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The Innocent Bystander: A Scenario Based Study on the Impact of Leadership Gossip

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how witnessing workplace gossip between a supervisor and an employee in a hypothetical scenario impacts ratings of acceptability of gossip behavior, leader quality ratings, relationship quality, and future comfort with the leader. Data were gathered from 207 college students who read a scenario involving gossip, which varied in the target (about oneself or another) and the domain (about work or personal matters) and then responded to a series of questions about the scenario. Across all four scenarios, leaders received fairly unfavorable ratings for participating in gossip behavior. However, we did not find consistent main effects based on the target or domain and there were no significant interactions between domain and target. Limitations and practical implications are further discussed.

Keywords: workplace gossip, experimental vignette, psychological contract, supervisor gossip, leader relationship quality

The Innocent Bystander: A Scenario Based Study on the Impact of Leadership Gossip

Gossip is a prevailing part of our everyday lives, so much so that 65% of conversations could be labeled as gossip (Winerman, 2006). However, there are variations in its definition, making it important to define gossip. According to Grosser and colleagues (2012), gossip is “evaluative talk between two or more persons about a third party that is absent from the conversation” (p.53). It is worth noting that this evaluative talk can be either positive or negative (Lee & Barnes, 2021). More specifically, our research seeks to understand workplace gossip, which is found to occur in 66% of conversations between employees regarding another employee’s social life (Ullah et al., 2021). Workplace gossip can be defined as “informal and evaluative” conversations in the workplace typically among a small group of individuals, about an absent member of the organization (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Our study examines the differing attitudes between evaluative gossip in the workplace, related to workplace performance, and informal gossip in the workplace focused on more personal events.

Gossip can occur for many different reasons with different underlying motives. According to Hartung & Pirschtat (2019), there are different reasons or motives that individuals may engage in gossip in the workplace, some more situationally driven and others more personality driven. A gossiper may be motivated to gather or validate information, which typically is not related to a desire to intentionally harm others and is often a motive among those with certain personalities, such as more narcissistic traits. Specifically, this can help an individual determine if their thoughts about a person or situation are shared by others or to stay up to date on interpersonal information. Others gossip for more social purposes, such as simple social enjoyment or to build trust and closeness within a relationship, with the exchange of information acting as the building blocks to a friendship. Some individuals may gossip for

personal protection, simply to comply with norms in a social group. Lastly, the least common motive is to have a negative influence more directly on the life or reputation of another person (Hartung & Pirschtat, 2019). Many studies either overlap or outline similar reasons for gossiping, with information validation and information gathering being the overall purpose. Grosser and colleagues (2012) also note that gossip serves numerous functions in the workplace. For example, gossip enables social comparison and social influence, where individuals can learn whether others feel a behavior, attitude, or situation is acceptable through talking about a third party. Moreover, it can mitigate boredom in a repetitive job or alleviate emotional labor for nurses, servers, or other jobs requiring management of one's emotions (Gosser et al., 2012). Additionally, gossip in the workplace can foster interpersonal intimacy and reinforce group values and norms (Gosser et al., 2012). It is clear that gossip can have both positive and negative impacts on individuals and groups within an organization.

While workplace gossip can serve members of an organization in a positive manner, our research seeks to understand how bystanders in an organization are impacted when they overhear their leader facilitating gossip that is more negative. Previous literature on supervisor gossip suggests that hearing different types of gossip can trigger different types of responses and attitudes for individuals in the organization. Specifically, Kuo et al. (2018) found that hearing positive supervisor gossip facilitates a promotion focus strategy. Conversely, hearing negative supervisor gossip triggers a prevention focus strategy for self-regulation and affects the perceptions of leader member exchange. A prevention focus strategy can be defined as a motivation to avoid loss, whereas a promotion focus strategy is a motivation to achieve gains (Kuo et al., 2018). For example, if an employee overhears their supervisor discussing how well they are performing, the employee is going to maintain or increase their performance to

continue achieving gains. Alternatively, if an employee overhears their supervisor discussing their poor performance, the employee is reminded of their duties and seeks to avoid this situation in the future. Specifically, gossip around work performance may create pressure for workers to perform, benefiting productivity to some degree (Tan et al., 2021). However, other studies suggest that this relationship may be non-linear, resulting in harmful effects on productivity if gossip is too prevalent (Xie et al., 2020). These studies and others (e.g., Kuo et al., 2018; Litman & Pezzo, 2004) have focused on how employees may respond to gossip themselves. To add to prior work, our study focuses on the perception the worker has of the leader after hearing the leader engaging in gossip.

Contributions of the Present Study

In the present study, we sought to examine workplace gossip in a novel context. Most of the studies on the topic of gossip used a correlational method that focused on surveys of workers' actual experiences of gossip (Kuo et al., 2018; Litman & Pezzo, 2004). For our study, we used a scenario-based study which utilized experimental vignette methodology (EVM). There are few studies on gossip that use EVM. Of those studies that have used scenario-based studies, these studies often ask participants to imagine a scenario based on some general situational characteristics (Hauke & Abele, 2019; Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2017). Additionally, those who used a scenario-based study did not include scenarios about the leader engaging in gossip (Tan et al., 2020; Lian et al., 2022). Applying EVM allows researchers to manipulate and control independent variables while still trying to place participants in a hypothetical, but relatively natural scenario (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Specifically, we used paper people studies, so we could receive the participants' judgments on gossip in the workplace while manipulating aspects of the situation. Paper people studies include presenting participants with

written vignettes and having them make judgments (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Using an EVM study allowed us to manipulate two key factors on who the gossip was about and the content of the gossip.

In our research, we chose to manipulate the target of the gossip, that is whether the participant overheard gossip that was about themselves or another coworker. We also chose to manipulate the domain of the gossip, meaning the gossip was either personal or work-related. With these manipulations, we theorized that participants would react more strongly to gossip about themselves and gossip that is personal. More specifically, we theorized that participants would have the most negative responses if gossip was both personal and about themselves. We base this hypothesis on theories capturing implicit norms and understandings between individuals in the workplace. Within an organization exists a psychological contract which can be defined as implicit and explicit expectations from the supervisor or organization. A contract violation can occur when there are inconsistencies between reality and an employee's expectations (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). We expected reactions to gossip would parallel what we know about these violations of psychological contracts within the workplace. For example, overhearing your supervisor talk about your personal life to another coworker is a breach of norms or expectations, more so than talking about workplace information. Furthermore, it is a violation of the perceived personal relationship that exists within a work environment if the gossip is about oneself. In sum, we hypothesized that domain and target could interact to impact responses to a hypothetical gossip scenario. We specifically examined the following hypotheses concerning ratings of the leader and more general responses to the acceptability of the scenario.

Hypothesis 1: There is an interaction between domain and target in relation to leadership quality ratings, such that the difference between self and other is larger in non-work scenarios.

Hypothesis 2: There is an interaction between domain and target in relation to the quality of relationship with the leader, such that the difference between self and other is larger in non-work scenarios.

Hypothesis 3: There is an interaction between domain and target in relation to acceptability of behavior, such that the difference between self and other is larger in non-work scenarios.

Hypothesis 4: There is an interaction between domain and target in relation to comfort with the leader, such that the difference between self and other is larger in non-work scenarios.

Method

Participants

The study consisted of 233 participants ($N = 233$) who were students with prior or current work experience. The majority were female (86%), and the remainder were male or chose to self-describe (13%). Of the sample, the majority were White (76%), with the rest of the ethnic background being 9% Black or African American, 2% Asian, 4% Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish origin, 6% chose to self-describe, and less than 1% were middle eastern or north African. Most participants were either in their sophomore (33%) or junior (32%) year of college and 12% of participants were freshmen, and 23% were seniors. The study criteria indicated that to participate, students needed to either be actively employed or to have previously held a job. These criteria were to ensure that participants had some experience in a work context to make

the scenario as realistic as possible. The majority of participants were currently employed (76%) and the rest were unemployed or chose to self-describe their work situation (24%). Examples of participants' current or prior jobs held included barista, cashier, childcare worker, bartender, server, and nanny.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using an online participant pool which offers psychology students extra credit for participating in research studies. After signing up for the study, participants were taken to an online survey platform. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios. Scenarios were drafted to vary in terms of domain of conversation (work or non-work) and target (self or co-worker). Specifically, the scenario either described a supervisor sharing personal or work-related information about another co-worker or about the individual taking part in the survey. An example of one of the scenarios representing a co-worker as the target and gossip that was non-work related in domain reads:

You've been working at your job for a few years now. You tend to have generally good relationships at work that you are satisfied with. Imagine you walk past the break room at work and overhear your supervisor speaking about one of your coworkers. Your supervisor says to another coworker "Did you hear, Sam is going on a date on Friday. I thought they just went through a break up a couple of weeks ago. Can you believe that?" Your coworker seems to be equally dismayed by Sam. The two continue to talk, but you keep walking by and don't hear the rest of the conversation.

An example of a work-related scenario targeting oneself reads:

You've been working at your job for a few years now. You tend to have generally good relationships at work that you are satisfied with. Imagine you walk past the break room at work and overhear your name. When you look inside, you see your supervisor speaking to a coworker about the fact that you have been late everyday this week. Your supervisor says, "It's starting to get on my nerves and probably everyone else's." Your coworker agrees and the two continue to talk, but you keep walking by and don't hear the rest of the conversation.

The co-worker, non-work scenario included 60 participants. The non-work gossip about oneself had 60 participants. The work-related gossip about another coworker consisted of 45 participants. The work-related gossip about oneself had 42 participants.

After reading the scenario, participants responded to a series of questions asking about their response to the scenario, including how realistic they felt the scenario was, how acceptable the situation was, and ratings of the leader. After scenario-related questions, participants completed several background measures assessing general personality traits, personal attitudes toward gossip, and other general attitudinal measures. One attention check item asked participants to select a specific response on an item. Twenty-six participants were screened out of our analyses for failing the attention check.

Measures

Quality of Leader Relationship

Quality of leader relationship was modified based on a measure of relationship quality by Poerio et al. (2015). In the original use of this measure, participants provided a rating for the quality of the relationship between the participant and a significant other in a daydream. This measure was adapted to rate one's supervisor in the scenario with three items. One of these

items was, "In general, how close would you feel to your leader?". The other two items assessed likeability and trust. The responses were on a seven-point scale, with 1 being not at all and 7 being extremely. The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Change in Leader Quality

Change in leader quality rating was assessed with three items developed for this study to respond to the specific scenarios. One of those items was, "How would this change your evaluation of the supervisor's leadership?" The other two items assessed changes in the perception of competence and respect of the leader. The responses used a ten-point slider scale, with 0 being much more negatively, 5 being no change, and 10 being much more positively. The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Acceptability

Acceptability of gossip was measured with three items developed for this study to respond to the specific scenarios. One of those items was, "How acceptable do you believe it is that the supervisor initiated this conversation?" The responses used a seven-point Likert Scale, with 1 being not at all and 7 being completely. The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .74).

Leader Comfort

Future comfort with the leader was assessed with three items developed for this study to respond to the specific scenarios. One of those items was, "How comfortable would you feel interacting with your supervisor in the future?" The responses used a seven-point Likert Scale, with 1 being not at all and 7 being extremely. The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Results

A 2X2 ANOVA was used to examine the main effects of domain and target, as well as the interaction between the two. Due to significant differences in how realistic participants rated the different scenarios (i.e., self-scenarios rated as less realistic), the realism rating was included as a covariate in our analyses. A summary of the means for each condition are provided in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1 tested differences in scenarios for change in leader quality ratings. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was met, as indicated by Levene's test ($p > .05$). There was not a significant interaction. There was not a main effect of domain or target of leader ratings outcome. Hypothesis 2 tested differences in scenarios for the quality of the relationship with the leader. The assumption for homogeneity of variance was met, as indicated by Levene's test ($p > .05$). There was not a significant interaction. There was a main effect of target on relationship quality with the leader, $F(1,174) = 5.76, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. The average perceived relationship quality with a leader for the self condition was lower ($M = 2.24, s = .14$) compared to the average for the other condition ($M = 2.72, s = .14$).

Hypothesis 3 tested differences in scenarios for acceptability of behavior. The assumption of variance was met, as indicated by Levene's text ($p > .05$). There was not a significant interaction. There was not a main effect of domain or target on the acceptability of behavior ratings outcome. Lastly, Hypothesis 4 tested differences in scenarios for future comfort outcomes. The assumption of variance was met, as indicated by Levene's text ($p > .05$). There was not a significant interaction; there was also not a main effect of domain or target of acceptability of behavior ratings outcome.

Discussion

The findings of our study contribute to the understanding of being a bystander of gossip in the workplace, specifically when it is between a coworker and a supervisor. We studied these conditions using an experimental vignette design to isolate different aspects of the gossip context. Although none of our formal hypotheses were supported, we will discuss how the trends of the means found in Table 1 align with some of our predictions.

We hypothesized that there would be an interaction between domain and target regarding leadership quality ratings, demonstrating a larger difference between self and other in non-work related gossip scenarios. The main effects and interaction were not significant. However, the condition means showed that participants rated leadership quality as worse when the supervisor facilitated work-related gossip in the self condition. Although we expected the ratings of leadership quality to be worse when gossip was personal, our findings could suggest that gossip is better received when it relates to personal matters rather than ability in the workplace. It appears that work-related criticism is often not well received. One survey supporting this notion found that nearly 25% of millennial employees called out to avoid an annual performance review. It is difficult for employees to hear criticism about their performance, especially when it is unexpected (Moore, 2022), which parallels to being a bystander to work-related gossip in our study. If most employees dread performance evaluations, then hearing an unofficial performance evaluation likely contributed to a lower leadership quality rating in the second condition.

We also hypothesized that there would be an interaction between domain and target concerning relationship with the leader, showing a larger difference between self and other in non-work related scenarios. It is worth emphasizing that there were low mean responses across each condition demonstrating leaders did not receive favorable ratings for this behavior. There

was only a main effect of target, revealing that perceived relationship quality was higher when the gossip was about someone else. According to Hartung & Pirschtat (2019) gossip can function as a way to form relationships and increase connectedness. Even though the participant is not involved in the gossip themselves, overhearing gossip about yourself would decrease connectedness to the coworker and leader as well as the perceived relationship quality. Moreover, the target of the gossip likely influenced condition ratings because of the psychological contracts that exist within the workplace. If one overhears gossip about themselves, regardless of the domain of gossip, it is a violation of social norms; therefore, their perceived relationship with their leader is compromised.

Our third hypothesis predicted an interaction between domain and target relating to acceptability of behavior, such that the difference between self and other is larger in non-work scenarios. The main effects and interaction were not significant. However, our condition means suggested that participants believed gossip was more acceptable when it was about someone else, regardless of domain. Although we controlled for realism, it could still be playing a role in our findings. When examining the domain of gossip, work-related gossip and personal gossip had similar mean levels of realism of 3.44 and 3.48 respectively. However, when examining the target of gossip, participants in the other condition had a mean of 3.71 and participants in the self condition had a mean of 3.20. This exemplifies the perceived lack of realism when gossip was about themselves, likely contributing to the acceptability of gossip when it is about someone else.

Our last hypothesis predicted an interaction between domain and target regarding future comfort with the leader, with a larger difference between self and other in non-work related scenarios. There were no significant main effects or interactions regarding future comfort with

the leader, however the trend of the means show that participants felt less comfortable with the leader when the gossip was about themselves, regardless of domain. The breach of a psychological contract also plays a role in these findings, suggesting that participants would not feel comfortable with their leader once relationship norms have been violated.

Moreover, there may have been additional factors contributing to non-significant results. It can be speculated that participants perceive a leader participating and/or initiating gossip as unacceptable in general, regardless of domain or target. Our average ratings support this idea since there were unfavorable means regarding leader quality ratings, relationship quality, acceptability, or future comfort. Thus, there may be some range restriction impacting our findings. Another reason results might not have been significant is the severity of the gossip scenarios. Our scenarios were fairly mild, so it is possible participants did not perceive an extreme violation of norms or a psychological contract breach. Relating to this, gossip could be so normalized that our scenarios represented talk that occurs often, if not daily in the workplace.

Practical Implications

A first, practical implication of our research is that universally people prefer their supervisors not to gossip in the workplace. Our mean scores were low demonstrating a lack of acceptability towards gossip behavior, a lower sense of relationship quality, leadership quality, and future comfort with the supervisor. However, a future direction could examine the attitudes towards gossip when it is between two coworkers, rather than a supervisor and coworker. Alternatively, researchers could ask participants to imagine that they are the supervisor and overhear two of their subordinates gossiping.

A limitation that could be affecting the significance of our findings was the sample size. Future studies with larger sample sizes and more statistical power may be able to detect

interaction effects. Additionally, the diversity of our sample could also be playing a role. Future researchers could use a more diverse sample by including participants from different age groups and fields of work. By utilizing college student workers, there could be limitations in work experiences or misguided expectations of work and/or supervisor norms. Ideally, some areas of work that could diversify the sample would include participants in healthcare, business, finance, government, public administration, and education to name a few.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate workers' perceptions of a leader after reviewing a scenario where the leader engages in gossip, with manipulations of the target and domain of gossip. We found that overall, participants found leaders engaging in gossip to be similarly unacceptable, no matter if it was about them or another person and if it was work-related or personal. Our only significant finding was that leaders received worse relationship quality ratings when gossiping about the individual versus gossiping about another co-worker. Future researchers could use a more diverse sample by including participants from different age groups and fields of work.

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Table 1

Mean and standard deviation of ratings of scenario outcomes by condition.

	Condition 1: Work-Related & Other	Condition 2: Work-Related & Self	Condition 3: Personal & Other	Condition 4: Personal & Self
Leader Quality Ratings	3.50 (<i>s</i> = .29)	2.73 (<i>s</i> = .30)	3.10 (<i>s</i> = .27)	3.19 (<i>s</i> = .25)
Relationship Quality	2.81 (<i>s</i> = .20)	2.18 (<i>s</i> = .21)	2.64 (<i>s</i> = .18)	2.30 (<i>s</i> = .18)
Acceptability of Behavior	2.46 (<i>s</i> = .18)	2.14 (<i>s</i> = .19)	2.31 (<i>s</i> = .16)	2.25 (<i>s</i> = .16)
Future Comfort	2.75 (<i>s</i> = .22)	2.21 (<i>s</i> = .22)	2.77 (<i>s</i> = .20)	2.48 (<i>s</i> = .19)

Note. Range of Options for Relationship Quality, Acceptability, and Future Comfort include a 1-7 scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely/completely). Range of Options for Leader Quality Ratings on a 1-10 slider scale (0 = much more negatively, 5 = no change, 10 = much more positively).