of organizational gossip. Burt argues that gossip is risky behavior because it may be damaging not only for the gossip object but also for the gossipers themselves (Burt, 2001). This risk is reduced in trust relationships. In the present study, we focus on trust as an antecedent of positive and negative gossip about managers.

We extend the previous literature in three ways. First, we explicitly focus on particular objects of organizational gossip, namely, managers. There is indication that employees low in formal status have a particular interest in retrieving information about employees high in formal status (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). The second extension treats gossip as an activity between triads of individuals. Individuals exchange information and experiences about the reliability and reputations of third parties (Baumeister et al., 2004; Burt & Knez, 1995; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). The frequency and tone of the

shared contents depend on the gossipers' relationships with the third person (i.e., the manager) and the relationship between the gossipers. Although theories about triads have been prominent in gossip literature, it has rarely been tested empirically (for an exception, see Wittek & Wielers, 1998). Finally, we acknowledge that the organizational literature generally describes trust as a multidimensional concept and distinguishes between generalized and interpersonal trust (Nooteboom, 2002). Our study covers both forms of trust.

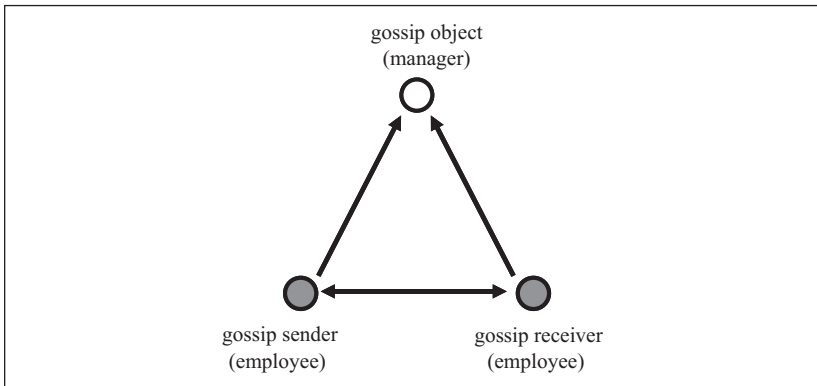
Our empirical approach is divided into two parts. The first study investigated the effects of generalized trust in the group of managers and colleagues on gossip behavior about an organization's management unit, using multiple regression analysis on a representative employee survey. The second study researched the effects of an employee's interpersonal trust in particular individuals, that is, a focal supervisor or a specific colleague, on his or her decision to talk about the supervisor. For this purpose, the dyadic relationships between employees from two sites of the same formal organization were analyzed with social network analysis.

## Theory

Managers are powerful players in organizations, which makes them a likely topic of gossip. In our framework, two employees share gossip about one manager. These three actors involved in gossip can be depicted in a triad as seen in Figure 1. Our theoretical and empirical analysis addresses the relationships between all parties in this triad.

The employees' decision to gossip is guided by the trust embedded in the horizontal and vertical relationships in the triad. The level of trust in the manager influences the tone of gossip (i.e., vertical relationship). Furthermore, employees need to trust that their immediate colleagues will support the gossiper and not leak the information (i.e., horizontal relationship). In brief, we expect negative gossip to increase with the degree of distrust in vertical relationships and trust in horizontal relationships. Positive gossip is less risky and expected to be less affected by trust.

Trust within organizations has multiple facets. It can either relate to the general functioning of a firm or to the reliability of particular individuals. Therefore, we distinguish between generalized trust in organizations and interpersonal trust (Bachman, 2005; Nooteboom, 2002; Rus, 2005; Six, 2005). Different forms of trust relate to different forms of gossip. For example, whereas low generalized trust will stimulate complaining and criticism of the skills of managers in general, low interpersonal trust in a specific manager will trigger person-specific gossip.



**Figure 1.** Gossip triad

### Generalized Trust

The first form of trust is impersonal and not related to specific social exchange relationships between people. Instead, it is rooted in the employees' beliefs about an organization's functioning and their assessment of whether the organization meets its contractual and moral obligations toward its employees (Rus, 2005). According to Den Hartog (2005), the two most important groups of generalized others are managers and coworkers. Generalized trust implies that groups of managers and colleagues are seen as representatives of a broader category. This trust does not relate to concrete interactions with specific people but to the general perception regarding the reliability of these groups, although *in reality* trust is formed through concrete interactions with members of these groups. Nonetheless, experiences (i.e., with a number of different managers) are often generalized to abstract categories (i.e., management as a whole).

**Generalized trust in management.** Based on their beliefs, employees speak positively or negatively about managers. Although managers try to present themselves favorably, the employees' core beliefs and predispositions about managers are subject to cognitive bias and ideological climate. Such bias is further enhanced when only certain information is accessible. Decision-making and managerial policies are usually communicated from higher to lower levels in the organizational hierarchy, so that employees in low positions are the least likely to be fully informed about management's actions.

Incomplete information is often supplemented with news from fellow employees via informal channels like gossip (Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997). In line with this, Mills' field study (2010) demonstrated how employees use gossiping for sense making about management's actions during organizational change. Secondhand information about managers, who represent the organization, potentially helps employees determine whether the organization is reliable, cooperative, and trustworthy in general (De Backer & Gurven, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008).

Research has further illustrated that information provided by gossip contacts is used to diagnose the trustworthiness of indirectly connected third parties (Ferrin, Dirks, & Shah, 2006). This can lead to trust transfers in whole networks without making actual contact with the third party. Trust has been shown to increase with openness in communication and perceived information accuracy (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Thus, lack or bias of information is likely to undermine generalized trust in management and thereby increase the demand for gossip. The more management succeeds in presenting itself as trustworthy, the more likely positive news travel through informal channels. On the contrary, beliefs in untrustworthy behavior reduce positive feedback from the grapevine but instead provide a fertile soil for negative gossip.

This tendency to spread negative gossip can be further enhanced by the employees' heightened thirst for negative news about people with high status in the organization (De Backer & Gurven, 2006; McAndrew et al., 2007). Malevolent actions of high-status people have a high impact compared to benevolent actions. In order "to survive" in the organization, it is more important to warn each other about untrustworthy behavior than to praise trustworthy behavior. Moreover, employees tend to perceive benevolent actions as part of the psychological contract with the organization, whereas violations of this contract are critically assessed and related to a decrease in trust (Robinson, 1996).

*Hypothesis 1 (generalized trust in management):* The lower an employee's level of trust in management, (a) the more negative and (b) the less positive gossip an employee will spread about managers.

*Generalized trust in colleagues.* We expect negative gossip behavior about managers to increase further when employees perceive their collegial environment as generally trustworthy and confidential (Burt, 2005). Employees generalize trust not only to the group of managers but also to the group of coworkers (Cook & Wall, 1980; Den Hartog, 2005). This implies that employees are generally confident that fellow employees will behave as

expected, keep promises, and help out at work when needed (Cook & Wall, 1980).

Generalized trust beliefs are likely facilitators of establishing informal cooperation and forming alliances against powerful third parties. In this process, gossip has been shown to be a strategic tool. In a number of qualitative studies, employees deliberately utilized negative gossip behavior to seek allies against managers and consequently undermine their managerial authority (Scott, 1985; Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). Quantitative research has also demonstrated an increased prevalence of negative gossip in organizational structures that constitute alliances (Wittek & Wielers, 1998). The more trust exists in an employee network, the further negative gossip echoes (Burt, 2001), so that single incidents of negative gossip can have far-reaching impacts. All these findings suggest that in environments of high trust, employees feel encouraged to share information that is discrete or negative.

*Hypothesis 1c (generalized trust in colleagues):* The lower an employee's trust in management and the higher an employee's trust in colleagues, the more negative gossip an employee will spread about managers.

We do not expect the same effect for positive gossip because we assume that positive gossip will travel equally fast in low-trust and high-trust environments and, thus, regardless of trust in employees. The risks and potential social repercussions of spreading positive news are limited, and sharing positive information is a less effective means of seeking solidarity with colleagues, as it is simply not that interesting and exclusive (Davis & McLeod, 2003).

### *Interpersonal Trust*

Support of authorities and commitment in organizations can also be developed through interpersonal trust relationships with particular others, that is, direct supervisors and fellow-colleagues (Erdogan & Enders, 2007). According to Nooteboom, interpersonal trust is embedded in the contexts of friendly and frequent relationships. First, interpersonal trust can be found in friendly relationships (Nooteboom, 2002; Rus, 2005), as they facilitate peoples' confidence in one another's benevolence. Also Grosser et al. (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010) operationalized interpersonal trust as expressive friendship ties in employee dyads in their sociometric study. Second, continuous and intense communication is a requirement of active

trust building. Frequent contact prevents exploitation of the trustor when the opportunity arises because there is the possibility that the trustor will punish betrayal in subsequent interactions. Here, trust is not based on the belief in the other's benevolence but in the expectation that cooperation will be reciprocated. This positive effect of the "shadow of the future" on cooperation has been demonstrated in multiple empirical studies (Axelrod, 1984).

On the basis of the above definition, we will study interpersonal trust in the context of friendly relationships and frequent contacts. Both friendly and frequent contacts, whether close or not, may contribute independently to strong trust ties (Marsden & Campbell, 1984).

*Interpersonal trust in particular managers.* The absence of friendly relationships (and even the presence of hostile relationships) eases the flow of negative gossip about an individual (Ellwardt et al., 2012). An in-depth survey of 90 MBA students in employment relationships showed that badmouthing the manager and harming reputation was a major strategy for getting even in cases where managers had violated trust (Bies & Tripp, 1996). In another study, 50% of the people who at some point during their employment had felt wrongly treated by supervisors or managers reported that they shared their grief with colleagues, whereas only 29% of the employees sought direct confrontation (Tucker, 1993).

In contrast, employees who have positive attitudes toward their manager will not want to jeopardize their personal relationships with the manager. Research on leader-member exchange suggests that employees who trust managers and feel well treated tend to reciprocate positive behavior (Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Frazier, Johnson, Gavin, Gooty, & Snow, 2010). They also repay their managers with behavior that benefits the organization, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Hence, they are less inclined to deliberately damage their relationship with the manager by means of negative gossip (Burt & Knez, 1996).

*Hypothesis 2a (friendly relationship with manager):* The more friendly an employee's relationship with the manager, the less likely the employee will be to gossip negatively about the manager.

Managers may have to monitor many subordinates, making it impossible to develop friendly relationships with all subordinates. However, managers may reduce gossip by establishing frequent communication contacts. Communication (e.g., accuracy, explanations, and openness) has been recognized as a dimension of trustworthy managerial behavior toward subordinates (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). If communication contacts



with the manager are sparse, employees have limited direct access to news from and about managers, which creates uncertainty. By informally talking about absent managers employees compensate for lack of formal information (De Backer & Gurven, 2006; Foster, 2004) and resolve uncertainty (Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997). More important, infrequent contacts with the manager further decrease the risks of being detected and punished by the manager for the gossip behavior.

Employees with frequent manager contacts acquire more knowledge and thus have less demand for gossip information (Whitener et al., 1998), although their higher knowledge status attracts gossip seekers. Negative gossip is further limited in the case of frequent contacts because chances of being detected are higher: If the gossip leaks, managers may suspect the source among their most frequent contacts. Repeated interaction, together with dependency on the more powerful managers, facilitates support and trustworthy behavior in relationships (Gambetta, 1988). Another reason why employees may not share gossip with colleagues is that the information might entail certain advantages. Like “gatekeepers,” employees can deliberately hide knowledge that helps to improve their own position in the organization (Burt & Knez, 1996).

*Hypothesis 2b (contact frequency with manager):* Employees who have frequent contact with the manager will be less likely to initiate gossip about the manager than employees who have infrequent contacts.

*Interpersonal trust in particular colleagues.* Spreading harmful and possibly unverified news about the manager is precarious because it can potentially backfire when detected. Burt argues, “When you exchange sensitive information with someone [in particular], trust is implicit in the risk you now face that the other person might leak the information” (Burt, 2005, p. 93). Gossip senders will prefer colleagues with whom they have friendly relationships over other colleagues, as the interpersonal trust embedded in these relationships reduces the risk of potential drawbacks. Positive gossip does not impose the same risks and, therefore, is exchanged more freely and independently of the nature of the relationship (Grosser et al., 2010).

*Hypothesis 2c (friendly relationship between employees):* Negative gossip about the manager will be more likely among employees who have friendly relationships than among employees who do not.

## Effects Across Trust Forms

Organizations failing to establish high generalized trust among employees may compensate for this with interpersonal trust relationships (Tyler & Degoe, 1996). Both trust forms are complementary because they develop based on different sources (Woolthuis, Hillebrand, & Nootboom, 2005). Based on the institutional environment of laws, norms, values, standards, and policies, every employee has a general predisposition toward the reliability and functioning of an organization's management. However, employees also share experiences in day-to-day interactions with other members of the organization and develop personal relationships and attitudes toward specific members. Hence, due to their different sources, both trust forms exist relatively independently from one another: Employees can have low generalized trust in management while they have high interpersonal trust in their direct supervisor, and vice versa. In a few cases, there may be a contagion effect where the interests and intentions of the organization are perceived as belonging to particular managers (Nootboom & Six, 2003). However, contagion will be the exception, meaning the theoretical distinction between generalized and interpersonal trust appears to be useful. From this distinction we conclude that low generalized trust will only affect gossip about the group of managers as the representative unit of the organization. It will not affect gossip about the direct supervisor.

*Hypothesis 3 (cross-level effects):* Low generalized trust in managers increases the likelihood that employees will spread gossip about management but not about their direct supervisor.

## Research Design and Setting

Data were collected in one medium-sized Dutch nonprofit organization in spring 2008. The organization is a major independent, subsidized, regional institution in the field of childcare. It is comprised of approximately 650 employees, with 15 sites spread across one region of the Netherlands. Its target group is children with problems in their social, psychological, and physical functioning. Most employees are female part-time workers.

Two studies were conducted in this organization, with each study targeting one of the two trust forms.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of Study 1 was to test the degree to which generalized trust in management and colleagues affects the employees' inclination to gossip about managers (Hypotheses 1a to 1c). It was based on

an employee survey of a random sample of employees and managers and limited to self-reported scale measures. The research was designed to produce a representative sample, allowing conclusions to be drawn for the organization as a whole. We applied ordinary least square (OLS) regressions.

The purpose of Study 2 was to investigate how interpersonal trust between actors in the gossip triad (i.e., between employees and managers, and among employees) determines gossip about the site manager (Hypotheses 2a to 2c). It also tested the relationship between generalized and interpersonal trust in managers (Hypothesis 3). Unlike the first study, we could not rely on a random sample of employees but needed full information about all possible interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Such information is traditionally collected with sociometric methods whereby each respondent answers questions about every member of the organization. Sociometric research, however, cannot be conducted for large organizations in their entirety because it requires small group samples. We therefore carried out a social networks study at two of the organization sites using sociometric measures. The study design allowed us to focus on and compare two specific cases with highly comparable contexts. The two sites were special kindergartens and identical in terms of hierarchy, number of employees, and workflow. Thus, we were able to control for formal structure. The data were analyzed using social network analysis methods, specifically exponential random graph modeling (ERGM).

## **Study 1: Employee Survey on Effects of Generalized Trust on Gossip**

### *Sample*

The organization agreed to a sample of approximately 30% of all employees. The organization provided sociodemographic data about all employees, containing information about gender, age, contracted hours per week, tenure, and geographical location of the worksite. A comparison of the sample data with the data of all employees resulted in no significant differences. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were sent to all 34 managers to ensure enough managers in the sample and to a random selection of 165 employees. As an incentive, €0.50 per completed questionnaire was donated to a prominent children's charity. A total of 144 respondents out of a possible 199 respondents (72.4%) completed the questionnaire after a second reminder. Responses came from all kinds of different units across the organization: General/Management, Ambulant Care/Foster Care, Daycare, and Children's Home. In total, 73% of the respondents were female, 20% were managers, and the mean age was

41.48 years ( $SD = 10.36$ ). On average, employees held a degree in higher education (Dutch: HBO) and had been working in the organization for 8.58 years ( $SD = 8.02$ ), mostly part-time (94.4% worked 36 hr or fewer per week).

## Measures

**Gossip about managers.** An adapted version of Wittek and Wielers' (1998) Tendency to Gossip at the Workplace Scale was used to operationalize the dependent variable, the employee's tendency to gossip about managers. We constructed and tested this two-dimensional gossip scale in a pilot study. Respondents were asked whether they sometimes talked positively or negatively about *any* manager in the organization. Three items addressed positive gossip, for example, "I sometimes praise the skills of a manager if she or he is absent," or "I sometimes make a positive comment about a manager if she or he is absent." Four items addressed negative gossip, for example, "I sometimes criticize managers for a negative characteristic while they are absent," or "If I feel treated badly by a manager I complain to my colleagues." Possible answers ranged from *does not apply to me at all* (1) to *applies to me* (7). When conducting a factor analysis or principal component analysis with direct oblimin rotation, positive and negative items loaded on two separate factors (eigenvalues of 3.38 and 2.15, explained variance of 79.1%). Cronbach's alpha was .89 for positive gossip and .90 for negative gossip.

**Generalized trust.** Trust at work was measured using Cook and Wall's (1980) two-dimensional scale on trust in management and trust in colleagues. Sample items are "The organization will always try to treat me fairly," or "Management can be trusted to make sensible decisions," and "Most of my workmates can be relied upon to do as they say they will do," or "If I got into difficulties at work I know my workmates would try and help me out." Possible answers ranged from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (7). Principal component analysis confirmed a two-factor solution (explained variance of 64.1%). Cronbach's alpha was .92 for trust in colleagues and .83 for trust in management.

**Control variables.** The analyses controlled for gender (0 = male, 1 = female), formal position (0 = subordinate, 1 = manager), age, education, and tenure. Furthermore, we controlled for positive gossip in the model of negative gossip, and vice versa.

## Results

Table 1 gives an overview of the descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables in Study 1. An analysis of variance revealed that

**Table 1.** Study 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Variables

Number	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Gender (1 = female)	73%	—	—							
2	Age	41.48	10.36	-.38***	—						
3	Education	7.86	1.46	.02	-.06	—					
4	Manager (1 = manager)	20%	—	-.39***	.39***	.28***	—				
5	Tenure	8.58	8.02	-.06	.42***	-.13	.08	—			
6	Trust in management	4.83	1.10	-.17*	.20**	.17**	.41***	-.07	—		
7	Trust in colleagues	5.81	0.91	-.05	.04	.08	-.15	.15*	.10	—	
8	Negative gossip	3.75	1.60	.15	-.20**	.02	-.35***	.05	-.50***	.22**	—
9	Positive gossip	4.99	1.35	-.07	.08	.22**	.15*	.03	.16*	.09	.22**

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

positive and negative gossip behavior did not differ significantly between the four organizational units. However, there were significant differences for trust in management ( $p < .05$ ), with trust being highest in the General/Management unit ( $M = 5.20$ ) and lowest in the Children's Home ( $M = 4.61$ ) and Ambulant Care/Foster Care ( $M = 4.62$ ) units.

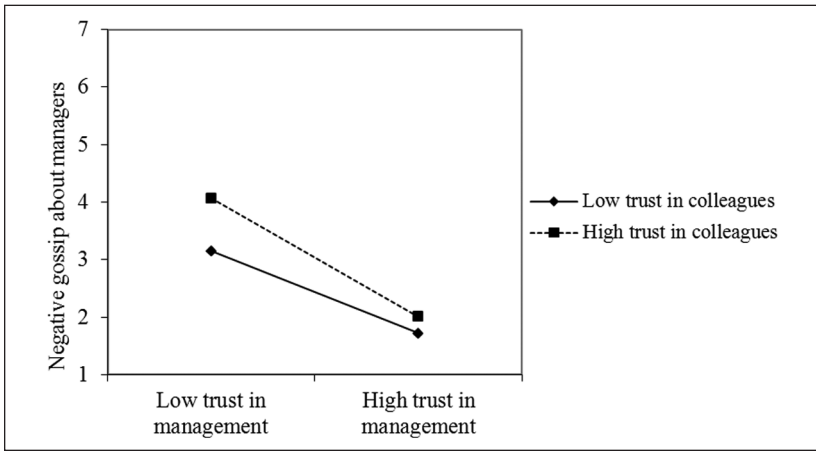
Table 2 presents two sets of OLS regression models, one predicting negative gossip and one predicting positive gossip about managers. In Hypothesis 1, we expected an increase in positive gossip (Hypothesis 1b) but a decrease in negative gossip (Hypothesis 1a) for employees who generally trust management. The results in Model 1B yield strong support for our argument about negative gossip, showing that negative talk becomes more likely when generalized trust in managers is low ( $\beta = -.51, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the results in Model 2B show that trust in management increases positive gossip ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ). Note that the latter effect is unstable, as it disappears if not controlled for negative gossip. In Hypothesis 1c we further elaborated on the effect of negative gossip by arguing for a moderation effect of generalized trust in colleagues. Trust in colleagues indeed increases the employees' frequency of negative gossip about managers ( $\beta = .22, p < .01$ ). More important, as expected, we find a significant effect for the interaction between trust in management and trust in colleagues (Model 1C:  $\beta = -.15, p < .05$ ), meaning that the two slopes of the direct effects differ from each other and, thus, the effect curves do not run parallel. This means that low trust in management combined with high trust in colleagues enhances negative gossip behavior:

**Table 2. Study 1: OLS (Ordinary Least Square) Regression Models on Negative and Positive Gossip About Managers<sup>a</sup>**

	Negative gossip (n = 132)						Positive gossip (n = 132)					
	Model 1A		Model 1B		Model 1C		Model 2A		Model 2B			
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
<b>Controls</b>												
(Constant)	3.40	0.75	—	3.23	0.65	—	3.26	0.64	—	3.71	0.66	—
Gender (1 = female)	-0.10	0.32	-0.03	0.03	0.28	0.01	0.05	0.28	0.01	-0.07	0.29	-0.02
Age	-0.23	0.16	-0.14	-0.13	0.14	-0.08	-0.09	0.14	-0.05	0.10	0.15	0.07
Education	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.15	0.08	0.16*
Manager (1 = manager)	-10.52	0.38	-0.38***	-0.57	0.36	-0.14	-0.51	0.35	-0.13	0.58	0.35	0.17
Tenure	0.20	0.13	0.14	0.04	0.11	0.03	0.03	0.11	0.02	-0.01	0.11	0.00
Positive gossip	0.44	0.14	0.26***	0.49	0.12	0.30***	0.50	0.12	0.30***	—	—	—
Negative gossip	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.40	0.12	0.29***
Generalized trust	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Trust in Management	—	—	—	-0.79	0.12	-0.51***	-0.87	0.13	-0.56***	—	—	—
Trust in Colleagues	—	—	—	0.35	0.12	0.22***	0.30	0.12	0.19**	—	—	—
Trust in Management x Trust in Colleagues	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.16	0.08	-0.15**	—	—	—
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.19			0.40			0.41			0.09		
R <sup>2</sup> change (sign. F change)	(0.000)			0.21			0.02			(0.006)		
				(0.000)			(0.043)					(0.001)

<sup>a</sup>Age, tenure, trust in management, trust in colleagues, and gossip (as control variable) were standardized for calculating the model and for computing the interaction term.

\*p < .1. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01. \*\*\*\*p < .001.



**Figure 2.** Study 1: Interaction effect of generalized trust on negative gossip about managers

Employees who do not trust management *but* trust colleagues are most likely to talk negatively about managers. However, high trust in colleagues is not a precondition for negative gossip about managers, as revealed by an additional simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991). The negative effect of trust in management on gossip was smaller but still significant for employees with low trust in colleagues (low trust in colleagues:  $\beta = -.46, p < .001$ , vs. high trust:  $\beta = -.66, p < .001$ ). The interaction finding is illustrated in Figure 2. The full model predicting negative gossip has strong explanatory power ( $R^2_{adj} = .41$ ), whereas the model for positive gossip has little significant explanatory power ( $R^2_{adj} = .138$ ). We do not report a third model on positive gossip, as adding an interaction effect ( $\beta = -.08, p = .90$ ) did not improve but reduced the model's explanatory power ( $R^2_{adj} = .037$ ).<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion

Negative gossip about managers is stimulated by low generalized trust in management and high trust in colleagues, which confirms our hypotheses. As already argued, negative gossip about management is behavior that implies more risks for employees than positive gossip. These risks seem to be minimized in collegial trust relationships. However, the effect of trust in management was more than twice as large as the effect of trust in colleagues and,

thus, was the driving force behind gossip. A notable finding of Study 1 is that the model for positive gossip has little explanatory power and that the positive effect of trust in management was unstable. This effect was outweighed by the employees' tendency to gossip negatively. Hence, managers cannot stimulate positive gossip by means that generate trust, such as transparency, accountability for decision making, and other managerial actions. Also, positive gossip is exchanged independently of trust and rather freely between colleagues.

## **Study 2: Network Study on Effect of Interpersonal Trust on Gossip**

### *Sample*

Social network data were collected at two organization sites to gain some case study insights. We refer to the two sites as "Blue Site" and "Orange Site." These sites were chosen because they were identical in terms of hierarchical structure, staff numbers (1 manager and 35 employees), division of labor, and buildings, which were constructed as kindergartens. Hierarchies were flat with one male line manager who directly supervised all employees. At the Blue Site all employees were female, and at the Orange Site all but one were female. Teams of about four or five employees were responsible for a group of children, but there were no formal team leaders. These highly similar structures and organizational contexts provided conditions that reduced the influence of differences in environmental factors while comparing the gossip networks at these two sites.

The topic of gossip is a sensitive one, so hesitation to provide accurate answers can pose a serious problem. We used several means to ensure that employees were responding as truthfully as possible. First, we personally introduced the study carefully on site. We presented our ideas to the group of employees and showed them examples of sociometric questions beforehand, so that they knew what to expect. We also presented an example of a network analysis of a school class to demonstrate how data would be anonymized in future research reports. After completion of the data collection we went back to the sites and, as promised prior to the study, provided respondents with a research report.

We further guaranteed full anonymity by using self-administered, computer-aided interviewing at both sites. For this purpose, laptop computers were installed on site and researchers were available to answer questions. Each employee received an e-mail invitation with a personal log-in and password



details to the study's website. This way, employees could choose to fill in the study at work or at home. Like in Study 1, an incentive of €0.50 per completed questionnaire was donated to a prominent children's charity. At both sites, 29 employees (82.9%) completed the questionnaire after a third reminder. The mean age of the respondents was 35.79 years ( $SD = 10.97$ ) at the Blue Site and 38.57 years ( $SD = 11.53$ ) at the Orange Site. Sixty percent of respondents at the Blue Site and 40% at the Orange Site were social workers.

## Measures

All measures were assessed by a sociometric design. This means that every employee at the Blue Site received a roster with the names of all their colleagues (including the site manager) at the Blue Site. For each of these colleagues, employees were asked questions about gossiping and their interpersonal trust relationships, operationalized as friendly relationships and frequent communication contacts. Exactly the same was done at the Orange Site. Gossip about the manager (i.e., the dependent network variable) was predicted based on the employees' friendly relationships and frequent contacts with one another (i.e., dyadic covariates) and on the employees' friendly relationships and contact frequency with the manager (i.e., actor covariates). Note that although the latter actor covariates were also assessed using the roster, they were treated as *attribute* variables in the model. In more technical terms, we extracted the out-degrees and tested them for sender and receiver effects (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). This way we could test, for example, whether friendly relationships with the manager influenced the sender's likelihood of sharing gossip with certain receivers.

*Gossip about the manager.* The dependent variable, gossip about the site manager between two employees, was measured as follows. From a list containing the names of all their colleagues working at the site, respondents selected every colleague with whom they had informally talked about their site manager (when absent) during the previous 3 months. "Informal talk" was described as talk that contained "positive" or "critical" comments. To limit social desirability effects, we deliberately avoided the term "gossip." Furthermore, the question was formulated indirectly, asking respondents which colleagues had talked with them. We took this as a proxy for self-reported gossip. For each colleague, respondents could also indicate whether their conversations about the manager were critical (i.e., negative), positive, or mixed.

*Friendly relationships with the manager.* Employees rated how they perceived their personal relationship with the manager. The question primed trust by using the following introduction: "With some colleagues we have a

very good relationship. To some we would even confide personal things. With other colleagues, however, we can get along less well.” Answer categories ranged from *very difficult* (1) to *difficult, neutral, friendly, or good friend* (5). This variable was implemented as an actor covariate in the analysis.

**Dyadic friendly relationships between employees.** We used the same question to rate relationships between employees, again using lists of names. Every employee was asked to rate their personal relationship with every colleague at their site. We dichotomized this variable into friendly relationship for respondents who rated a relationship as *friendly or good friend* (1), and *no friendly relation* (0) for the other ratings. Friendly relationships (i.e., out-degrees) between colleagues were analyzed as a dyadic covariate.

**Contact frequency with the manager.** Employees rated how often they had had formal or informal communication contact with the manager during the previous 3 months. Possible answer categories ranged from *never* (1) to *eight or more times per week* (6). This variable served as an actor covariate.

**Dyadic contact frequency between employees.** The same question was asked for every colleague at the site. We dichotomized contact frequency into low contact frequency (0 = *two times or less per week*) and high contact frequency (1 = *three times or more per week*). To reduce the impact of missing data, we symmetrized contact frequency using the maximum method. This means that if only one of the two employees in a dyad indicated that there was contact, we also coded the contact as present for the other employee in the dyad. Contacts between employees were modeled as dyadic covariates.

**Formal team membership.** Formal group structure was an important control variable because it determined who had to collaborate with whom at the sites. Previous research found evidence that physical proximity increases the likelihood of communication between a pair of actors (Krackhardt, 1994). The organization provided data about the formal work groups at the two sites. We gave every employee a group code and then tested whether being in the same group led to more gossip between those employees (i.e., actor covariate).

**Control variables.** We controlled for a number of common network configurations, which will be detailed in the following section.

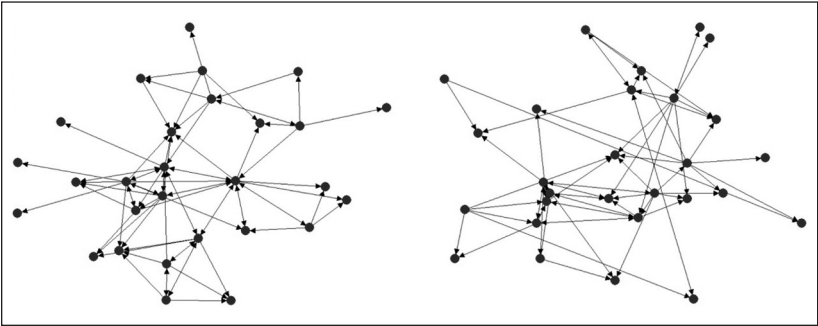
## Method of Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we used ERGM, which is also referred to as the  $p^*$  model (Robins, Pattison, Kalish, & Lusher, 2007; Robins, Pattison, & Wang, 2009; Robins, Snijders, Wang, Handcock, & Pattison, 2007; Snijders, Pattison, Robins, & Handcock, 2006). Models were estimated with the statistical package SIENA- $p^*$  in STOCNET (Snijders, Steglich, Schweinberger, &

Huisman, 2008). An OLS regression approach could not be relied upon this time because network data violate their assumptions about observational independence. ERGM allows us to consider all observations as conditionally dependent, meaning that the change of one observation affects the probability of all other observations (Robins, Pattison et al., 2007). A major advantage, as with any social network analysis, is that ERGM investigates the structure within a complete social network. In our case, we looked at gossip relationships within an organizational network, where a gossip relationship represents one employee gossiping with a specific colleague about the site manager. We assumed that these gossip relationships do not just form randomly but have a certain underlying pattern.

ERGM examines and empirically tests certain patterns with the following procedure: A number of random networks are simulated and compared to the observed gossip network. This procedure informs us about how much the observation differs from networks that occur by chance. A Markov chain Monte Carlo maximum likelihood estimation (MCMCMLE) is used for the simulation. Network density is not modeled but fixed to the observed density. After every simulation, the randomly produced network is compared to the observed network through a number of parameters. If the simulation does not represent the observation well, the parameter values (zero at start) of the model are adjusted. A parameter is changed to a value above zero when an effect was observed more often and changed to a value below zero when observed less often than in the random network. The simulation procedure is repeated at least 8,000 times until the simulated network provides a good representation of the observed network, indicated by convergence statistics close to zero. We only used models with convergence statistics between  $-0.10$  and  $0.10$  for every parameter, as recommended by Robins et al. (2009) to ensure that our results were robust. We modeled two exponential random graphs, one for each site.

Exponential random graphs are multivariate models, meaning that a dependent network is described based on a number of other networks, called dyadic covariates, and a number of individual attributes, called actor covariates. Three levels of analysis were covered. The first level covered relationships with the site manager (i.e., actor covariates). We included parameters that tested whether the employees' relationships with the site manager affected their choice to share gossip about him and whether there was similarity between the relationships of gossip senders and their chosen gossip receivers. As recommended for ERG models, we also controlled for the relationships of gossip receivers with the site manager. Furthermore, in each gossip dyad, we controlled whether both employees tended to have a friendly relationship with the manager, or had similar contact frequency with him, respectively.



**Figure 3.** Networks of gossiping employees at Blue Site (left) and Orange Site (right)

The second level of analysis regarded the dyadic relationships *between* gossiping employees (i.e., dyadic covariates). This way we knew whether patterns in the gossip network were related to patterns in another network, for instance, whether the likelihood of a gossip relationship increased when there was frequent contact between two employees.

For the third level, we included parameters that described the overall endogenous structure of the gossip relationships in the organization as a whole. These parameters may be called “network statistics” and tell whether certain patterns of gossiping occur more or less often than expected by chance. They are typically included as controls in ERGM: reciprocity, alternating  $k$ -in-stars, alternating  $k$ -out-stars, alternating independent 2-paths, and alternating  $k$ -triangles (Robins, Pattison et al., 2007; Robins, Snijders et al., 2007; Snijders et al., 2008). While these control statistics rule out biases on our first two analytical levels, they offer additional material for interpretation of structural characteristics in gossip networks. More explanation of these effects will be provided in the results section.

## Results

The gossip networks of the two sites are reproduced in Figure 3. Table 3 summarizes the descriptive results of the network study. At both sites, 28 out of 29 employees engaged in gossip about their site manager. On average, they gossiped with three colleagues at the Blue Site and with two colleagues at the Orange Site. At the Blue Site, there was basically no positive talk about the manager (1.4%). About 50% of the gossip was negative, whereas this figure was much lower at the Orange Site (about 12%).

**Table 3.** Study 2: Descriptive Statistics of Networks at Blue Site and Orange Site

Network statistics <sup>a</sup>	Blue Site	Orange Site
Number of employees	35	35
Number of respondents	29 (82.9%)	29 (82.9%)
Gossip about the site manager		
Number of employees involved in gossip	28	28
Average number of nominated gossip partners per employee (out-degree)	2.69	2.28
Density of gossip network	0.08	0.07
Shares of total gossip: Negative contents		
Mixed contents	50.7%	11.8%
Positive contents	47.9%	60.3%
Interpersonal trust: Friendly relationships		
Average number of friendly relationships with colleagues per employee (out-degree)	10.00	10.40
Average relationship rating for site manager	3.15	3.21
Density of friendly relationships network	0.30	0.31
Interpersonal trust: Contact frequency		
Average number of frequently contacted colleagues per employee (three times or more weekly; degree)	10.61	23.67
Average frequency of contacts with site manager <sup>b</sup>	3.26	2.37
Density of contact network	0.33	0.72

<sup>a</sup>Because both networks are equal in size and response rate, network measures are nonstandardized and, hence, directly comparable.

<sup>b</sup>A *t* test revealed a significant difference in the employees' contact frequency between the two site managers ( $p < .001$ ).

The identical formal structure of the two sites combined with different gossip behaviors provided interesting material for comparison: At the Blue Site gossip was predominantly negative and at the Orange Site gossip was more positive, meaning one site manager was much more criticized than the other. This enabled us to compare the effects of interpersonal trust relationships on gossip in two different workplace settings. In the following, we will refer to this difference in negativity when discussing our hypotheses about negative and positive gossip. Table 4 presents the results of the exponential random graph models for both sites.

The first set of hypotheses regarded the relationships of employees with their manager. As expected in Hypothesis 2a, employees who have a friendly

**Table 4. Study 2: Gossip About the Manager at Two Sites—Parameter Estimates and Standard Errors (SE)**

Parameter	Blue Site: Predominantly negative gossip			Orange Site: Predominantly positive and mixed gossip			
	Estimate $\theta$	SE	Estimate $\theta$	Estimate $\theta$	SE	Estimate $\theta$	SE
<b>Controls</b>							
1. Reciprocity	0.69	0.61	0.85	0.60	0.69	2.13**	2.26***
2. Alternating out-k-stars	1.08***	0.31	1.06***	0.31	0.28	1.58***	1.64***
3. Alternating in-k-stars	-0.10	0.36	-0.19	0.34	0.31	0.43	0.46
4. Alternating k-triangles	0.61**	0.22	0.59**	0.21	0.19	0.25	0.25
5. Alternating independent two paths	-0.06	0.08	-0.11	0.08	0.09	-0.27**	-0.23**
<b>Generalized trust in management</b>							
6. Sender of gossip	—	—	-0.03	0.02	—	—	0.01
7. Receiver of gossip	—	—	0.05	0.03	—	—	0.01
8. Similarity in trust of sender and receiver	—	—	-1.40*	0.64	—	—	-0.20
<b>Friendly relationship with site manager</b>							
9. Sender of gossip	-0.45*	0.22	—	—	0.17	-0.02	—
10. Receiver of gossip	0.24	0.33	—	—	0.25	-0.05	—
11. Same friendly relationship between sender and receiver	0.17	0.26	—	—	0.25	-0.09	—
<b>Contact frequency with site manager</b>							
12. Sender of gossip	-0.33***	0.09	—	—	0.16	-0.13	—
13. Receiver of gossip	-0.10	0.13	—	—	0.23	0.13	—
14. Similarity in contact of sender and receiver	-0.97	0.62	—	—	1.22	1.94	—
<b>Dyadic relationships between employees</b>							
15. Friendly relationship (out-degree)	1.81***	0.34	1.31***	0.33	0.24	0.21	0.17
16. Contact frequency (symmetric)	0.80*	0.33	0.72*	0.33	0.38	1.18**	1.01**
17. Team membership	1.11***	0.32	1.48**	0.33	0.29	1.34***	1.16***

Note: Significance is calculated by dividing the parameter estimate by its standard error. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

relationship with their manager were less likely to send negative gossip about their manager. This is shown by a significant negative sender effect at the Blue Site ( $\theta = -0.45, p < .05$ ) where gossip contents among employees were mostly negative, and a nonsignificant effect at the Orange Site ( $\theta = -0.02, ns$ ) where gossip contents were much more positive. This suggests that a friendly relationship indeed inhibits negative gossip behavior. We find partial support for Hypothesis 2b, where we assumed that frequent contacts with the manager would decrease the likelihood employees would gossip about their manager: There is a significant negative sender effect at the Blue Site ( $\theta = -0.33, p < .001$ ) but no effect at the Orange Site ( $\theta = -0.13, ns$ ). This means that the effect of contact frequency, similar to the effect of friendly relationships, is strongest in the negative gossip network (i.e., Blue Site).

We also formulated a hypothesis with regard to the relationships between employees. As expected in Hypothesis 2c, a friendly relationship between two employees is a predictor of gossip behavior between them about managers. Interestingly, this was only observed at the Blue Site, where gossip contents were mainly negative ( $\theta = 1.81, p < .001$ ). This is an indicator that trust may be a more important prerequisite in workplaces dominated by negative gossip rather than by positive and mixed gossip. Both control variables were significant: Frequent contacts between employees (Blue Site:  $\theta = 0.80, p < .05$ ; Orange Site:  $\theta = 1.18, p < .01$ ) and formal team membership (Blue Site:  $\theta = 1.11, p < .001$ ; Orange Site  $\theta = 1.34, p < .001$ ) increase the probability of gossip exchange at both sites.

In Hypothesis 3 on cross-level effects, we predicted that an employee's generalized trust in managers is independent of the inclination to spread gossip about a particular manager, such as the direct supervisor. As expected, generalized trust in management did not affect an employee's tendency to gossip about the site manager at either site. We find further support for this assumption by looking at the correlations between generalized and interpersonal trust in managers: There were no significant associations between generalized trust in management with friendly relationships (Orange Site: Spearman's Rho =  $-.08, ns$ ; Blue Site: Spearman's Rho =  $.24, ns$ ) and contact frequency with the site manager (Orange Site: Spearman's Rho =  $-.09, ns$ ; Blue Site: Spearman's Rho =  $.09, ns$ ).

Finally, our control variables accounting for network statistics yielded some interesting insights. Reciprocity of gossip behavior is stronger at the Orange Site than at the Blue Site, which implies that colleagues reciprocate negative gossip less than nonnegative gossip. At both sites, alternating out-k-stars are significantly overrepresented, meaning that a small number of employees were particularly active in spreading gossip in the organization.

The insignificant alternating in-k-stars show that gossip is received rather equally—there are no employees who were particularly popular gossip partners. The significant positive parameters for alternating k-triangles and the negative parameters for alternating independent two paths indicate a statistical overrepresentation of closed triads. This means that gossip relationships tended to occur in local, dense social structures.

## Discussion

The two sites of our network study differed remarkably with respect to the negativity in gossip among employees, which provided two interesting case studies. Our assumptions concerning the dyadic determinants of gossip about managers were mainly confirmed at the Blue Site, where the workplace was characterized by high criticism of the site manager. Friendly relationships of employees *with* their site manager reduced the likelihood of gossip about him. However, friendly relationships *between* employees diminished this effect by enhancing the probability of gossip about the site managers. Also frequent interpersonal contacts and team membership increased the flow of gossip. Frequent contact was also a determinant of gossip at the Orange Site, where the site manager was viewed less critically. Interpersonal trust, as it is produced in friendly and frequent contacts, is a prerequisite for negative but not positive or mixed gossip. Altogether, the findings of the network study strongly underpin results from the employee survey in Study 1: Both trust forms seem to have a substantial and similar influence on negative gossip behavior about managers. However, they were not directly related to one another but operated on different levels of analysis.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present research offers several innovations regarding the study of gossip in organizations. It accounted for important status differences at the workplace by focusing on managers as the objects of gossip between employees and assessing vertical and horizontal trust relationships. Furthermore, it extended ideas from previous work using social network theory (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Burt, 1992; Foster & Rosnow, 2006; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998), which mainly drew on reputation and trustworthiness in people as antecedents of gossip (Burt, 2005; Ellwardt et al., 2012). Finally, the present study disentangled two distinct variants of organizational trust.

The combination of our two studies shows that negative gossip behavior is stimulated by interemployee trust relationships but inhibited by trust



relationships with managers. Interestingly, positive gossip flourished irrespective of the employees' generalized trust and interpersonal trust with managers and of the friendliness between employees. In line with research findings by Burt (2001) and Grosser et al. (2010), we conclude that negative gossip behavior, in contrast to positive gossip, is precarious and therefore requires positive relationships with colleagues.

Our empirical findings strongly confirm previous research conducted using network theory: Gossip is likely to flow in networks with many friendly and frequent contacts between employees (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1990), when the object of gossip is of particular importance to a broader group of employees (McAndrew et al., 2007) and when information about the object is negative (Bosson et al., 2006; Davis & McLeod, 2003). These conditions make it easy for negative gossip to reach through entire organizational grapevines and create long-lasting, sticky reputations (Burt, 2005).

A conclusion from the present study is that negative gossip about management can hardly be avoided in dense organizational networks where employees perceive their relationships with managers as difficult, regardless of whether lack of trust concerns generalized or interpersonal trust. Whereas this sounds like bad news to practitioners, they may be able to curtail the emergence of gossip to some extent: The two forms of trust appeared to be unrelated in our study. This means managers in organizations may be able to compensate the lack of one trust form with the other. This is particularly relevant in flexibly regulated organizations where much depends on individuals' idiosyncratic and situational context, meaning trust is primarily developed on an interpersonal, rather than a general, level. On the other hand, more strongly regulated systems may rely on impersonal power when building trust since they provide a reliable framework for individuals' expectations and interactions (Bachman, 2005). This may help practitioners reduce negative talk, promote a positive reputation of management, and facilitate organizational citizenship behavior (Grosser et al., 2011).

Further research is required to address some of the shortcomings of this research. First, although our study was limited to one organization, we have already found strong evidence for contextual differences between the two sites. Future studies will benefit from a multiorganization design that allows more systematic variations in organizational context, such as hierarchical structure, demographic composition, or diversity in professions. Second, interactions of interpersonal trust may be explored in more detail. It could well be that friendly relationships moderate the relationship between contact frequency and negative gossip: Frequent but unfriendly contacts likely increase negative gossip, whereas frequent and friendly relationships decrease

such behavior.<sup>3</sup> Third, our study was restricted to the antecedents of gossip about managers, leaving us in the dark about potential individual- and organization-level consequences of gossip.

In order to assess practical implications of workplace gossip, an integrated model addressing antecedents, processes, and consequences would be necessary. However, whether these insights will ever lead to the design of viable interventions to “manage” gossip at work remains to be seen. As Noon and Delbridge (1993) suggested, the dynamics of workplace gossip are intrinsic to the workplace and belong to social life in organizations.

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### **Notes**

1. Both studies were preceded by a phase of document study and exploratory in-depth interviews with five managers and three employees, as well as pretests. Questionnaires were discussed with management and piloted by six employees from various professions.
2. Because negative and positive gossip about managers correlated weakly ( $r = 0.22$ ;  $p < .05$ ), we also tested a multivariate generalized linear model to include both these dependent variables in one regression analysis. The results appeared to be robust as they were comparable to those from OLS regressions.
3. No interaction effects were found between friendly relations and frequent contacts in our network study.

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