NOTE

PASSING THE WORD: TOWARD A MODEL OF GOSSIP AND POWER IN THE WORKPLACE

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Although gossip is widespread, seldom has it been a topic of management research. Here we build a conceptual model of workplace gossip and its effects on the power of employees who initiate it. After defining and distinguishing among different kinds of workplace gossip, we develop propositions about the effect of that gossip on gossipers' expert, referent, reward, and coercive power. We then suggest how moderators may shape those effects and discuss implications of the model.

As early as the Hawthorne Studies (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1943), management scholars recognized the existence of the informal organization. Unlike the formal organization, which appears in organization charts and reflects prescribed patterns for officially sanctioned messages, the informal organization consists of spontaneous, emergent patterns that result from individuals' discretionary choices (Stohl, 1995: 65). This informal network, also called the *grapevine* (e.g., Baird, 1977; Daniels, Spiker, & Papa, 1997), has received considerable attention in the years since its discovery (e.g., Davis, 1953; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Podolny & Baron, 1997). Still, there is a need for closer examination of its specific components—for example, rumor, "catching up," and gossip (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Accordingly, in this article we explore one such component: workplace gossip.

Although psychologists (e.g., Fine & Rosnow, 1978), sociologists (e.g., Eder & Enke, 1991), and anthropologists (e.g., Dunbar, 1996) have examined the nature and role of gossip in larger society, scholars have yet to develop a conceptual model of workplace gossip—or even agree on its definition—despite Noon and Delbridge's (1993) call for research on the topic. Thus, it is important to begin redressing this gap. In this article we draw on writings from multiple disciplines to offer a definition and theoretical model of workplace gossip and its consequences.

Models of general communication typically have been of two kinds. The first, most common kind is the linear model (e.g., Berlo, 1960; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Shannon & Weaver, 1949), in which the researcher treats communication as a "left-to-right, one-way" process (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981: 33). Key components of linear models are the source (person who initiates communication), message (content of the communication), channel (transmission medium), and receiver (person receiving the message; Ruch, 1989). Communication is viewed as a process by which a message is transferred from an active source, through a channel, to a passive receiver.

The second kind of general communication model is the convergence model (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). In convergence models (e.g., Kincaid, 1979; Pearce, Figgins, & Golen, 1984) researchers treat communication as a two-way process. Suggesting that participants in the communication process are simultaneously sending and receiving messages, researchers developing these models make less distinction between sender and receiver. Instead, they delve into the relationships among communication participants, the larger social networks in which those relationships exist, and the dynamic nature of com-

munication (e.g., how communication changes its participants).

To ensure practical value in communication models, researchers may need to balance the simplicity of linear models with the complexity of convergence models. As Smeltzer and Leonard have suggested, a communication model should "contain enough elements so that users can relate their personal experiences and training to the model. But it must not become so complex that practitioners find it impossible to understand" (1994: 32). Thus, our model lies between the linear and convergence categories. Like linear models, its primary emphasis is on the flow of a message (gossip) from source (gossiper) to receiver (gossip recipient).[1] However, with our model we improve on traditional linear models by paying greater attention to the communication context—specifically, the culture in which gossip occurs. Also, the receiver in our model has a more active role than in strict linear models: we consider the interplay between source and receiver—that is, how the relationship between gossiper and recipient moderates the effects we propose. Additionally, we incorporate the receiver's reaction to the message in our model's dependent variable: the source's power over the receiver. The receiver's interpretation of the gossip largely determines how much power the source gains.

Power is the dependent variable in our model for several reasons. First, social scientists (e.g., Berger, 1994; Giddens, 1984; Mumby, 1988) have suggested that communication in general tends to shape power structures in organizations as well as society. Second, in extant writings on gossip, scholars have hinted at linkages to power (e.g., Emler, 1994). Third, power is a multidimensional construct (French & Raven, 1959; Hinkin & Schriescheim, 1989); as such, it has sufficient breadth to capture a variety of workplace gossip effects. Finally, power is often a critical asset to employees (Pfeffer, 1992).

Although the focus of our model is the gossiper-recipient dyad, it is important to keep in mind that such dyads are embedded in social networks. Mutual friends and acquaintances of the gossiper and recipient can influence the prolif-

eration and impact of gossip (Burt & Knez, 1996; Jaeger, Skelder, & Rosnow, 1998). Indeed, researchers (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Martin & Siehl, 1983) have observed that even an ostensibly minor story about one employee can ultimately transform a corporate culture, if that story is shared by many organizational members.

A complete network analysis of gossip is beyond the scope of our model, for as Burt and Knez note, even "a minimal assumption of active third parties creates enormous complexity for theoretical analysis" (1996: 72). Nevertheless, at several points in this article, we touch on how such networks play a role in gossip-power linkages.

KEY CONCEPTS IN THE PROPOSED MODEL

Definition and Types of Gossip

As prior researchers have noted (Jaeger et al., 1998; Schein, 1994), gossip traditionally has been defined as *idle chatter, chitchat,* or the *evil tongue.* These negative connotations largely arose from religious writings (e.g., Exod. 23 : 1; Lev. 19 : 16; Prov. 25 : 18). Many authors (e.g., Bok, 1984) continue to treat gossip as improper and overly subjective. Some, however, recently have offered neutral definitions, such as "evaluative talk about a person who is not present" (Eder & Enke, 1991: 494) and "the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting" (Noon & Delbridge, 1993: 25). Unlike their negative counterparts, these more even-handed definitions allow for gossip's functional as well as dysfunctional side (e.g., Dunbar, 1996; Tebbutt, 1995). Here, we draw upon and adapt these neutral conceptualizations, defining workplace gossip as *informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present.*

Although laypersons and academics (e.g., Ayim, 1994) occasionally may suggest that gossip encompasses informal communication about objects or events—not just people—our treatment focuses on talk about other persons. We delimit our definition in this manner for two reasons. First, in scholarly writings on gossip in larger society (e.g., Eder & Enke, 1991; Harris, 1993; Rosnow & Fine, 1976), researchers predom-

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[1] The source may be either a supervisor, subordinate, or peer of the recipient. That is, the direction of gossip may either be upward, downward, or lateral.

inantly treat the concept as communication about people. Second, the American Management Association (AMA) recently asserted that the grapevine may include a wide range of informal communication, whereas gossip focuses solely on information about people (Smith, 1996).

Just as there are distinctions between gossip and other forms of informal communication, there are important distinctions among different kinds of gossip. A review of relevant literature points to three dimensions useful for making these distinctions: sign, credibility, and work-relatedness. Following writings on feedback (e.g., Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979), we define *sign* as the positivity or negativity of the information being related. When gossip consists of favorable news about others—for example, stating that "Mary received a raise"—its sign is positive. When gossip consists of unfavorable news about others, its sign is negative.[2]

Credibility is the extent to which the gossip is believable—that is, it is seemingly accurate and truthful. Message credibility has been the subject of considerable research in the fields of communication, marketing, and social psychology (e.g., Boehm, 1994; McCroskey, 1969; Slattery & Tiedge, 1992). A recent review attests to its importance as a communication feature (Self, 1996).

Consistent with prior literature (e.g., Morrow, 1981; Tushman, 1979) in which authors have distinguished between work-related and non-work-related communication, we distinguish among work-related (professional) and non-work-related (social) gossip. We define *work-relatedness* as the degree to which gossip is focused on a subject's work life, such as job performance, career progress, relationships with other organizational members, and general behavior in the workplace.

Definition and Types of Power

Also essential to our model is the concept of power. Pfeffer has described power as "the po-

tential ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things that they would otherwise not do" (1992: 30). Finkelstein has referred to power as "the capacity of individual actors to exert their will" (1992: 507). Based on these writings and the writings of others (French & Raven, 1969; House, 1988; Shackleton, 1995), we define power here as the *ability to exert one's will, influencing others to do things that they would not otherwise do*. In the model we specifically focus on the gossiper's power over gossip recipients.

The multidimensionality of power is well recognized. French and Raven (1959) advanced a typology of power that remains popular (e.g., Atwater, 1995; Davis & Schoorman, 1997; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1994), distinguishing among five kinds of power that one individual (whom we call Person A) can have over another individual (whom we call Person B): coercive power, reward power, legitimate power, expert power, and referent power.[3] Although organizational scholars have offered other power typologies (e.g., Finkelstein, 1992; Yukl & Falbe, 1991), French and Raven's original classification is the most widely accepted and adopted. Their typology is particularly useful for describing individual-level power, which is the focus of our model. Hence, our propositions pertain to four of these power types (coercive, reward, expert, and referent) that we expect gossip to influence. (We do not consider legitimate power as an outcome because it is largely based on one's position—that is, hierarchical rank—rather than on social processes.) Our predictions refer to the French and Raven dimensions, but we draw from a range of power and influence writings to develop those predictions.

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[2] Within the categories of positive gossip and negative gossip, it is possible to make additional distinctions. For example, gossip can be negative if it describes an unfortunate event that befell someone (e.g., a broken leg), but it can also be negative if it describes unethical behavior. Here, we interpret gossip as negative when it constitutes a "smear" that could detract from a subject's reputation. Positive gossip, however, tends to enhance a subject's reputation.

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[3] *Coercive power* is the power that emerges from Person B's belief that Person A has the ability to punish him or her. *Reward power* is the power that emerges from Person B's belief that Person A can provide him or her with desired outcomes. *Legitimate power* is the power that emerges from Person B's perception that Person A has a legitimate right, based on position in the organization, to influence him or her. *Expert power* is the power that emerges from Person B's belief that Person A has special knowledge or expertise that Person B needs. Finally, *referent power* is the power that emerges from Person B's attraction for and desire to be associated with Person A.
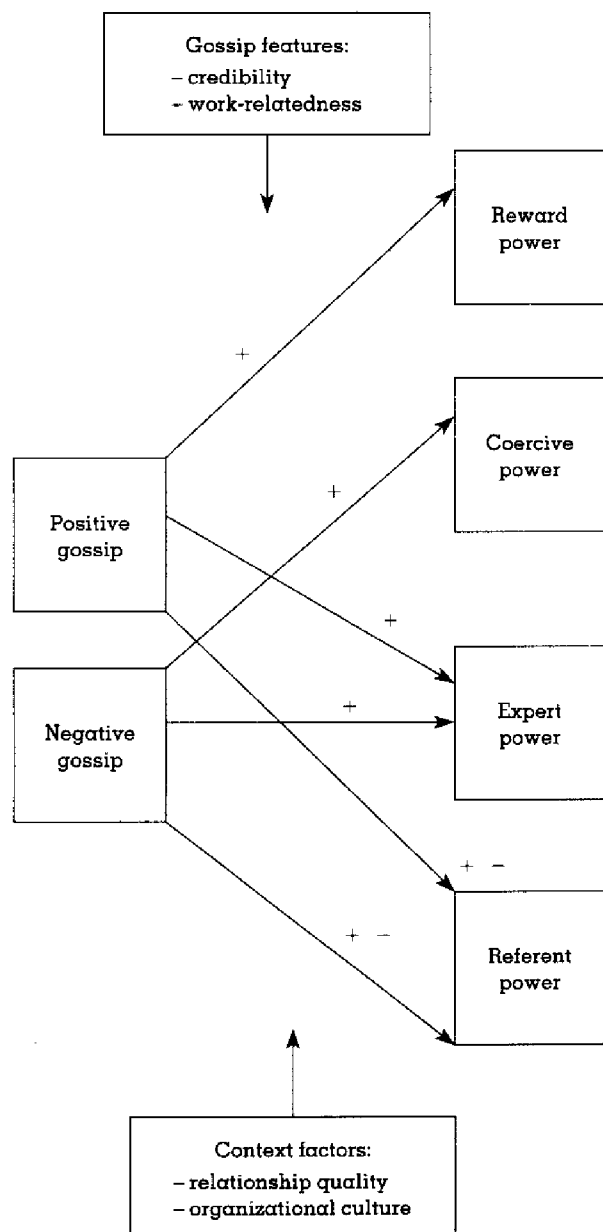
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Figure 1 presents our model. In the following sections we develop propositions about the illustrated linkages.

Linkages Between Gossip and Power

One main effect of negative gossip may be enhanced coercive power. When the gossiper

FIGURE 1
Proposed Model of Gossip and Power

relates negative news about a third party, recipients may infer that the gossiper also could spread negative information about *them* (Yerkovich, 1977). Because such information can damage reputations and/or careers (Emler, 1994; Fine, 1977; Glazer & Ras, 1994; Tebbutt, 1995), negative gossip may constitute an implicit threat by the gossiper. French and Raven (1959) proposed that when Person B perceives that Person A can administer punishments, Person A has coercive power over Person B. Along the same lines, other researchers (e.g., Hunt & Nevin, 1974; Tedeschi, 1972) have advanced the notion that implicit and explicit threats can enhance power and influence.[4] Those who feel threatened may comply in order to avoid retribution (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980). Thus, negative gossip may give the gossiper coercive power over recipients.

> *Proposition 1: In a work setting, negative gossip will enhance the gossiper's coercive power over gossip recipients.*

Positive gossip, in contrast, is likely to affect reward power. When a gossiper shares positive news about another worker, recipients may infer that the gossiper also could spread positive information about *them*. Because such information can strengthen reputations and/or careers, positive gossip shows the ability to distribute (albeit indirectly) desired outcomes. French and Raven (1959) suggested that when Person B perceives that Person A has control over valued outcomes, Person A has reward power over Person B. Along the same lines, Etzioni (1961) proposed that control of material and symbolic rewards are a basis for power. Additionally, Emerson asserted that power "resides in control

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[4] There may be limits to the effectiveness of implicit threats (e.g., the threat of spreading negative information) in attempts to gain power. First, if the gossiper has few connections to others, recipients may be less concerned about the gossiper's ability to spread dark secrets. Second, some news—for example, information that is hard to remember—may be especially difficult to spread (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Third, as our Proposition 7 suggests, recipients may be less afraid of the gossiper when they have a good relationship with him or her. Moreover, those who do feel threatened may strive to decrease their dependence on the person making the threat (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Tjosvold, 1995). As Bacharach and Lawler have noted, coercion "should be most effective when the target is highly dependent on the user" (1980: 177).

over the things [another person] values .... In short, power resides implicitly in the other's dependency" (1962: 32). Resource dependence theorists (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977), too, have advanced the notion that power comes from the control of relevant resources—resources that are important to others. Hence, by revealing the gossiper's ability to control an important resource (reputation), positive gossip may give the gossiper reward power over recipients.

> *Proposition 2: In a work setting, positive gossip will enhance the gossiper's reward power over gossip recipients.*

Gossip in general, whether positive or negative, is apt to influence expert power, for it can facilitate an exchange of data and help build a knowledge base (e.g., Code, 1994; Dunbar, 1996). When a gossiper shares information about others, the recipient may learn more about the organization's values. As Heath (1994) has observed, stories shared by coworkers can help employees understand principles by which their organization operates. Additionally, gossip can reveal that the gossiper has relevant knowledge about persons in the work environment. As the gossiper demonstrates such knowledge (an ability that depends, in part, on the gossiper's network centrality), the recipient may come to view the gossiper as a source of useful information, and the gossiper may thereby gain expert power.

> *Proposition 3: In a work setting, gossip will enhance the gossiper's expert power over gossip recipients.*

In the case of referent power, we expect gossip to have competing effects. One possibility is that gossip reduces referent power, for gossip may be seen as a small or petty activity. As mentioned earlier, in religious writings and other sources of guidance and education, gossip is often denounced as idle, immoral, or improper (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Socialized by such teachings, many persons perceive gossip as reprehensible, and they look down on those who engage in the behavior. Gossip, therefore, may detract from the referent power of the gossiper.

This effect is likely to be particularly pronounced when gossip is negative. As described earlier, positive gossip can enhance the reputation of its subjects, whereas negative gossip tends to destroy subjects' reputations. Hence, those who condemn gossip from an ethical standpoint will be especially hard pressed to find anything redeeming about negative gossip.

> *Proposition 4a: In a work setting, gossip will reduce the gossiper's referent power over recipients. This effect will be stronger for negative gossip than for positive gossip.*

The competing argument is that gossip enhances referent power. As gossipers share news, they draw recipients into their social circles (e.g., Dunbar, 1996; Eder & Enke, 1991). These recipients, in turn, may appreciate being included. Moreover, through gossip, recipients might realize that the gossiper is on the inside of a social network. This realization is apt to make recipients more interested in knowing and being liked by the gossiper. Consistent with this notion, impression management scholars have found that people can enhance their image by managing information about others with whom they are associated (Gardner & Martinko, 1988).

If gossip enhances referent power, this effect is apt to taper off at very high levels—that is, as the frequency of the gossip and the pool of recipients increase. As Levin and Arluke have observed, a person who gossips too much "may become defined as a 'big mouth' or a 'yenta' who will 'talk to anyone about anything,' as a person who cannot be trusted to keep a secret or to be discreet with 'privileged information'" (1987: 16). Moreover, when gossipers talk incessantly about others, they may become resented for using so much of recipients' time. Thus, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 4b: In a work setting, gossip will have a curvilinear effect on the gossiper's referent power over recipients; it will enhance referent power until it reaches a very high level, at which point it will detract from referent power.*

Moderators of Linkages Between Gossip and Power

The strength of the above linkages may be influenced by characteristics of the gossip and by contextual factors, including organizational culture and the relationship between gossiper and recipient.

Features of the gossip. As described earlier, one particularly relevant characteristic of gossip is its credibility. Upon reviewing a variety of empirical findings and conducting their own study, Slater and Rouner (1996) concluded that message credibility has considerable influence on judgments of source credibility.[5] Thus, gossip that lacks credibility can lead a recipient to view the gossiper as a noncredible source. Even if the recipient's view of the gossiper is not widely held, he or she may assume that others share this view, for a common cognitive bias is the *false consensus effect*: the tendency to overestimate the prevalence of one's own opinions or experiences (Kelley, 1967; Whitley, 1998). According to Fiske and Taylor, "Researchers consistently find that consensus information (i.e., the opinions or experience of others) is relatively underutilized in the judgment process" (1991: 93). They explain that those "who agree with us are more likely to come to mind when we attempt to infer what others will believe" (1991: 75). Recipients, therefore, may infer that the gossiper also lacks credibility with others and will not be believed when sharing negative or positive gossip. Hence, when gossip credibility is low, recipients are less likely to view the gossiper as someone with coercive or reward power.

In addition, credibility may affect the relationship between gossip and expert power. If recipients believe that a gossiper's information is inaccurate, they may begin to question or doubt any future information the gossiper relays. As a result, that gossip will contribute less to, and may detract from, the gossiper's expert power. In line with this reasoning, Krackhardt (1990) has found that employees with more accurate information about the informal network have higher reputational power than those whose information is less accurate.

Lack of credibility also may diminish any positive link, and enhance any negative link, between gossip and referent power. Recipients may resent the gossiper who seems to relate far-fetched or incorrect information, for they may

perceive that the gossiper is attempting to mislead them. As Zucker (1986) has suggested, individuals perceived as providing accurate information are more trusted than those who share inaccurate knowledge.

> *Proposition 5: The effects of gossip on coercive, reward, expert, and referent power will be moderated by gossip credibility. Any tendency for gossip to enhance the four power types will be stronger when credibility is high than when it is low. Any tendency for gossip to reduce referent power will be weaker when credibility is high than when it is low.*

Like credibility, the work-relatedness of gossip may play a moderating role. Rewards (e.g., high performance ratings and promotions) and punishments in the organization (e.g., demotions and firings) are based largely on an employee's work-related behavior. It is, in fact, illegal to take many personal events (topics of social gossip), such as marriage, a major illness, or a change of housing, into account when determining such rewards and punishments (Hollwitz, Goodman, & Bolte, 1995; Madison & Knudson-Fields, 1987). Although some managers still consider those personal factors when allocating resources, legislation (and the possibility of costly lawsuits) constrains their ability to do so. Thus, the employee who engages in work-related gossip has a greater ability to influence rewards and punishments in the workplace than does an employee who engages in gossip about other topics.

Work-related gossip is also particularly likely to shape expert power. Fiske and Taylor (1991) have pointed out that a given context can encourage us to attend to some information more than other information. Being in the workplace makes employees particularly attuned to work-related information. When the recipient is in a work context, "professional" topics such as a person's salary, promotion, and recognition generally have more relevance than do divorce, plastic surgery, or other "social" topics. Thus, a gossiper who provides work-related information about others is especially likely to be used as an information source and seen as an expert in the workplace.

In addition, the work-relatedness of gossip may diminish any negative link between gossip

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[5] Although message and source credibility are conceptually distinct, they are often closely related. Indeed, credibility is a complex feature, and that complexity may make it more challenging to measure, compared to other features of gossip. Those who test the proposed model should keep this caveat in mind.

and referent power. Recipients are less likely to perceive the gossiper as wasting their time at the office when the gossip is relevant to that setting. Hence, they will be less resentful of the gossiper when the work-relatedness of gossip is high.

> *Proposition 6: The effects of gossip on coercive, reward, expert, and referent power will be moderated by the work-relatedness of the gossip. Any tendency for gossip to enhance coercive, reward, and expert power will be stronger when work-relatedness is high. Any tendency for gossip to reduce referent power will be weaker when work-relatedness is high.*

Gossiper-recipient relationship quality. Like the nature of the gossip, the context of that gossip—specifically, the quality of the relationship between gossiper and recipient—may act as a moderator. *Relationship quality* is the degree to which a relationship is characterized by mutual support, informal influence, trust, and frequent information exchange (Lee, 1998). Employees who have a habit of gossiping with each other, for example, can be characterized as having a high relationship quality. Much of the literature on relationship quality pertains to supervisor-subordinate dyads or leader-member exchange theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975), but one can also characterize peer relationships in terms of relationship quality (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Negative gossip is less likely to enhance coercive power when relationship quality is high. If a recipient trusts a gossiper, that recipient may believe the gossiper will avoid harming him or her. Even if the gossiper is spreading negative news about others, the recipient may be confident that his or her own dark secrets will not be revealed by that gossiper.

Positive gossip, however, is more likely to enhance reward power when relationship quality is high. A recipient who is a close friend of a gossiper may believe that gossiper will try to help him or her when possible. Thus, if that gossiper is spreading positive news about others, the recipient is especially likely to think the gossiper will do the same for him or her.

> *Proposition 7: The effect of gossip on coercive and reward power will be moderated by gossiper-recipient relationship quality. Any tendency for negative gossip to enhance coercive power will be weaker when relationship quality is high. Any tendency for positive gossip to enhance reward power will be stronger when relationship quality is high.*

Relationship quality also may shape gossip effects on referent power. Gossip is more likely to enhance referent power when the quality of a relationship is high. If the gossiper and recipient have a close and trusting relationship, the recipient is apt to view such gossip as appropriate, for informal communication is characteristic of high-quality relationships (Fairhurst, 1993; Lee & Jablin, 1995). Consistent with this logic is "halo effect" research (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), which has revealed "a tendency to evaluate all components of a target person in the same way once a general evaluation, positive or negative, is formed" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991: 256). Thus, in the context of a strong relationship, any positive link between gossip and referent power will be stronger. Also, when relationship quality is high, recipients who frown upon gossip in general may be more forgiving of the gossiper. Hence, any negative link between gossip and referent power will be weaker.

> *Proposition 8: The effect of gossip on referent power will be moderated by gossiper-recipient relationship quality. Any tendency for gossip to enhance such power will be stronger when relationship quality is high. Any tendency for gossip to reduce such power will be weaker when relationship quality is high.*

Organizational culture. Another moderating contextual factor may be *organizational culture*: the "system of shared values (that define what is important) and norms that define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members (how to feel and behave)" (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996: 160). In some organizations the culture advocates considerable formal communication, while discouraging informal communication (Smeltzer & Leonard, 1994). If there is a cultural injunction against informal communication, then employees will be constrained in their use of gossip to spread news about others.

Gossip recipients may recognize these constraints and conclude that gossipers have few opportunities to help or harm reputations. The effect of gossip on reward and coercive power, therefore, will be weaker.

Also, when culture encourages formal communication and discourages informal communication, organizational members may not look to gossip as a source of information. Evidence has shown that individuals refrain from an information-seeking strategy if they expect the strategy to have high social costs (Miller & Jablin, 1991). In an antigossip culture, seeking information from a gossiper may have such costs. Consequently, it may be difficult for the gossiper to gain expert power via gossip.

The link between gossip and referent power, too, may be shaped by culture. An antigossip culture may reinforce a recipient's belief that gossip is wrong or immoral. Thus, any tendency for gossip to reduce referent power will be stronger when the culture discourages such informal communication.[6]

> *Proposition 9: The effects of gossip on coercive, reward, expert, and referent power will be moderated by organizational culture. Any tendency for gossip to enhance coercive, reward, and expert power will be weaker when the culture discourages informal communication. Any tendency for gossip to reduce referent power will be stronger when the culture discourages informal communication.*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The proposed model contributes to both management research and practice. On the academic side, it is—to the authors' knowledge—the first theoretical model of workplace gossip and its consequences. Noon and Delbridge (1993) took a significant step with their thought-provoking discussion of gossip in organizations and their call for research on the topic. Our model takes their work a step further, offering a

refined conceptualization and specific predictions about the phenomenon. On the practitioner side, the proposed framework illustrates that, contrary to the adage "small people talk about other people," gossip can make a person quite "large" in an organization. At the same time, the model shows conditions under which gossip may backfire. An understanding of such dynamics of gossip is likely to help organizations and their members capitalize on this widespread genre of informal communication.

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[6] It is possible that some employees will reject the values of the dominant culture and appreciate the individual who goes against it (e.g., by gossiping in an antigossip culture). These employees may respect that gossiper for taking such a risk.

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