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THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF WORKPLACE GOSSIP*
(A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYEES ABOUT GOSSIP)

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ABSTRACT

Workplace gossip describes informal and unconstrained talk in an organization among a few individuals about people of that organization who are not present. Although the nature and implications of gossip have been investigated from a number of different angles, seldom has it been studied in the context of the workplace. The purpose of this work is to present the main findings from a survey on various aspects of employees' perceptions about gossip, which was conducted between January and June 2011 in Turkey. In brief, the findings have revealed that there are four dimensions in the perceptions of the employees about gossip: (1) morality, (2) friendship, (3) hostility and (4) seeking information. Secondly, the morality factor has been found to be a significant predictor of avoiding gossip in the workplace. The results have concluded that the female respondents are more prone to engage in gossip than men.

Keywords: *gossip, multidimensionality, morality, employees, Turkey*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the term "gossip" originates from the Old English word god-sibbs, it later evolved into "trivial talk", and was typically viewed as a "female activity" (Berkos 2003). Gossip is no longer considered to be gender-specific in the sense (Cowan 2008).It is one of the most widespread social phenomenon of human beings. An empirical study discovered that about two-thirds of human conversation is including some reference to third-party doings (Grosser and Kidwell and Labianca 2010).

The definition of gossip or workplace gossip has taken many forms but most have somewhat similar components. In general, the term "workplace gossip" describes informal and unconstrained talk in an organization among a few individuals about people of that organization who are not present (Kurland and Pelled 2000, Mills 2010). Although the nature and implications of gossip have been investigated from a number of different angles, seldom has it been studied in the context of the workplace.

From the organizational perspective, gossip traditionally is regarded as a negative behavior that is harmful to workplace relationships, and inhibits group performance. According to Bergmann, "gossip itself possesses a chaotic quality". It threatens unity, does not respect moral boundaries, and provokes people to neglect their social responsibilities (Kartch 2009). De Sousa asserts that gossip means seeking private information on all aspects of people's lives likely to elicit shame or guilt (Young 2001). Vajda claims that gossip as a form of workplace violence is an emotional cancer damaging the sense of well-being of the individual and the team (Vajda 2007). Galen and Underwood argue that "gossip may be transmitted to malign our enemies or those we perceive as potential adversaries" (Litman and Pezzo 2005).

There are empirical studies on the potential adverse influences of gossip on employee and organizational performance. Rosenthal concludes that workplace gossip may cause several social problems such as the incitement of riots (Rosenthal 1971). McAndrew and Milenkovic suggest that people are more willing to share negative than positive information about potential rivals in the workplace (Hess and Hagen 2009). Kartch has found that organizational gossip results to the creation of fault lines (Kartch 2009).The findings of the study by Ellwardt point out that negative gossip flourishes in coalition triads (Ellwardt 2011).

On the other hand, the discussions on the possible benefits of gossip in the workplace have a long history in the literature. While Stirling has seen gossip as an instrument of easy communication with employees (Taylor 2005), Dunbar considers it as a means of exchange for ideas and experiences among people

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(Litman and Pezzo 2005). Eder and Enke describe gossip as a management tool for shaping group norms and moral principles (Eder and Enke 1991). Fine and Rosnow argue that entertainment is likely to be one of the functions of gossip (Brusk and Artstein and Traum 2010). Rosnow refers to the importance of gossip in creating and enhancing friendships (Litman and Pezzo 2007). According to Farley et al., employees may use gossip as a coping mechanism for dealing with stressful workplace situations (Farley and Timme and Hart 2010).

The effects of positive gossip have been supported by the empirical studies. Grosser et al. have observed that expressive friendship ties between employees are positively related to engaging in both positive and negative gossip (Grosser and Kidwell and Labianca 2010). A study by Ellwardt et al. has concluded that gossip increases friendship formation (Ellwardt and Steglich and Wittek 2010). The results of the research by Feinberg et al. have demonstrated that prosocial gossip may effectively deter selfishness, and encourage cooperation (Feinberg and Timme and Hart 2011).

The purpose of this work is to present the main findings from a survey on various aspects of employees' perceptions about gossip, which was conducted between January and June 2011 in Turkey. The study analyzes four dimensions of gossip: morality, friendship, hostility and seeking information. The paper comprises 4 sections. Following the introductory section providing a conceptual framework, the section 2 gives a general description of the methods used for the data collection and analysis. The next presents the results and discussions. The last section offers some concluding remarks.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

A total of 424 full-time and part-time employees from the 10 participating organizations took part in the study on a voluntary basis. The sample consisted of 238 males (56.1%) and 186 females (43.9%), ages 18 to 56 (mean age 30.4 years). While approximately half of the population had a university degree, 38.7% had a high school certificate. More than half of respondents were single, and 47.2% were married. The vast majority (96.7%) worked as full-time workers.

2.2. Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was a revised version of the Gossip Questionnaire by Donald J. Sharpteen (Sharpteen 1988). The participants were asked to rate 48 statements about gossip on five-point scales, where 1 meant "definitely disagree" and 5 meant = "definitely agree". The Cronbach's alpha was .90 in the present study, indicating a high internal consistency.

2.3. Data Analysis

The principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation was used to identify the aspects of the respondents' perceptions about gossip. Twenty-seven factors having loadings greater than 0.40 were classified into four groups with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, explaining 57.4% of the total variance. Then, the dimensions were named with regard to the statements included in each of them (i.e., dimension 1 as Morality), and checked for reliability (Cronbach's alpha). Secondly, significant differences between participants' mean scores on the basis of gender, education and marital status were tested using independent t-test.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Dimensions of Gossip

Based on the factor analysis of the responses, four scales have been developed as measures of the aspects of gossip. One of them reflects the ethical side of gossip (i.e., morality), while the others represent the exciting dimensions (i.e., friendship, hostility and seeking information). The factor dimensions, the statement labels, and the respective factor loadings are summarized in Tables 1-4.

3.1.1. Morality

Considering factor 1, it could be explained that the workplace gossip is perceived by the employees from an "ethical point of view" and therefore, the first scale is labeled as "Morality". It has emerged as the most important factor accounting for 28.8 per cent of the total variance, and ten statements are loaded on this factor. The relatively higher loading of the items illustrates the relevance of focusing on the moral side in analyzing workplace gossip.

The scale suggests several conclusions. First, as the employees are prone to accept gossip as an ethical issue, they avoid gossiping. Consequently, not gossiping derives from their thought about gossip being an "inappropriate" and "morally wrong" behavior. This result is consistent with the common assumptions in the literature that gossip is detrimental to work confidence (Waddington and Michelson 2006, Baker and Jones 1996, Nicholson 2001, Wert and Salovey 2004), and erodes organizational values and also the trust of employees (Grosser and Kidwell and Labianca 2010).

TABLE 1: MORALITY DIMENSION OF GOSSIP

(N=416) Morality (Cronbach's alpha .91)	Factor Loading	% of Variance	Eigen-value
Items		28.8	7.9
I do not want others to gossip me.	.82		
People may have interesting conversations without gossip.	.81		
Gossiping would be inappropriate behavior.	.80		
I think that gossiping would damage my respect.	.79		
People may have enjoyable conversations without gossip.	.79		
I wouldn't want to be considered a "gossip".	.78		
Gossiping is morally wrong.	.77		
I feel to be outside of conversation in gossip conversations.	.68		
I am not invited to the gossip conversations.	.63		
People know me that I don't get involved with gossip or rumors.	.58		

Moreover, the perception of the employees on "the value for gossip" is also based on a comparison with the cost of alternatives sacrificed; as if gossiping would be a trivial activity and, therefore, a waste of time that some other meaningful activities would be worth trying (i.e., "there are interesting or enjoyable conversations without gossip"). Thirdly, some respondents identify themselves as gossipy incapacitated (i.e., "people know me that I don't get involved with gossip or rumors"), and they feel out of place in the gossip conversations. Consequently, they are not invited to share what they know.

3.1.2. Friendship

The second dimension that emerged from the factor analysis is intimacy. It accounts for 15.4 per cent of the total variance, and six statements are loaded on this factor. It indicates that workplace gossip is viewed by the respondents as a "facilitator of relationship", and therefore the second scale is called "Friendship".

The employees feel that gossip in the workplace is a way to promote socialization and friendship through the sharing of similar interests and experiences, and the disclosure of trusted information, which agrees with Foster's (2004) "Gossip Functions Questionnaire" (GFQ) are based in social exchange theories, and Stirling's (1956) social functions of gossip (Foster 2004).

TABLE 2: FRIENDSHIP DIMENSION OF GOSSIP

(N=412) Friendship (Cronbach's alpha .85)	Factor Loading	% of Variance	Eigen-value
Items		15.4	5.8
Gossiping is a nice way to have a conversation with someone.	.72		
Gossiping helps develop friendship with others.	.69		
Gossiping helps people to better understand others who they gossip about.	.67		
Gossip is a communication form to help people to maintain relationship with other people.	.67		
Gossiping makes people feel invigorated and excited.	.60		
Sharing gossiping makes people feel close to the people they gossip with.	56		

Moreover, gossip provides the participants the chance to build intimacy relationship as it helps them come together and have nice conversations. The respondents are also of the view that gossip activities support to foster a sense of closeness between staff as it creates opportunities for people to better understand others in the workplace. Finally, they believe that gossip leaves them feeling so excited and invigorated about what they learn in gossip sessions. All of this indicates that workplace gossip provides opportunities for employees to enjoy the friendship of their colleagues, which, coupled with mutual understanding, is contributing to organizational harmony.

3.1.3. Hostility

The malice character of gossip is another factor which accounts for 4.8 per cent of the total variance. Four statements are loaded on this factor. Considering this scale, it could be assumed that the term "gossip" is perceived by the employees as an aggressive behavior, and therefore the third scale is named "Hostility".

TABLE 3: HOSTILITY DIMENSION OF GOSSIP

(N=420) Hostility (Cronbach's alpha .72)	Factor Loading	% of Variance	Eigen-value
Items		4.8	1.3
It feels good to hear certain people's failures.	.70		
People gossip about people who have done something wrong.	.61		
People can feel some of their aggressions being released when they gossip.	.54		
Gossiping is a way of making fun of people.	.48		

The hostility scale reflects the nature of gossip's negative emotionality, activity, and reactivity between people, which is consistent with Sharpteen's findings (1988), studying a motivational-emotional model of gossip. The participants who endorse the items from the hostility scale relatively seem to be saying that gossip gives them the opportunity to "feel some of their aggressions being released", especially when they gossip about the employees "who have done something wrong".

Further, the perception of gossip as "hostility" may be also related to the internal competition. It could be said that the employees may use gossip as a strategy to damage the reputation of their potential

competitors and gain an advantage over them (i.e., "It feels good to hear certain people's failures"), which has been also identified in Hess and Hagen's (2009) study.

3.1.4. Seeking Information

The last factor is explaining 7.9% of the total variance with an eigenvalue of 1.1, and 7 of 27 statements loaded on this factor. By looking closely at the items of this dimension, it could be inferred that gossip is considered by the employees as a means of sharing opinions, ideas and evaluations, and therefore the last scale is called "Seeking Information".

As the variables show in Table 4, gossip in the employees' perceptions is a tool to exchange the potentially valuable information about third parties, which stays in line with Foster's (2004) description of the social functions of gossip.

Seeking information about other people is also important for friendship, hostility and rumor. First, having a friendly and casual conversation by gossiping offers the opportunity to people getting closer to the others (i.e., "knowing the values of others"). Moreover, the respondents want to seek out information or secrets about their co-workers, especially "whom they don't like". Lastly, it also seems that the gossiper is primarily concerned to know about hearsay in the workplace (i.e., "getting rumors in the office").

TABLE 4: SEEKING INFORMATION DIMENSION OF GOSSIP

(N=412) Information (Cronbach's alpha .88)	Factor Loading	% of Variance	Eigen-value
Items		7.9	1.1
Gossiping allows people to find out what they want to know about others.	.66		
Gossiping allows people to discover others' interests.	.63		
Gossiping allows people to get rumors in the office.	.62		
Gossiping allows people to share information about others.	.61		
Gossiping allows people to give and receive information.	.58		
Gossiping allows people to share information about people who aren't liked.	.54		
Gossiping allows people to know the values of others who are gossiped.	.51		

3.2. Test of Differences in Gossip Scales

In this section an attempt has been made to highlight significant differences in the sample across specific variables. Table 5 contains descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) of the dimensions separately for genders, education level and marital status.

Although no significant differences were concerning gender, the differences in the mean scores of men and women did appear. The female participants reported slightly higher scores in all dimensions of the gossip scale. Women were also found to gossip more than men (m=24.99 vs. 22.56). This result is consistent with that found by Sharpteen (1988).

Moreover, there were no significant differences between high school degrees and graduate degrees across all scales except the morality. Education level was strongly related to the morality scale (p=.002) with graduate school degrees (m=4.09; sd= .76) having higher morality scores than high school degrees (m=3.79; sd= 1.07). This finding suggests that the participants with graduate degrees perceived the workplace gossip as unethical behavior much more than the employees with graduate degrees did.

TABLE 5: MEANS and STANDARD DEVIATIONS of GOSSIP SCALES BY INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Scales	Mean (S.D.)					
	Gender		Education Level		Marital Status	
	Males	Females	High School Degrees	Graduate Degrees	Single	Married
Morality	3.89 (.92)	4.00 (.94)	3.79 (1.07)	4.09 (.76)*	4.00 (.87)	3.87 (.97)
Friendship	2.18 (.94)	2.23 (1.0)	2.07 (.90)	2.25 (.99)	2.16 (.95)	2.22 (.95)
Hostility	2.59 (.90)	2.62 (.96)	2.51 (.90)	2.61 (.95)	2.53 (.83)	2.64 (.99)
Seeking Information	2.84 (.96)	2.98 (1.0)	2.74 (.97)	2.94 (.99)	2.90 (.96)	2.88 (1.1)
***p > .05**						

In terms of the marital status, the single participants admitted to greater morality than married ones; and said that they gossiped more often for information than married. More of the gossip of the married employees was devoted to relatively emotionally extreme gossip (i.e., friendship and hostility), although the differences are too small to be statistically significant.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has examined a number of aspects relating to the workplace gossip. The foregoing analysis reveals that there are four dimensions in the perceptions of the employees about gossip: (1) morality, (2) friendship, (3) hostility, and (4) seeking information. Secondly, the morality factor has been found to be a significant predictor of avoiding gossip in the workplace. Moreover, the results have described that the female respondents were more prone to engage in gossip than men. Finally, a strong significant difference has been noted in the morality scores for education level. Future research should use more sophisticated methods to describe the causes of organizational gossip, and to identify specific individual differences in attitudes toward workplace gossip.

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