CAN "TIGHT" GROUPS AT WORK BE DETRIMENTAL? A THEORETICAL VIEW OF GOSSIP FROM THE NETWORK TIE STRENGTH AND DENSITY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Given the importance of effective communication in organizational settings and the potential destructive impact of gossiping, greater research is needed to isolate those factors that enable negative gossip to occur. Although previous research has examined the effect of social network characteristics on gossip, the focus has not been on assessing the effect of social network tie strength and density on forms of gossip. In this article, we present a new theoretical framework for investigating how social network tie strength and network density can influence the forms of gossip, either negative or positive, in organizations. Our theoretical framework, therefore, provides important implications for theory and managerial practice.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication has been shown to be one of the managerial tools that enhance organizational outcomes such as employee participation, employee involvement, and job performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). As communication plays a crucial role on organizational effectiveness, scholars have paid much attention to negative forms of communication in organizations.

Among various forms of negative communication in organizations, gossip has received much attention as it is generally seen as a socially destructive activity (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). In the organizational setting, gossip occurs when an organizational member engages in informal and evaluative talk with a few members about another member of that organization who is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Given gossip requires a group of individuals, the nature of relationships among these individuals could potentially determine not only whether gossip is engaged but also what form of gossip is encouraged. Although previous research (e.g., Grosser et al., 2010) has examined gossip in organizations from a social network perspective, how social network tie strength and density affect the forms of gossip has been largely neglected.

We strive to address this issue by using social network analysis (e.g., Cook & Whitmeyer, 2001; Freeman, 2004) as our theoretical base. In this article, gossip is defined 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" (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429). Moreover, as the literature suggests, gossip can take the form of either being positive or negative (e.g., Michelson & Mouly, 2004); our focus is on how social network tie strength and network density determine the forms of gossip that occur in groups and organizations. The analysis of gossip in organizations from this perspective is important because network tie strength could be considered a group's ability to maintain the permeability of group

boundaries (Nelson, 1989) and network tie density could affect the degree of direct communication within a network (Nelson & Vasconcellos, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gossip in Organizations

As modern organizations are facing complex and turbulent environments, effective communication becomes particularly important. Given the important role that communication plays on organizational survival, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the types of communication. Specifically, it has been suggested and widely known that two communication systems, the formal and the informal, can be found in virtually every organization (Driskill & Goldstein, 1986). Formal communications are formal channels of communication such as written policies, procedures, rules, formal authority and duties (Melcher & Ronald, 1967), whereas informal communications include social communications and grapevine activities (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998).

Formal communication is important to an organization as it is a tool used to improve productivity and job satisfaction, while it reduces conflict by reinforcing trust and overall satisfaction (Chio, Hsieh, & Yang, 2004). Meanwhile, informal communication has been suggested to be important for facilitating communication, improving trust, maintaining cohesiveness, and ensuring a sense of personal autonomy (Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009). Although informal communication may be less rational than formal systems (Johnson, 1993), it is a natural consequence of human interacting and thus is an inevitable part of organizational life (Baskin & Aronoff, 1989). Among various informal communication mediums, gossip is one of the most pervasive activities within organizations (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Gossip generally occurs when a member engages in informal and evaluative talk with a few members about another member of that organization who is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000); it is commonly referred to as idle talk, tittle-tattle, scandal, and rumor (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Given gossip often involves ignoring factuality, previous research has attempted to identify the outcomes of gossip. For instance, in Kurland and Pelled's (2000) conceptual model of gossip and power, it is suggested that negative gossip enhances the gossiper's coercive power, whereas positive gossip enhances the gossiper's expert power. Kniffin and Wilson (2005) analyzed gossip in a competitive sports team and discovered that gossip serves group-beneficial rules when rewards are partitioned at the group level on a scale that permits mutual monitoring. Sommerfeld, Krambeck, and Milinski (2008) examined the outcomes of multiple gossip statements and found that gossip not only improves cooperation within a group but also transfers group members' reciprocity, trust, and reputations. Using a case study approach in various industries, Kniffin and Wilson (2010) found that workplace gossip can serve positive functions when organizational rewards are fairly distributed at the level of small-scale groups.

In addition to the outcomes of gossip, a number of studies have sought to identify antecedents of gossip. For example, McAndrew, Bell, and Garcia (2007) examined the effect of gender on the likelihood of spreading the gossip and found that both male and females were more interested in gossip about same-sex others than about opposite-sex others. Moreover, men were found to be more likely to confide in their romantic partners, whereas females were equally likely to share gossip with their lovers and same-sex friends. Farley, Timme, and Hart (2010) investigated perceptions of female gossipers in workplace and found that high gossipers were perceived as having a greater need to exert control of others than low gossipers and high gossipers were perceived as less emotionally warm than low gossipers. In a recent study conducted by Mills (2010), gossip was suggested to be an integral part of sense making and social exchange. More importantly, Mills claimed that gossip cannot be fully understood in isolation to the formal and other types of informal communication processes. Other antecedents that have been identified to be predictors of gossip include level of anxiety experienced (e.g., Rosnow, 1991), organizational climate (e.g., Crampton et al., 1998), and organizational change (e.g., Difonzo & Bordia, 2000).

Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis is concerned with how individuals in a network are connected. Specifically, a network consists of a set of nodes (i.e., individuals) that are connected by ties (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003) and these ties determine several important outcomes such as human relationships, information exchange, performance, transactional contents, etc. (Burt, 2005). Because of its ability to understand human behavior within social units, social network analysis has been utilized in various academic fields. For instance, Nelson (1989) utilized social network analysis to focus conflicts within organizations and found that high-conflict organizations have fewer numbers of frequent contacts than low-conflict organizations. Sparrowe, Liden, and Kraimer (2001) analyzed the impact of social advice networks on individual and group performance and revealed that network centrality and hindrance network density were predictors of individual and group performance. Grabner-Krauter (2009) used social network analysis to investigate individual's decision process of sharing personal information with other individuals in an on-line social network and found that the role of trust is contributed in the decision process. Wong and Boh (2010) used social network analysis to study peers' perception of managers' reputations for being trustworthy and found that attributes such as network heterogeneity, non-overlapping contacts, and network density played a role in enhancing a manager's peer reputation.

Social Network Analysis of Gossip in Organizations

Given social network analysis is a viable approach to understand human relationships in a network, the application of social network analysis in the context of gossip in organizations could help us better understand how gossip occurs. To date, however, only a few studies have utilized social network analysis to examine gossip in organizations. For instance, Szekfu and Szvetelszky (2005) investigated the dissemination of connections and information in human networks and claimed that the average path length, local patterns, and the degree of distribution affect the dynamics of gossip in human networks. Grosser et al. (2010) used social network analysis in an organization to understand how employees engage in positive and negative gossiping behavior and found that individuals tend to participate in positive and negative gossip when it was related to friendship, whereas positive gossip was related to workflow ties and non-friendships due to the lack of trust. Mills (2010) used social network analysis to understand commonly accepted views of gossip and found that gossip is embedded in other forms of communication, as it is a part of sense making and social exchange which cannot be understood as a form of formal communications.

While the above research of gossip in organizations from a social network perspective provide important insight into factors influencing gossip in organizations, the impact of network tie strength and network density on gossip in organizations has been neglected. Since network tie strength and network density determine much of the nature of the relationships and the overall level of interaction among network members (Sparrowe et al., 2001), the application of network tie strength and network density in the analysis of gossip in organizations may provide useful information on managing gossip in organizations more effectively. Thus, to fill this research gap, we use social network analysis (e.g., Burns & Stalker, 1961; Burt, 1992; Krackhardt & Stern, 1988) as our theoretical base and systematically analyze the impact of social network tie strength and network tie density on gossip forms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

In this section, we intend to explore the missing piece in the literature of gossip in organizations. Specifically, we develop a theoretical framework describing the relationship between gossip and social network tie strength and network tie density. The application of social network analysis is considered a viable approach because gossip can be viewed as a process of negotiated interaction between individuals and groups (Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010) and the objective of social network analysis is

to understand the pattern and content of the interactions taking place within and between social units (Nelson, 1989).

The Strength of Social Network Ties

Tie strength, ranging from weak to strong, refers to the closeness and interaction frequency of a relationship between two individuals (Granovetter, 1973). According to Granovetter (1973), the strength of a tie is a function of frequency of contact, reciprocity, emotional intensity, and friendship. Thus, it is suggested that strong ties are those with frequent contacts and these contacts involve affective and friendship overtone characteristics (Nelson, 1989). Moreover, strong ties often involve reciprocal favors such as helping others (Nelson & Mathews, 1991) and are mechanisms for conflict reduction, cooperation, and conflict prevention because of the existence of friendship (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988).

On the other hand, Granovetter (1973) claimed that novel information is facilitated by weak ties because they enlarge the gap between what an information seeker already knows and what others know. Granovettter (1973) further argued that because weak ties are characterized by infrequent interaction and low intimacy, they tend to be bridges that provide individuals information and resources that they cannot obtain in their own social circles. In other words, weak ties often serve as a means for information diffusion.

When linking gossip and network ties, Grosser et al. (2010) posited that positive gossip does not require affective relationships and trust, whereas negative gossip can only be found in individuals with close friendships. In other words, networks with friendship ties facilitate negative gossip, whereas networks without friendship ties encourage positive gossip. From this standpoint, one can expect to find high degrees of negative gossip within a network featuring more strong ties and to find high degrees of positive gossip within a network featuring more weak ties. We, therefore, propose the following:

Proposition 1a: Groups that feature more overall weak ties will have higher degrees of positive gossip than groups that feature fewer overall weak ties.

Proposition 1b: Groups that feature more overall strong ties will have higher degrees of negative gossip than groups that feature fewer overall strong ties.

The Density of a Social Network

Network density is the ratio of the actual number of links between nodes over the maximum number of possible links, which refers to the fullness of a social network (Phillips, 2010). Networks with a higher degree of density will have a higher degree of communication within the network and the flow of information is directly between the nodes (individuals) of the network (Nelson & Vasconcellos, 2007). Specifically, it has been found that information about individual behavior can be circulated smoothly within a group that features high degrees of network density (Coleman, 1988). In addition, Berscheid and Walster (1978) argued that individuals are socially proximal and relationships are highly reciprocal in a high-density network, which in turn facilitate interpersonal attraction. It is also because of the existence of reciprocal relationships and interpersonal attraction that individuals in a high-density network tend not to engage in self-serving, norm-defying, or opportunistic behavior (Labianca & Brass, 2006). Similarly, Coleman (1988) claimed that mutual obligations, trustworthiness, and the existence of norms and sanctions are encouraged in high-density networks.

On the other hand, individuals in a low-density network are only connected through indirect ties, which lack the frequency of contact, affect, obligation and personal involvement, which permits the emergence of substructures in the network (Nelson & Vasconcellos, 2007). In addition, it is suggested that a lower

density network allows for the formation of multiple substructures or cliques (Breiger & Pattison, 1978). Therefore, the type of information flowing through the low density network, or networks of the substructures is guarded because of the indirect ties, personal involvement and the lack of trust that is in the network.

In the context of gossip in organizations, it is suggested that individuals are able to promote interpersonal closeness when sharing negative information (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006). Similarly, Turner, Mazur, Wendel, and Winslow (2003) argued that sharing a negative attitude is considered self-disclosing and personal. Sharing negative information, therefore, facilitates interpersonal attraction (Yoo, 2009). Kowalski (2002) rationalized this notion by stating that individuals are able to conform to the attitudes of others around them by sharing negative information. Moreover, Dunbar (2004) claimed that negative gossip serves the function of bringing individuals together and strengthens interpersonal bonds.

Meanwhile, Grosser et al. (2010) suggested that whether an individual engages in positive gossip or negative gossip depends on his or her dyadic relationship ties with others and one of the crucial factors is the level of interpersonal trust. Grosser et al. further commented that because negative gossip often represents a risky social behavior, it requires high levels of interpersonal trust in order to ensure privacy. In other words, the higher the level of interpersonal trust the higher the degree of communication throughout the network (Nelson & Vasconcellos, 2007). Therefore, one can expect that high degrees of negative gossip will be found in high-density networks.

On the contrary, positive gossip is often considered less sensitive and requires less interpersonal trust (Grosser et al., 2010). In their empirical study, Grosser et al. (2010) found that the occurrence of positive gossip does not require friendship ties. This, therefore, suggests that high levels of positive gossip will be found in low-density networks where individuals are connected through indirect ties (i.e., coworkers). Based on the characteristics of gossip and network density, we propose the following:

Proposition 2a: Groups with lower social network density will have higher degrees of positive gossip than groups with higher social network density.

Proposition 2b: Groups with higher social network density will have higher degrees of negative gossip than groups with lower social network density.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article is to investigate a missing piece in the gossip in organizations literature. Specifically, this article investigates how social network tie strength and network density determine the forms of gossip in organizations as it has been suggested that the structure of social networks has an important impact on whether members in a network engage in gossiping (e.g., Grosser et al., 2010). Thus, the focus of this article is on how social network tie strength and density influence positive and negative gossip. Our theoretical framework provides several important implications. In the following section, we present the implications for theory and managerial practice.

Implications for Theory

Given the importance of effective communication in organizational settings and the potential destructive impact of gossiping, greater research is needed to isolate those factors that enable negative gossip to occur. Since social network structure has an important impact on whether members in the network engage in gossiping activities (Grosser et al., 2010), previous research has examined the effect of social network characteristics on gossip. However, the focus has not been on assessing the effect of social network tie strength and density on forms of gossip. Thus, the propositions presented in this article provide

researchers with a new starting point from which to examine different levels and forms of gossip. Empirical research is needed to confirm the theory that groups with higher social network density and more stronger ties will have higher degrees of negative gossip as compared to groups with lower social network density and weaker ties. Our theory contributes to the social network literature by extending it to negative and positive gossip. Our propositions also build upon the communication and gossip in organization literature as there are very few studies that even look at the characteristics between two social units; most studies address the individual's characteristics for gossiping.

Implications for Practice

While most managers would probably agree that negative gossip degrades organizational performance, the research does not always portray it as such and is inconclusive since the function and nature of gossip tends to change according to the organizational situation (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Some would argue that gossip can have positive impacts, such as reducing stress, fostering solidarity and cohesiveness, and developing friendships (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). However, the negative impacts of gossip, such as creating divisiveness within an organization, spreading false information and damaging reputations, wasting valuable employee time on the job, draining morale and creating conflict are often seen by managers as outweighing any good that may come from gossip. The literature does provide a variety of managerial tools to reduce the impact of negative gossip in organizations, such as educating employees on the dangers of gossip and stressing to managers the importance of being role models, eliminating the gossip perpetrators, keeping employees energized in their tasks so they don't have time to gossip, and eliminating anxiety by explaining the unexplained (Danziger, 1988). However, we are hopeful that our new line of research will provide additional concrete preventive options to the manager's tool box.

We have argued that strong ties result in negative forms of gossip, whereas weak ties lead to positive forms of gossip. From this perspective, organizations and managers could focus on reducing the strength of social network ties in organizations. Specifically, as the strength of ties weakens, it tends to reduce opportunities for negative gossip because members do not develop stronger ties based on trust. Additionally, since strong ties are characterized by frequent interaction, intimacy and sharing, and reciprocity in exchanges (Granovetter, 1982), organizations and managers can reduce the degree and frequency of interactions or the strength of ties by reducing the degree of task interdependence as it is suggested that members of groups with low task interdependence engage in little information sharing (Crawford & Haaland, 1972). However, it should be noted that many organizations are likely to depend on good collaborative teams to achieve desired performance outcomes. If team dynamics are necessary for performance, then organizations and managers may need to carefully design teams consisting of people who don't share to the extent to become personal. Therefore, this may suggest minimizing the use of social type team building events, such organizational coordinated social gatherings.

In terms of network density, we have suggested that low levels of social network density tend to facilitate higher degrees of positive gossip, whereas high levels social network density tend to generate higher degrees of negative gossip. Thus, if one wishes to reduce the disruptiveness of negative gossip in organizations, one can focus on reducing the number of actual links in a network. This can be done by reducing the number of reciprocal contacts (e.g., direct reporting) within a network or reducing the size of a network. Additionally, some organizational structures may be less susceptible to negative gossip, such as virtual offices, while other more traditional structures may not. Once the effect of social network tie strength and density on gossip has been tested, researchers should then extend this theory to evaluating different organizational designs and structures in order to identify ones that are more likely to minimize negative gossip while enhancing positive gossip.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In this article, we have sought to develop a theoretical framework that explains gossip in organizations by using social network theory. We propose that social networks that feature weak ties will have high degrees of positive gossip, whereas social networks with strong ties will have high degrees of negative gossip. Moreover, we suggest that groups with lower social network density will have higher degrees of positive gossip than groups with higher social network density and groups with higher social network density will have higher degrees of negative gossip than groups with lower social network density. As we present our theoretical framework, we also offer the propositions that guide future theoretical and empirical research. More importantly, we offer managers and organizations recommendations on how our theoretical framework and propositions can be used to manage gossip in organizations more effectively.

Although this article uses a systematic process to analyze the effects of social network tie strength and density on the forms of gossip in organizations, it is not without limitations. A first limitation is that our article solely focuses on two social network characteristics, density and tie strength. We recognize this as a limitation as we did not consider other characteristics such as transactional content and configuration. However, we believe network tie strength and density are the major factors in determining the forms of gossip as they determine the closeness and interaction frequency and the actual number of links between nodes, respectively. Future research may be needed to study the effects of the other characteristics of social networks in order to strengthen our propositions. Secondly, this article does not address individual perceptions of positive and negative gossip. For instance, what an individual considers positive gossip may be considered as negative gossip by another individual. Thus, future research may be needed to investigate the boundaries of positive and negative gossip in order to validate our theoretical framework. A final limitation is that this article does not include organizational-level factors when analyzing gossip in organizations from a social network perspective. For instance, as organizational culture has been suggested to be a form of control mechanism that shapes group and organizational members' values and expectations about appropriate behavior (e.g., O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996), it could have potential impact on what form of gossip is accepted in a group and/or an organization. Future research that includes organizational-level factors may be needed in order to develop a more comprehensive framework of gossip in organizations.

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