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## The effects of message direction and sex differences on the interpretation of workplace gossip

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THE EFFECTS OF MESSAGE DIRECTION AND SEX DIFFERENCES ON THE  
INTERPRETATION OF WORKPLACE GOSSIP

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

Gossip occurs in the organization and individuals exposed to these gossip messages must decide how to interpret the gossip. This dissertation explains the definitions and research for gossip, message direction, sex differences, message interpretation, politicalism, and believability. Applying symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory, seven relationships between variables are proposed. The seven hypotheses are tested via a web-based questionnaire that manipulated the message direction and sex of the gossiper and gossip receiver. Two hundred seventy-six full time employees completed instruments measuring gossip believability, purpose, and politicalism. Data were subjected to a MANCOVA, and correlation statistics. Results supported or partially supported three of the seven hypotheses. Specifically, message direction and sex of the receiver influenced gossip interpretation. Data confirmed a predicted negative relationship between believability and politicalism. Interpretations of results, limitations, implications, and directions for future research are included.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Almost any time human beings are presented with a juicy bit of negative gossip they have a dilemma. Do they believe the gossip and thus think poorly of the gossip subject? Or do they think poorly of the gossip source and therefore discount the gossip? Perhaps the source of the gossip has his or her own agenda. Potentially, gossip can serve as a commodity, allowing individuals to trade information or manipulate others or their reputations. As such, gossip may be both harmful and beneficial, depending on the message and depending on whether one is the source, the subject, or the recipient of gossip.

In the organization, gossip is a part of fitting in. Because gossip plays a part in organizational assimilation (Jaeger, Skelder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994), it is hard for organizational newcomers to know what to believe. The newcomer may be unsure of whom he or she can trust or who is well connected in the organization (Jablin, 2001). The newcomer does not know if gossip is an ordinary part of information flow in a particular organization. He or she may not know if the organization frowns upon gossip, or if gossip as relationship building and information exchange is encouraged. Even organizational veterans may have some difficulty interpreting organizational gossip. The veteran may be unsure whether to trust new organizational members as credible information sources (Jablin, 2001). Organizational veterans may also be skeptical of others sharing gossip because the others want something for themselves, whether it be influence or intimacy. Without prior relationships, the “true” meaning of the gossip can be difficult to decipher.

The purpose of this dissertation is to gain greater insight on how gossip messages are interpreted and the factors that influence their interpretation. Specifically, this project studies the interpretation of organizational gossip as believable and/or political based on the sex of the gossip source and receiver as well as the message direction of the gossip based on the organizational level of the gossip source and the gossip receiver. This chapter will orient the reader to the basic tenants of the theoretical perspective adopted by this dissertation as well as introduce the variables under investigation. In particular, the following section of this chapter will introduce symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory as well as define gossip, biological sex, message direction, believability, and politicalism. The following chapter includes an in depth review of the literature relevant to the variables investigated as well as rationale and hypotheses.

### Symbolic Interactionism

This dissertation is most broadly based in symbolic interactionism through the exploration of the way individuals interpret the messages of others using symbols, such as sex, rank, and the message itself. These symbols allow the individuals to base their interpretations of others' words according to their individual schemas based on prior interactions with others. These social constructions, such as those about sex role behaviors, have been mentally created over time, and influence individual perceptions of messages. To understand the role of symbolic interactionism most generally for this investigation, it is important to note the underlying assumptions of the theory. Subsequent chapters will provide further explanation of the theory applied to the present study, beyond the general elements of symbolic interactionism provided in the following paragraphs.

Modern symbolic interactionism has seven basic issues: “(1) the meaning component in human conduct; (2) the social sources of humanness; (3) society as a process; (4) the voluntaristic component in human conduct; (5) a dialectical conception of mind; (6) the constructive, emergent nature of human conduct; and (7) the necessity of sympathetic introspection” (Manis & Meltzer, 1978, p. 5). Behavior and interactions unique to humans are propelled through the mediums and meaning of symbols. In other words, humans do not respond directly to stimuli, but rather to the meanings that they assign to the stimuli.

These meanings are socially constructed through interaction with others (Mead, 1934), and involvement and interaction with others is how human beings become humanized. Individuals engage in uniquely human activity, such as imagining others’ feelings, using symbols when thinking, and responding toward the self as they would respond toward others (Mead, 1934). Therefore, humans are not born, but become human through their socialization with others (Mead, 1934).

Society, for humans, consists of all of the individuals who interact with each other. Individuals move within various social networks, some networks being more salient to the individual’s social framework than other networks. This is not to say that an individual’s behavior is entirely shaped by others. Rather, humans are active in shaping their own behavior, voluntarily choosing to respond to their social environments as opposed to a deterministic view not allowing for behavioral choice. Thus, humans are capable of forming new meanings, allowing them to be individuals within a larger society (Mead, 1934).

When creating meanings, humans interact with themselves, relying on internal communication as a dialectical process, deciphering meaning from their surroundings, based on the I (the spontaneous reaction), and the Me, which includes the internal social definitions for symbols (Mead, 1934). Human beings create their own destinies through making choices about their own behavior in the present (Mead, 1934). However, it is important to note that symbolic interactionists do not believe that humans have complete free will in every moment. Rather, a set of symbols is developed through interactions with others and is relied on by the individuals (Meltzer, 1978).

Importantly, some symbols are interpreted based on prior social encounters and the meanings of symbols can change or be created in the moment, potentially causing unpredictable behavior (Manis & Meltzer, 1978). Finally, understanding how human beings behave relies on the study of individuals' covert behavior (Mead, 1934). In other words, to understand human behavior, it is essential to study the symbols human beings use to make decisions about their conduct (Mead, 1934).

Therefore, symbolic interactionists believe that human beings interpret the actions of others and respond to such interpretations based on perceptions, instead of simply reacting to the actions of others (Blumer, 1978). This altering of the individual's experiences lends support to symbolic interactionism in that the individual reframes the situation, communication, relationship, the self or the other based on her/ his interpretations of the possible communication (Goffman, 1974). This dissertation will explore the interpretations of gossip in the organization. Nonessential to this investigation are the actual meanings intended by the gossip source. The multiple

interpretations of the meaning of gossip are created by the gossip receivers, dependent on the sex of the gossiper and direction of the message.

### Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) examines how individuals make comparisons between two or more possible alternatives, and select the alternative most beneficial to themselves, while incurring the lowest costs. Like other types of currency, the goal is for individuals to gain more than they lose, thus being profitable in the encounter. However, social exchange theory differs from economic exchange theories because the outcome exchange relation involves another person, not a financial market (Emerson, 1987).

Emerson (1987) claims that the rationality of social exchange theory has two requirements. First, the individuals involved in the social exchange have a set of values, goals, or purposes. Second, the individuals' behaviors are consistent. Each person has his or her own set of principles from which he or she bases his social decisions. These decisions remain constant while other situational factors change, thus influencing the overall value of the outcome. Individuals do not make a conscious decision to achieve the greatest value, but rather this process occurs naturally for the individual. Because this process is intuitive for the person, his or her responses to situations with similar reward outcomes are consistent over time (Emerson, 1987).

What changes in each situation is the opportunity the individual encounters (Emerson, 1987). Although the individual continues to hold the same values, he or she makes decisions based on opportunities that arise. Emerson (1987) notes that courting

rituals involve risks of rejection, but an individual valuing love will find these risks tolerable, and acts when a courting situation arises.

Individuals want to be able to predict the behavior of others (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). They want to know what the other person is “really like” to enable them to know what to expect from the other person (p. 209). Individuals generally want others to know who they really are, offering up their possible reward value in the interaction (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978). When individuals are unique, holding different societal roles, they find different rewards salient to the interaction. This may lead to distrust between differing individuals (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Kelley and Thiabut (1978) identify two ways individuals interpret the behavior of others. One option is for a person to determine the possible outcome value the other individual yields from an opportunity, then use that outcome value to figure out how the other person will respond in a situation. A second option is for one person to present herself or himself to the other, allowing the other person to recognize the presenter’s values. The individual then makes predictions based on the values of the other person. Kelly and Thibaut note that an external person (third person), including an experimenter, may impose a given matrix on a dyad by identifying the costs and rewards in the dyad’s situation, in order to predict the behavior of the dyad members.

Emerson’s (1962) development of the social exchange theory’s power-dependence structure explains how individuals of varying structural levels respond to one another. Emerson (1962) claims when two people are involved in an interaction and one person’s reward outcomes are more dependent on the other than the other person’s reward outcomes are based on the first person, power imbalance occurs. Emerson (1962)

says that when the power-dependence structure is imbalanced, the dependent person ends up giving more than he or she gains. Molm (1987) argues that power-imbalance may shift when the low power person finds alternative rewards to offer to the person with more power, thus balancing the power structure. Molm's notion of alternative power sources outside of the structure is important to the arguments this dissertation makes in subsequent chapters.

In sum, the social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) emphasizes what individuals have to gain in a given situation. Individuals' values remain constant while other factors shift, presenting individuals with an opportunity to maximize their rewards (Emerson, 1986). Individuals try to interpret others' behavior based on rewards the others are obtaining in the interaction (Emerson, 1987). When power imbalance occurs, those with more power reap greater rewards, often causing those in lower power positions to give more than they receive in these relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Individuals with less power may supplement the power imbalance with alternative rewards outside of the structure of the relationship (Molm, 1987).

Both theories, symbolic interactionism and social exchange, work simultaneously. Within the symbolic interactionist framework, individuals utilize the symbols to make sense of the world (Meltzer, 1978). These symbols are then placed into the predicted outcome matrix with individuals evaluating the overall goodness of outcome based on the costs and rewards of the situation (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Because these are intangible costs and rewards (Emerson, 1982), symbols are used to understand their outcome value (Meltzer, 1978).

## Definitions

In the next section, each variable in the current investigation will be briefly identified and defined. Specifically, this next section will define gossip, message direction, sex differences, message interpretation, politicalism, and believability. A complete review of literature relevant to these aforementioned concepts will be presented in chapter two.

Gossip. Gossip is something said by one person to another, in a private forum, which cannot easily be substantiated or verified by the message receiver. Kurland and Peled (2000) defined 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” (p. 429). The word *gossip* originates from Old English, where it originally referred to “god-sibbs.” God-sibbs were godparents, often known for engaging in small talk about the children and other distant relatives at Christenings and other family events. The term later evolved into “idle talk” and was typically associated with women who engaged in such behavior (Rysman, 1977).

In a study of sorority members, Jaeger, Skelder, and Rosnow’s (1998) participants provided a definition for what gossip meant to them. Some of the responses centered on the historical notion of gossip as mean talk about someone else, whereas others considered it more of an acceptable practice. One of Jaeger et al.’s (1998) respondents asked what else it was called when people got together and socialized, other than gossip, as if to say it is a way of life, both natural and acceptable.

Two terms, gossip and rumor, are often used interchangeably in lay contexts. Rosnow (2001) argues “gossip is always about people and can involve either fact or

supposition. Rumors on the other hand, may or may not involve people, but are always speculative (unlike most urban legends, for example, which are generally presented as “facts” attributed to friends of friends)” (p. 211). Thus, some communication events can be considered both gossip and rumor, making distinction somewhat nebulous at times.

To distinguish gossip from rumor, Rosnow and Georgoudi (1985) state that gossip is nonessential to the exchange of the interaction and focuses on personal affairs.

Rumors, according to Rosnow and Georgoudi, may also focus on personal affairs, but may also include other topics, not concerning people, such as a rumor about a company awarding bonuses. To make the distinction between communication about personal affairs that is and is not gossip, individuals gossiping discuss personal affairs that are not relevant to the current exchange. Rumors, however, may be relevant to the communication exchange. Gossip, on the other hand is not needed to perform the necessary functions of the exchange. For example, a rumor regarding corporate layoffs may be relevant to a workplace communication exchange. However, gossip occurs when coworkers discuss who they want to be fired for personal reasons. Thus, when the information is unnecessary or excessive, it is characterized as gossip because it goes beyond the requisite context of the initial conversation.

Rosnow and Fine (1976) distinguish rumor and gossip, such that rumor is information, neither substantiated nor refuted; gossip is small talk with or without a known basis in fact. The multiple functions that both serve are practically identical, but the motivational hierarchies appear to be different. “Rumors seem most often fueled by a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure; gossip seems motivated primarily by ego and status needs” (p. 4).

Rosnow (2001) claims that when compared to the study of rumor, gossip is a more challenging subject to understand, particularly in controlled studies. Allport and Postman (1947) defined rumor as “a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present “ (p. ix).

Message Direction. Message direction is the way a message travels in the linear communication model from source to receiver. Communication in the organization may flow downward, upward, or horizontally, for both formal and informal functions. Downward communication occurs when information flows from supervisors to subordinates (Katz & Kahn, 1966). When employees communicate with their supervisors, upward communication occurs (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Horizontal communication occurs when individuals communicate with others in the organization at their same level as opposed to communicating with supervisors or subordinates (Fayol, 1937). This horizontal communication may occur within one department or across several departments within an organization (Harris, 2002).

Sex Differences. Sex “refers to the genetic, biological differences between boys and girls, between men and women...” (Canary & Dindia, 1998, p. 4). Some confusion surrounds the use of the terms “sex” and “gender.” As mentioned above, sex is biological whereas gender refers to the “psychological and social manifestation of what one believes to be male and/or female, which might – or might not – or might not reflect one’s biological sex” (Canary & Dindia, 1998, p. 4). However, it should be recognized that much of an individual’s gender identity is constructed through socialization with others based on one’s biological sexual distinctions (Wood & Dindia, 1998). This

dissertation examines the differences between males and females. Sex differences are the distinction between men and women.

Message Interpretation. According to Edwards (1998), message interpretation “focuses on the meanings attributed by a target to a specific message (or set of messages) within a communication context” (p. 54). This process includes how the message recipient interprets the intent of the source, as well as both the connotative and denotative meanings of the message. As individuals receive messages they must decode the meaning associated with the message. These message interpretations may or may not be consistent with the intent of the message sender.

Politicalism. When individuals work together, their success or failure in the organization becomes dependent on others. Others’ impressions can influence promotions, selection to project teams, and create or limit networking and mentoring opportunities within the organization. In an effort to get ahead, individuals may try to manipulate impressions of others or themselves through organizational gossip, fulfilling their own ego needs and desire for greater organizational status. Politicalism has to do with personal gain in an organization. Politicalism is the degree of prevalence of “actions by individuals which are directed toward the goal of furthering their own self-interests without regard for the well-being of others or their organization” (Kacmar & Baron, 1999, p. 4). Politicalism does not include the lay definition of politics some people may use in everyday contexts, such as an individual’s desire to hold leadership positions or become involved in the doctrine or legislation of the organization. Politicalism does, however, include the desire to get ahead in the organization through the use of games or

manipulation of others, potentially unethical behavior, or other power-seeking behaviors not supported by the organization.

Organizational politics was first defined by Burns (1961) who indicated that behavior is political when “others are made use of as resources in competitive situations” (p. 257). Mayes and Allen (1977) extended Burns’s definition of politicalism to include the idea of one enacting behaviors toward end goals that are not sanctioned by the organization. Kacmar and Baron (1999) defined organizational politics as “actions by individuals which are directed toward the goal of furthering their own self-interests without regard for the well-being of others or their organization” (p. 4).

As various definitions of organizational politics emerged in the field of management, Drory and Romm (1988, 1990) identified ten themes among the definitions. These themes were grouped into three categories: outcomes, means, and situational characteristics. Outcomes are behaving in a self-serving manner, acting against the interests of the organization, securing valuable resources, and attaining power. Means include influence attempts, power tactics, informal behavior, and motive concealment. Situational characteristics include conflict and uncertainty in the decision-making process. Most relevant to this study are outcomes and means. Both of these self-serving behaviors and influence attempts may be enacted through spreading organizational gossip as a political tactic to gain power in the organization.

Drory and Romm (1990) argue that politicalism often includes activities ordinarily out of the scope of one’s job. These activities are not sanctioned by the organization, and the actor engaged in political behavior generally conceals his or her intent from the target. Kacmar and Baron provide examples of politicalism, such as

“furthering one’s own interests” or “evening the score’ with others for past injustice and other real or imagined wrongs” (p. 4). In short, when individuals try to get ahead in ways not supported by the organization, they are engaging in politics.

Believability. A person or message is interpreted as believable when the message is ascribed truth as opposed to deceit (Levine, Park, & McCornack, 1999). Anthony and Gibbons (1995) examined believability of rumors, defining believability as how believable a particular rumor is to the receiver. This study defines believability as the extent to which a receiver deems a message to be truthful. For this dissertation, accuracy of deception detection is not important. Instead, of interest to this study are the conditions that influence a gossip receiver to interpret the extent of gossip believability.

### Summary

This chapter has introduced the topics of this study. Specifically, Chapter 1 presented the theoretical framework and definitions for the variables gossip, sex, message direction, message interpretation, politicalism, and believability. Chapter 2 will review the literature relevant to the previously defined variables in this investigation. Following the review of literature, rationale and hypotheses are presented. Chapter 3 will explain the methods that will be used to conduct this investigation and the results will be reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will interpret the results, discuss the limitations, and explain the value of this study and how it fits into the larger communication context.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The previous chapter introduced the rationale for the current investigation as a whole. This section will examine each of the variables individually. Specifically, this section will review the relevant literature in organizational communication pertinent to gossip, sex, message direction, message interpretation, politicalism, and believability. After the review of literature, rationale will be set forth for seven hypotheses.

### Organizational Communication

The study of organizational communication emerged in the 1950s as an extension of the business communication that had initially been studied in management departments (Redding, 1992). Organizational communication covers a broad variety of communication processes within business settings or other formally organized groups of individuals working together for a common goal. Most of the research in organizational communication addresses interpersonal relations including communication between superiors and subordinates, conflict, stress, race and gender, and interviewing (Allen, Gotcher, & Seibert, 1993). To date, very little research has examined negative communication processes within organizations. Instead, most of the research focuses on how communication can be used to benefit the organization.

Similar to other research identifying positive communication processes, this dissertation argues that individuals engage in organizational gossip because of the benefits they obtain while still recognizing the taboo nature of gossip. Individuals are capable of analyzing what they think others are thinking, and the motives others have for communicating (Meltzer, 1978). When others interpret the motives behind the gossip, the gossip receiver may interpret the message differently than if they could not consider

these motives. This dissertation seeks to broaden the context of the study of message interpretation and extend the knowledge of gossip into the workplace setting. This investigation will examine the interpretation of gossip in the organization.

### Gossip

Scholars have been studying gossip for several decades, the earliest research from the mid-1970's. Most of the research to this point has studied the concept of gossip itself as opposed to the relationships among gossip and other variables. This dissertation is concerned with how gossip is interpreted. Research on gossip has identified the characteristics of gossip messages, conditions necessary for gossip transmission, and outcomes of gossip.

Characteristics of Gossip. There are eight characteristics of gossip identified in previous research. The first characteristic is the subject of gossip (Bergmann, 1993). An underlying element is that gossip is considered worthy of communication. Gossip generally emphasizes the unexpected, unconventional, juicy, strange, improper, immoral, or eccentric in the behavior of the subject of the gossip. Bergmann argues that this emphasis on the extraordinary has two important implications. One, it heightens the entertainment value of the gossip; and two, because it is extraordinary, it indirectly legitimizes the gossip producer's retelling of the gossip subject's private information. Bergmann (1993) says, "Scandal turns a private event into a subject of public interest" (p. 99).

The second element of gossip is that gossip producers are predominantly concerned with presenting the information they share as believable. Bergmann (1993) argues that because gossip is naturally prone to exaggeration, and because gossipers are

confessing the sins of others, gossip producers run the risk of being called slanderers. This characteristic is important to this study because being called a slanderer is costly in the predicted outcome matrix. Gossipers want to reap the rewards of gossip while limiting their costs (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). It thus becomes important for gossipers to limit their liability to this cost. Because of slander risk, gossip producers display several authentication strategies to prove that they are being honest, such as stating upfront that they too are skeptical about the information, naming their sources for the information, or confirming their story with consistency of an external event (Bordia & Rosnow, 1998).

The third characteristic of gossip is that gossip is unscheduled (Elmer, 1994). Because gossip is unscheduled, individuals acquire bits of information about people in a random fashion, never being sure when the information obtained will become useful. Because individuals cannot know what they will need, or which information will become useful, they do not schedule gossip sessions, rather these sessions occur spontaneously. The gossip receivers generally pay close attention, as the receivers are aware that the information contained in the gossip may be useful in the future.

Fourth, gossip is informal and therefore does not have a fixed agenda (Elmer, 1994). The conversations may start in one place and end in another. Elmer argues that formality works against intimacy, discouraging disclosure or taking risks. When individuals engage in formal communication, they feel less free to change the subject at will. Individuals find unstructured environments conducive to the transmission of gossip, as it allows the gossipers an opportunity to adapt their messages as risky situations arise.

Fifth, gossip focuses on topics of no considerable importance (Rosnow, 2001). That is, the topic of the gossip itself should be considered idle talk. This study argues

that gossip may be important, although not essential for the organization to function. If two people discuss how a third person has had indiscretions with his or her boss, merely to share the news, this discussion would be considered gossip, as the discussion is of no importance to the functioning of the individuals or the organization. In other words, the company could still function, turn a profit, and people would be able to perform the tasks assigned to them without having specific information about the personal lives of other employees. If, however, one reports this unprofessional relationship to a human resource manager (as evidence of sexual harassment and favoritism), it would then no longer be considered gossip, as it would be of relevance and not merely idle chatter (Rosnow, 2001). This is not considered gossip because lawsuits could evolve from this problem, potentially disrupting the organizations ability to function in a way necessary to the organization's survival.

In some instances, the gossip source may merely be packaging the gossip to appear idle in nature, even if the gossip has ulterior motives for some sort of political gain (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). In other words, the gossip may appear to be engaging in meaningless chatter, when in reality he or she is sharing the gossip for personal gain. For this study, gossip is not necessarily trivial to the organization, but the message is delivered in such a way as to seem casual, as if the message isn't urgent to the day-to-day functioning of the organization, while still playing an important role. Although Rosnow (2001) argues the subject or topic of gossip is of no considerable importance, he does not claim the act of gossip itself is unimportant. The benefits of gossip will be discussed in a later section.

The sixth element of gossip is the gossip producer seeks to extend his or her knowledge to other areas. That is, the gossip producer wants to generalize his or her knowledge of the subject to other parts of the gossip subject's life. The gossip producer assumes the gossip information to be typical of a particular subject, potentially relaying a chain of stories about a person of a particular social type (Bergmann, 1993). Gossiping about one aspect allows the gossiper to draw broad conclusions about how the gossip subject behaves in other contexts and also enables the gossiper to evaluate the gossip subject's life values.

Seventh, gossip producers do not report just the facts in plain, unbiased language. Rather, the important element in the gossip transmission is the gossip producers' commentary and evaluation of the gossip subject (Bergmann, 1993; Rosnow, 2001). Rosnow (2001) states that gossip is inherently evaluative; gossipers inject their opinion while relating the information to others. Therefore, gossip producers take joy in divulging this information to others, and offering their spin on things. The gossip producer enjoys speculating about the gossip subject's background or motivation (Bergmann, 1993). The tone of gossip is evaluative, either positive or negative. This tone may be explicit or implicit, but is attached to the person, event, action, or scandal being discussed. Each time an individual shares gossip with someone else, she or he is also providing her or his opinion of the gossip target. This opinion reveals how the source feels about the particular person and the person's actions. Sometimes, individuals feel the need to clarify their moral or judgmental orientation by saying things like, "I would never do something like that" or "I really like him, but what he's doing seems foolish."

Finally, gossip producers do not forget that what they are doing is morally objectionable (Bergmann, 1993; Amirol, 1981). Historically, gossip has negative connotations. The Bible, for example, warns against gossip. (Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 17:4,9, 20, 27; Proverbs 20:19; James 4:11). Recently, two Orthodox Jewish rabbis began an anti-gossip campaign warning of the harms gossip brings (Schemo, 2001). Celebrities such as Goldie Hawn and Tom Cruise have publicized the Words Can Heal organization started by Rabbi Irwin Katsorf to discourage the use of gossip (Hawn, 2001). In Hawn's speech, "A Better Normal," to the National Press Club on December 10, 2001, she urged individuals to take a pledge, promising to see how gossip hurts people, and to try to eliminate it from their lives. Furthermore, gossip has been degraded as it is thought of as something only done by women (Rysman, 1977).

Research has examined sex differences in gossip. Leaper and Holliday (1995) suggest that women may be more inclined than men to gossip, and they encourage others to gossip in their conversations with same-gender friends. Anthony's (1992) research with rumor transmission among the deaf indicates that men and women are exposed to the same amount of gossip. That is, when asked if they are familiar with a particular gossip message, both men and women are familiar with the same number of gossip topics. The difference, however, lies in how the men and women transmit the gossip. Anthony found that men spread the gossip to more people, whereas women gossipers provide more details to the people they tell, with the most details shared within all female dyads.

Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi (1994) tested for differences in the gossip tendencies of men and women. After controlling for social desirability, Nevo et al. found

the only sex differences in tendency to gossip occurred based on topic. Women are more likely to gossip about the physical appearance of others (e.g. talking to friends about others' clothes) than are males. When the topic turns to achievement (e.g. talking with colleagues about others' work or grades), social information (e.g. talking to friends about others' love affairs), or sublimated activities (e.g. finding out other people's motives), no sex differences were identified. Nevo et al. (1994) also speculated that had they asked about gossip about the sports achievements about others as opposed to physical appearance of others, they would have found that men gossip more than women.

The morally objectionable awareness on the part of the gossip producers is revealed through their attempts to demonstrate that the information they have was passively attained. To limit risks or costs in the gossip transaction, gossip producers want to make sure they are not seen as spies or snoops, but rather as someone who acquired the gossip by chance. Perhaps they begin their gossip session with "I was just minding my own business when I overheard someone talking about someone else." In this example, note the gossiper did not mention he or she was eavesdropping. Gossip producers also seek protection by qualifying their gossip messages with statements such as "I don't like to talk badly about people, but ..." or "I don't want to judge anyone else's business, but..." In this way, the gossip producers are able to anticipate potential challenges to their message in an attempt to preserve their own character (Bergmann, 1993). Although gossip is most frequently thought of as a morally questionable act (with high social costs), gossip continues to occur. Before gossip occurs, however, several conditions must exist.

Conditions for Gossip Transmission. Ideally, before gossip occurs, four conditions are desirable. Bergmann (1993) has studied how important the absence is of the third party being discussed. To demonstrate how crucial this component of third party absence is to gossip, Bergmann suggests simple observation of what happens when the person being gossiped about suddenly shows up. In social situations, particularly in organizational settings, the subject of gossip commonly appears. Bergmann notes from ethnographic data that the gossip session instantly pauses, and picks up momentarily with a new topic of conversation, usually irrelevant to the prior gossip. The subject of such gossip often leaves knowingly, according to Bergmann, and may even follow with an “I’ll see you later” or similar comment.

Bergmann also discusses a second option for removal of the third party. When someone to be gossiped about is physically present, gossipers may turn their backs or hush their voices, acting as though this third party is not present, as they discuss him or her right in front of him or her, treating the third party more like a non-person than an actual conversation participant, thus simulating third party absence. These two examples provided by Bergmann (1993) based on ethnographic evidence, show that third party absence is a requirement for most gossip to occur. This absence of a third party serves to guide the norms of what is appropriate and what is not.

For this reason, Elmer (1994) posits gossip occurs face-to-face, the second condition of gossip. He argues face-to-face transmission occurs to allow the message receiver to determine the credibility of the source. Further, the source can also evaluate the response and feedback of the receiver, to determine how the gossip receivers are perceiving the gossip source. Potentially, the gossip receivers may think poorly of the

gossip source, which the source attempts to avoid by altering his or her message dependent on receiver feedback. The possibility of negative perceptions of gossipers is present, as gossip itself breaks rules of friendship (Elmer, 1994). Friendship has implicit relationship rules such as not talking behind someone's back, not talking badly about mutual friends, and not betraying confidence. The gossiper looks to the person receiving the gossip message to determine if she or he is a co-conspirator in breaking these rules. In negotiating this process, the gossiper relies on nonverbal communication as cues to determine the receiver's involvement.

The third condition is that gossip does not occur with large groups of people. Gossip most frequently occurs one-to-one (Elmer, 1994). The messages are very specific, and the gossiper prefers to tailor the message to a very specific audience because of its sensitive content (Elmer, 1994). With a small audience, what is said can be adjusted, dependent on receiver feedback. Larger audiences do not allow for such easy adaptations. Criticisms of one's mutual friend may be voiced in a different way, if at all, to another person. Having an audience of one allows the gossiper to reap the most benefit of sharing the gossip, while keeping risks at a minimum.

The fourth condition is that gossip generally occurs between acquaintances (Elmer, 1994; Bergmann, 1993; Yerkovich, 1977). Knowing the other person allows for the gossiper to be both interesting and efficient in communicating to the receiver. Although not everyone will know the subject of gossip personally, it is important that the person is at least known. The names of gossip subjects are important to gossip transmission. Gossipers may inquire to find out if a third party is known, such as in the oft heard "Do you know so and so?" (Yerkovich, 1977).

The most interesting gossip, according to Bergmann (1993), is when both parties know each other. Gossip when only the listener knows the third party, but the third party does not know the gossiper is also of interest. This type of gossip occurs when individuals gossip about celebrities. The celebrities may be of the local variety; the CEO of one's company may be an interesting target of organizational gossip, even though she or he may not personally know the people sharing gossip about her or him. This type of gossip, according to Bergmann, however, is less interesting than gossip when there is a reciprocal relationship of acquaintance that forms the gossip triad. Further, and perhaps more importantly, acquaintances are more familiar with each other's nonverbal cues, and thus able to make strategic adaptations as necessary. Knowing another person and feeling that the gossiper can trust her or him enough to share the gossip, the gossiper is less afraid of being "duped" or manipulated by the receiver. "When people are not talking about other people, it may be a sign of social alienation or indifference" (Rosnow, 2001, p. 205). Thus, gossip is a way of revealing social networks and trust patterns. When people are not gossiping, perhaps it is a sign that they have no one with whom they can share gossip. Although gossiping incurs social costs it also some positive outcomes.

Outcomes of Gossip. Gossiping has several outcomes for individuals and the organization. This section will describe the benefits and consequences of gossip. Although most people consider gossip a negative phenomenon, not all of the outcomes of gossip are detrimental.

Rosnow argues that gossip is a socially constructed phenomenon that serves as a container of social values and judgments. Gossip can serve as a method for guiding small groups of people, teaching them the socially constructed rights and wrongs of the group

norms (Jaeger, et al., 1994; Jaeger, Skelder, & Rosnow, 1998). Sociometric research on gossiping and friendship networks suggests that gossip is used to guide social deviants and isolates back into the group (Jaeger et al., 1998). Gossip can also be a satisfying social exchange bringing individuals closer as they express their values (Yerkovich, 1977). Rosnow (2001) claims that gossiping may operate to the disadvantage of a third party, but usually the defining characteristic of gossip is that it is mutually beneficial to the interacting parties.

Gossiping can have several beneficial functions: news-bearing, influencing others, entertainment, and intimacy (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). Gossip is news-bearing when it presents news, shares information, or makes announcements. A gossipier may announce some positive personal news about a coworker, for example. It is possible to influence others, change opinions, or get people to think or act in a specific way through gossiping. A supervisor may use gossip about another employee to teach his or her subordinate how not to behave. Gossip can also be used purely as entertainment, as a way to pass the time. Coworkers may gossip about other employees' habits as they watch the clock, waiting until five o'clock when they can leave for the day. Gossip presents, even if only superficially, a feeling of secrecy, privacy, and thus, intimacy (Rosnow, 2001; Yerkovich, 1977). When someone shares gossip with someone else, the gossip receiver feels included. By filling in a new employee on the office gossip, she or he will not only gain a better understanding of the company, but also feel closer to the person who reached out and trusted him or her enough to share the gossip.

In the workplace, gossip can improve the social organization of the company. Dunbar (1996) argues that the workplace functions most efficiently when physical space

is allotted for gossip. In one example cited by Dunbar, a successful organization decided to commission an architect to design a more appropriate building to accommodate the growing organization. In the former building, the workers had a coffee break room that served as a place for chance encounters and socializing. When the architects drew up the plans for the new building, they felt that this coffee break room was unnecessary, and not the best way to utilize space. When the organization moved to the new building, the organization was less successful. Although changes in other organizational aspects were not controlled for, Dunbar attributes this change to the lack of casual contacts, sharing gossip and information at work. These findings may be limited, but, Dunbar suggests a link between workplace gossip and organizational success.

Although gossip has many benefits, corporate gossip can also be of consequence to company managers. The time people spend gossiping can be a drain on key personnel who must use their time and energy to address the various gossip floating about. These gossip messages can hurt the bottom line of the organization in that clients may no longer want to work with a particular person based on gossip, legal costs to an organization may follow libel and slander charges, organization members may have a damaged public image, gossip may cause a decline in employee morale, and gossip may also cause the loss of consumer confidence (Espostio & Rosnow, 1983).

Jaeger et al. (1998) studied gossip within the organization by studying the communication networks and perceptions of gossip and gossipers within a sorority house. They found that individuals who gossiped least were perceived to be the most likeable although not the most popular. In addition to studying those gossiped about, Jaeger et al. also examined the popularity of the individuals doing the gossiping. Gossiping allows

individuals to connect and be a member of an ingroup. Therefore, low gossipers were not the most popular, even if the most liked. The most popular individuals, operationalized as those having the most mutually identified friends, were those who were moderate gossipers. Jaeger et al. (1998) predicted that those most frequently gossiped about would suffer from lower self-esteem. However, none of the individuals in the sorority, whether they were gossiped about frequently or not at all, had low self-esteem. Instead, the sample as a whole had high self-esteem and a great deal of self-confidence, despite the frequent gossiping among the group.

Another issue related to gossip is power. Kurland and Peled (2000) define power as the “ability to exert one’s will, influencing others to do things that they would not otherwise do” (p. 430). In their conceptual model of organizational gossip, they focus on the gossip source’s power over gossip recipients. Their model suggests that one person may have individual influence over another through four of French and Raven’s (1959) five bases of power, which include coercive, reward, expert, and referent power. Coercive power occurs when one person can punish another. Reward power occurs when one person can reward another. Expert power occurs when one person has special knowledge or expertise wanted by another. Referent power is when one person attracts another, and the other person desires to be associated with them. Kurland and Peled (2000) do not propose a relationship between legitimate power and outcome of organizational gossip, because legitimate power stems from organizational rank as opposed to social processes. Legitimate power occurs when one person has legitimate rank and authority, based on one’s position, and is able to use that position to influence others (French & Raven, 1959). Although Kurland and Peled (2000) argue that

legitimate power may not be an outcome of organizational gossip, it seems likely that legitimate power may play a role in how gossip is received.

Kurland and Peled (2000) argue that negative gossip will enhance the gossiper's coercive, reward, and expert power in the organization. They also propose a curvilinear relationship between gossip and referent power, suggesting gossip will enhance referent power, but only to a point, after which gossip will have a negative effect on the gossiper's referent power. Kurland and Peled suggest that these relationships between gossip and power may be moderated by gossip credibility, work-relatedness of the gossip, relationship between gossip source and receiver, and organizational culture.

Overall, the research on gossip in the organization is limited. Studies examining gossip in a general interpersonal sense are really only in the beginning stages of developing knowledge about gossip. To date, research has defined gossip and clarified it from rumor and identified characteristics of gossip and conditions present for gossip to occur. Additionally, several benefits of gossip have been identified. One factor that may influence the interpretation of gossip is message direction – who is sharing the gossip with the receiver.

### Message Direction

One possible factor influencing gossip interpretation is the source of the gossip message. The perceived meaning of messages may be influenced by whether the gossip is spread by a boss, a subordinate, or a coworker. Message direction researchers describe the functions of each direction of communication flow: downward, upward, and horizontal.

According to Katz and Kahn (1966), downward communication serves five primary functions which include (1) giving job instructions; (2) providing job rationale; (3) explaining procedures, policies, and practices, (4) giving performance feedback, and (5) transmitting information regarding the organization's mission and goals. Gossip is possible while accomplishing any of these functions. For example, when giving job instructions, supervisors may recall a story of an incompetent employee who caused problems by doing something wrong. While the use of another employee isn't necessarily gossip, adding unnecessary details about the employees' personal life and appearance may make the story more memorable, yet not essential to the exchange.

Upward communication is important for organizational success (Harris, 2002), yet Koeler, Anatol, and Applbaum (1981) found that upward communication is less effective than downward communication. According to Harris (2002), "excellent downward communication will be assigned the greatest credibility if upward communication works well" (p. 236). This statement means that employers are most effectively able to convey information to their employees when the employees are able to get messages to their employers. Four functions of upward communication are most prevalent: (1) suggestions; (2) unsolved work problems; (3) what subordinates are doing; and (4) how subordinates feel about the job and other employees. Beyond making suggestions for improvement, subordinates may want or need to share other types of information with their supervisors. Upward communication may be used to find out about what the subordinates are doing – their successes and failures. Sometimes, supervisors may find out about problems with their subordinates when another subordinate reports the problem. Problems may include issues such as unresolved work

problems, safety concerns, and sexual harassment (Harris, 2002). Although often this type of communication is important and necessary to the environment, sometimes individuals share information about their coworkers for purposes not related to the job. Employees may spread gossip about other employees to their supervisors. Perhaps an employee tells his or her boss about what a coworker does on the weekends. While not necessary to the job at hand, conversations about the activities of coworkers may allow employees to express to their supervisors how they feel about the people with whom they work, an established form of upward communication. This gossip exchange also gives the employee something to talk about with their supervisor besides their own work, which may alleviate some tension and build rapport. Subordinates may even use upward gossip to make themselves look better in comparison to their peers. By making a coworker seem less attractive, over time the subordinate may line themselves up for the next promotion, beating out their unattractive peer.

Horizontal communication benefits the organization by accomplishing task coordination, problem solving, information sharing, conflict resolution, and rapport building (Harris, 2002). Harris (2002) argues that horizontal communication may have organizational benefits not fully realized, as much of horizontal communication is not sanctioned by the organization. In other words, not all horizontal communication is business related or essential to conduct the task at hand.

Several scholars have identified benefits of horizontal communication. Holland, Stead, & Leibrock (1976) found that horizontal communication helps employees to reduce uncertainty caused by complex organizational structures. Instead of using a formal channel, such as upward or downward communication, employees can ask a

same-level colleague to answer a question. Employees also use horizontal communication to build confidence in their work (Valente, 1995). Katz and Tushman (1979) found that employees in a technical setting prefer using horizontal communication in face-to-face channels over downward and/or mediated communication to receive job-related information.

Employees may discuss job related topics but also gossip about others in the organization, sharing topics unrelated to task performance. Perhaps an employee tells another employee of their same level how a third person wears ugly clothing. This conversation is hardly relevant to supporting the organization, yet still occurs. Although horizontal channels are less available in the formal settings (Holland et al., 1976), informal communication is better able to transmit gossip (Elmer, 1994).

### Sex Differences

Wood & Dindia (1998) indicate that differences between men and women do exist, although these differences are relatively small. Often, the results of these sex differences are an outcome of socialized gender differences, with individuals being socialized by society in large part according to their sex (Wood & Dindia, 1998). Overall, men and women differ in how they send and/or receive nonverbal messages (Hall, 1978, 1998; Mongeau, Carey, & Williams, 1998; Burgoon, 1991), interact with each other (Aries, 1996; Robey, Canary, & Burggraf, 1998); use language (Mulac, 1998; Bonvillain, 2003; Johnson, 2000); and perform many other communication functions (Canary & Dindia, 1998). In addition to sex differences in interpersonal contexts, women and men also communicate differently in the organization.

Women and men are perceived differently in the organization, and women who work are perceived differently than women who do not (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). In general, females are more likely to be perceived as communal (selfless and concerned with others), whereas males are more likely to be perceived as agentic (concerned with self and control of others) (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Interestingly, Eagly and Steffen (1984) argue that employed women are more likely to be perceived as agentic than female homemakers. In fact, employed women in this 1984 study were perceived to be even more agentic than employed men. The researchers explain this interaction as an outcome of working women exerting their freedom of choice. Nearly 20 years later, the workplace has changed to include more women.

Whereas more women work, not all women place their careers first. Perhaps with the current generation of women workers, it is female executives who are perceived as being more agentic than the male executives because female employees are quite common. Dierkman and Eagly (2000) argue that the stereotypes of both sexes are changing, with the female stereotype especially dynamic because of the drastic changes in female social roles and the increasing similarity in the roles males and females play. Carli and Eagly (1999) found that females were less likely to emerge as leaders overall, while Karau and Eagly (1999) found that females with masculine personality traits were more likely to emerge as leaders than females with feminine personality traits. Van Vianen & Fischer (2002) also found that a preference for masculine organizational culture is associated with getting ahead in the organization, leaving more women behind than men.

Although women are able to emerge as leaders in the organization, very few actually do (Bertrand & Hallock, 2001). Even when women do emerge as leaders in an organization, they are usually confined to middle management. Bertrand and Hallock (2001) studied gender participation in all firms in the S&P 500, S&P Midcap 400, and S&P SmallCap 600 between 1992 and 1997. When examining the top five executives for each of these companies, only 2.4% of their sample were women. Not only did they find a lack of women in these top positions, but the women they did find were mostly executives in smaller companies, specializing in health, social services, and trade.

Many of the sex role differences in the organization stem from sexual scripts (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). The traditional sexual script occurs when the males play the role of the initiator and females play the role of regulator of communication interaction. This traditional sex role stems from childhood and individuals' extraorganizational lives. Sex role spillover (Gutek & Morash, 1982) is the general tendency for sex role expectations established outside of the workplace to carry over into the workplace and thus influence communication at work. For example, an individual may have grown accustomed outside the organization to communicating with men in a particular way. Perhaps these patterns are established based on how the individual communicated with his or her parents, spouse, and friends. Similarly, the individual has a pattern for communication with extraorganizational women. How this individual communicates with men and women within the organization may be similar to how he or she communicates with men and women outside of the organization, his or her communication thus spilling over into the workplace setting (Jablin & Sias, 2001). Although potentially inappropriate (such as, communicating with one's coworker as one

communicates with one's spouse), sex roles established outside of the organization do indeed influence communication within the organization and expectations about how men and women communicate at work. With such noticeable differences between how individuals communicate with male and female employees, factors such as message direction and sex of the gossip senders and receivers may influence how workplace gossip messages are interpreted.

### Message Interpretation

Individuals process the world through a series of symbols that make up their reality. Words themselves are symbols. Messages are made up of word symbols and individuals interpret symbols differently, based on their perspective. Symbolic interactionists believe that human beings interpret the actions of others and respond to such interpretations based on perceptions, instead of simply reacting to the actions of others (Blumer, 1978). Relying on previous encounters, role expectations, or other personal experiences, individuals engage in symbolic processing of messages for interpreting meaning. Instead of reacting to what another person has actually intended, individuals interpret their perceptions of likely or possible responses based on their interpretations of other information that creates the individual's social reality. These interpretations may be based on interpretations of previous messages or their expectation for the present message. In either case, the interpretation of the other substitutes for the actual intention or communication with the other, unless individuals are able to clarify their interpretations with the message sender.

Edwards (1998) found that the interpretation of messages is multidimensional, influenced by expectations, values, and role characteristics of the recipients. She also

found that interpretation of messages is neither characteristic nor consistent across individuals. In other words, individuals will not necessarily interpret messages the same each time they are exposed to the same content. Edwards (1998) states that all messages have some degree of ambiguity. That is, even messages that are not intended to be vague or polysemic can still be interpreted in varying ways by different individuals.

Hewes, Graham, Doelger, and Pavitt (1985) contend that some message senders intentionally mislead the message sender. Additionally, they claim that messages themselves are inherently ambiguous. Individuals often lack complete information about the social context or external information to determine how these ambiguous or misleading messages should be interpreted. Hewes and Planalp (1982) argue that individuals just make their best guess at the most likely interpretation instead of devoting much energy into determining with absolute certainty that their interpretation is the one accurate truth.

Hewes et al. (1985) studied the process individuals go through when “second-guessing” information from others. They claim that when individuals obtain information indirectly from others the receivers are aware that the message may be distorted. They found that people find second hand information useful, although not as useful as hearing information directly. They found that most individuals (71%) second-guess information from a source not directly involved in the situation the source reports, although their non-college student sample was less likely to second-guess others than the sample of students. Additionally, Hewes et al. (1985) found that receivers reconstruct messages that they suspect may be biased.

Receivers themselves may also be biased. Edwards (1998) found that psychological gender roles, particularly the feminine or communion role is a better predictor of how individuals interpret messages than biological sex. Both the gender of the source and receiver, as well as their respective gender roles, influence the interpretation of messages. Interestingly, Edwards (1998) found that individuals have a same-gender bias when interpreting messages from individuals of their same sex when interpreting ambiguous spousal communication. That is, females are more likely to perceive wife-source messages as supportive, and husband-source messages as controlling. Conversely, males are more likely to perceive husband-source messages as more supportive and less controlling than the wife-source messages.

In the organization similar biases may exist. Although psychological gender is more difficult to estimate in other individuals, biological sex is a salient characteristic in determining diversity (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Individuals may interpret organizational gossip differently for same-sex message sources than for opposite-sex message sources. Several studies have concluded that heterogeneity is associated with decreased communication, message distortion, and more errors in communication (Barnlund & Harluand, 1963; Triandis, 1960; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

Similar to Edwards's previous work (1998), Futch and Edwards (1999) also found a same-sex bias in their research on the effects of gender, defensiveness, and sense of humor on message interpretation. Both males and females interpreted messages from same sex members more positively than messages from the opposite sex. First they determined that sense of humor was associated with interpreting messages humorously, regardless of sex. Contrary to their predictions, defensiveness was not associated with

defensive interpretations about ambiguous messages about one's self. Topics of messages made a difference for males and females. Males were more defensive and less humorous than females when ambiguous comments were made about their mental and physical errors. Futch and Edwards (1999) explain these results by noting that "much of men's social identities relies upon their fulfillment of the traditional masculine roles"(p. 94). These masculine roles may be most pronounced in the workplace, thus making comments regarding their mental errors at work more sensitive than other topics. Further, Futch and Edwards (1999) note previous research indicating the perceptions of jokes as more humorous when women are the targets, as compared to men. Females, on the other hand, were more defensive than males regarding ambiguous comments pertaining to their weight. Overall, individuals were more likely to interpret messages from same-sexed others more positively.

Sex and gender are related to individuals' interpretation of messages. Edwards (2000) found that males and females interpret messages as more or less affiliative or dominating, often depending on the situation. Overall, females are more likely to interpret messages as affiliative. However, in a situation where someone's work is criticized, males were more likely to interpret the criticism as affiliative than females. Males were more likely to interpret messages as dominant, with the exception of a situation when a driver stops short and puts a hand in front of the passenger. In this driving scenario, females were more likely to interpret the message as relational dominance than males.

In addition to determining biological sex of the participants, Edwards (2000) measured the gender-role of each participant. Individuals with high levels of communion

are less likely to interpret messages as conveying dominance. In a situation where a classmate advises a student to see the professor for help with exams, individuals with high levels of agency are more likely to interpret the situation as affiliative, although no relation was found between agency and perceptions of affiliation in other scenarios. This study found that interpretation of relational messages may depend on the situation. Overall, males and females differ in their perceptions of affiliation and dominance and gender roles influenced the perceptions in some situation.

In the organizational context, Edwards (1998) found gender differences for the interpretation of a bragging coworker. She found that males are more likely to perceive a bragging coworker as being supportive than females, regardless of the males' support of communal or feminine values. These communal or feminine values include emphasis on family, love, and friendship (Rokeach, 1973). Females, however, with a communal, or feminine, gender are more likely to perceive a bragging coworker as supportive than are females who do not have a communal gender.

Edwards (1998) also found an interaction effect in the interpretation of bragging coworkers as controlling. Bragging by a male coworker is perceived as more controlling than bragging by a female coworker. When a female coworker brags, agentic (or masculine) orientation individuals perceive the behavior as less controlling. Agentic or masculine values include emphasis on work, success, and competition (Bem, 1974). However, when the bragger is male, individuals with agentic orientations are more likely to interpret the behavior as controlling. Potentially, these bragging coworkers may have been perceived as trying to make themselves look good.

These differences in psychological gender are highly correlated with biological sex because these roles are expected and rewarded from others (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Eagly, 1987). In the organization, individuals would seem likely to rely less on their psychological gender when making assessments about others because individuals in the organization are categorized by their most salient features, in this case the most salient feature being biological sex (Williams & O'Reilly 1998).

Edwards and Bello (2001) found that individuals interpret equivocal messages that protect the face of another as more polite and less honest than unequivocal critical messages. These effects are even stronger for women, with women identifying the equivocal messages as more polite and unequivocal messages as less polite than men. Unequivocal messages are interpreted as more competent when the situation is obvious to the message receiver, such as a knowingly poor performance on a speech. However, when the situation is ambiguous, unequivocal messages are not interpreted as more competent, although they were interpreted as more polite and less honest.

Another factor influencing message interpretation is personality. Edwards, Bello, Brandau-Brown, and Hollems (2001) studied the effects of loneliness and verbal aggressiveness on message interpretation. They predicted that lonely or verbally aggressive individuals would be more likely to interpret ambiguous messages negatively, and that when lonely or verbally aggressive individuals interpret messages negatively, greater difficulty with communication results. Participants completed questionnaires measuring loneliness and verbal aggressiveness and indicated their reactions to two ambiguous communication situations. The findings supported their hypotheses. Edwards

et al. (2001) concluded that lonely and verbally aggressive individuals are more likely to interpret ambiguous messages negatively.

Research on message interpretation has examined the influence of sex and gender on interpreting ambiguous messages. Although some research has been conducted on message interpretation of mistakes at work, research has not tested perceptions of organizational politics contained within messages. The next section of this literature review will examine the role of organizational politics. Both sex and message direction may influence the interpretation of gossip as political.

### Politicalism

Researchers of organizational politics have identified factors and types of politics. To this point, the research on politicalism analyzes the organization or group level. It has not yet examined how individuals are perceived as political. This section will identify the research on politicalism, including political tactics and differences in perceptions of politicalism based on organizational level and sex.

Previous research (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Kacmar & Carlson, 1998) has highlighted several political tactics including exemplification (e.g., offering oneself as an example of appropriate or acceptable behavior), supplication (e.g., acting helpless in an effort to have others support you), entitlements (e.g., claiming responsibility for positive outcomes whether or not you were responsible for them), enhancements (e.g., exaggerating one's accomplishments), apologizing, offering excuses, justifying one's behavior, using disclaimers (e.g., statements made to prevent negative reactions from others), favoritism (e.g., promoting a friend), nepotism (e.g., hiring your nephew), gender discrimination (e.g., not promoting or hiring females), use of power-upward (e.g., taking

the case to a higher authority), use of power-downward (e.g., supervisor forcing a subordinate to wash her or his car), and self-serving (e.g., ingratiation, backstabbing, sabotage, spreading false or negative gossip).

Several of the political tactics identified in previous research (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Kacmar & Carlson, 1998) may be enacted through spreading organizational gossip. One example may be the political act of exemplification where one may spread gossip about others to make him/herself look better in the eyes of the gossip receivers, perhaps putting themselves forth as an example of appropriate conduct. Another example of political behavior enacted through gossip is spreading unflattering news about others, perhaps stabbing them in the back or sabotaging someone's career or reputation.

Organizational politics are perceived differently depending on the organization level. Two studies found organizational politics are perceived to be greater in upper levels of the organization (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980). Put simply, employees perceive more political activity to occur at upper organization levels than at lower organization levels. Gandz and Murray (1980) found that organizational politics were perceived to be more intense at higher levels of the organization. However, senior level managers perceived less political activity at higher levels than lower levels of the same organization. Consistent with findings by Gandz and Murray (1980), Madison et al. (1980) found that individuals holding lower positions in the organization perceived more politics occurring at higher organizational levels.

Whereas Gandz and Murray (1980) and Madison et al. (1980) explored differences in perception of politics based on organizational rank, other research has examined the role of sex in politicalism. Politicalism can be either the presence of

organizational politics within an organization or workgroup or a dimension of individual behavior. Kirchmeyer (1990) found that males with an internal locus of control (belief in self responsibility for outcomes rather than fate or outside forces; Rotter, 1975) are more likely to be political, but found no significant relationship between females and locus of control. Biberman (1985) found no relationship between politicalism and locus of control, but did not control for sex. Kirchmeyer (1990) also found a relationship between politicalism and women's need for power, but did not find a similar relationship between need for power and politicalism in men. One study found female executives are less likely to employ impression management techniques than men, rather relying on their achievements and competencies to get ahead (Singh, Kumra, & Vinnicombe, 2002). Whereas men are more likely to use political tactics, women are more likely to notice them.

Fedor et al. (1998) reports that women are more likely than men to perceive organizational politics because they are more likely to be members of organizational outgroups. Even when women do reach higher levels in the organization, they are still more likely to identify with other women as their ingroup members, as opposed to the men at their same organizational level (Lorenzo-Cioldi, Eagly, & Stewart, 1995).

To overview, the research on politicalism has identified organizational politics and behaviors identified as engaging in organizational politics. This dissertation extends the idea of politicalism from a group level variable to an individual characteristic. Women and other outgroup members are more likely to perceive the organization as political. When individuals interpret gossip, these messages may potentially be interpreted as political and/ or believable.

## Believability

Believability has been studied in terms of rumors and deception detection. Anthony and Gibbins (1995) studied the believability of rumors among deaf college students. They found that the more believable a rumor was, the more likely it was to be transmitted to others. However, Anthony and Gibbins's results revealed that perceptions of rumor importance were more important than believability in predicting rumor transmission. Deaf college students were more likely to transmit what they felt were important rumors, even if they did not believe the rumors to be true.

Although most people are relatively poor detectors of deception (Kraut, 1980), people are more likely to detect deception under certain conditions. Specifically, when the message interpreter is expecting a lie, or looking for deception, he or she is more likely to be able to identify when the speaker is lying (Levine, et al., 2000). In most instances, however, individuals expect others to tell the truth (Levine, et al., 2000). Research by Rosenthal and DePaulo (1979) claim that women's social style may make them less likely to look for deception in others, thus making them more likely to believe what others tell them. However, other research has found that women are better detectors of deception (Burgoon, Buller, Grandpre, & Kalbfleisch, 1998; Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981) because they are more sensitive to nonverbal fluctuations than are men (Burgoon, et al., 1998).

## Summary

In summary, this review of literature highlighted the research on each of the variables included in this dissertation. Specifically, research on message direction, sex differences and sex roles in the organization, gossip, message interpretation, politicalism,

and believability were discussed. Research on sex roles indicates that men and women are socialized to behave differently, most often consistent with their psychological gender. Women are expected to communicate differently than men, and are generally limited or omitted from the upper echelons of large organizations. Gossip is communication about another person that is interesting and potentially beneficial, yet unnecessary to perform the task at hand. Individuals may interpret the meaning of gossip or other messages based on the symbols they have created from interactions with others to construct their worldview. Men and women interpret messages differently, and interpret others of their same sex more favorably in some contexts. Politicalism is the degree of organizational politics conducted by an organization, group, or individual. Believability is the perception of truth and the absence of lies. The next section will discuss the relationships among these variables and propose hypotheses.

### Rationale and Hypotheses

The previous sections addressed the literature underlying the study of gossip, message direction (i.e., downward, upward, and horizontal communication), sex differences, message interpretation, politicalism, and believability. This section will lay forth the relationships among these concepts. Throughout the discussion on how message direction, sex, politicalism, and believability are related to the interpretation of gossip, seven hypotheses will be presented.

When gossip can benefit individuals, others may be suspicious of the gossip source's motive. The gossip receivers may look to the gossip's connotative meaning for latent political content. Even without identifying a gossip source's actual motive, the perception of being able to identify a potential motive creates a view of how the gossiper

is operating in the mind of the receiver. These message symbols may be interpreted with the gossip sender's actual motives in mind or they may be interpreted to reveal a false motive for the gossip source. In either case, the mere perception of the gossip symbol used to interpret motive can influence how others perceive the gossip source (Mead, 1934). By applying a predicted outcome matrix to test goodness of outcome (Thiabaut & Kelley, 1959), message interpreters may view those having the most to gain as most willing to take a risk by spreading false gossip, whereas those with little to gain would be less likely to risk their reputations without such benefit. If this is the case, individuals with motives to gossip may also have personal agendas. Consequently, individuals who are perceived as having motive to lie are also likely to be perceived as political, looking out for their own interests in the organization.

Message interpretation focuses on the meanings of messages within specific communication contexts (Edwards, 1998). These message interpretations may focus on the denotative and/ or connotative meaning of the message, as well as the intent of the message sender. This investigation is most interested in how specific messages and message contexts may change how individuals interpret the intent of the message sender.

The specific message type central to this investigation is gossip. Gossip is a unique type of message because the senders risk how others perceive them when they gossip. Thus, when individuals hear gossip, they are not only making assessments about the subject of the gossip, but also making assessments about the gossiper. In order for gossip receivers to make judgments about the gossipers, they need to gather information about the situation. Individuals make use of symbols created from their interactions with others to analyze and interpret meaning in the world. In the organization, these symbols

would be a reflection of a person's communication with other organizational members. It may take employees several years to identify symbols of politicalism and believability in workplace gossip.

When spreading gossip, the intent of the source may be positive or negative for the organization. For example, spreading gossip about someone's unprofessional conduct may help others to avoid similar mistakes. The intent of the person spreading the gossip may be to help others fit into the organization or it may be to help him or herself gain power in the organization by tarnishing the reputation of others. When individuals interpret gossip messages to have latent meaning indicating that the gossip source is trying to gain status in the organization through nonsanctioned methods, the individual would be interpreting the gossip as political. Previous research has identified that some individuals are more likely to perceive organizations as political. Perhaps the same types of individuals perceive individual gossip messages as political. Some sources of gossip will likely be perceived differently than others.

One difference relevant to this study is message direction. Downward gossip occurs when superiors share gossip with subordinates, upward gossip occurs when subordinates share gossip with superiors, and horizontal gossip occurs when employees share gossip with others of the same organizational level. Because a lower status person may seek to gain favor with a higher status individual by sharing gossip, so as to appear "in the know" or well networked, the message may be interpreted as less believable as the gossip source would have motive to send a gossip message that is either true or false. On the other hand, a higher status person has less to gain by impressing or networking with a subordinate or someone with less organizational power, thus making the risks more

costly because the rewards are not as great. In this case, the message would seem to be more believable because the motives to lie are not as prevalent. When gossipers are perceived as believable, this perception may or may not be related to the perception of the gossiper as political.

Previous research is inconsistent regarding the perception of greater organizational politics at higher levels of the organization. Some research has shown that people perceive organizational politics to be more intense in higher levels of the organization (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Madison et al., 1980). Additionally, other studies indicate no differences for organizational level (Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995). Further, messages from higher status individuals would seem more believable, because of the high risks involved with little to gain from employees of a lower status. However, research on upward communication reveals that employees are often reluctant to use upward channels for fear of organizational consequences such as appearing incompetent (Dansereau & Markham, 1987; Rowe & Baker, 1984) or getting in trouble for sharing bad news (Waterman, 1987). Many employees feel upward communication is useless, particularly when they feel the issue is trivial (Rowe & Baker, 1984).

Although gossip is defined as trivial talk (Rosnow, 2001), some individuals may gain political power from sharing gossip, thus making gossip's trivial nature questionable. This dissertation argues that the act of gossip itself is not trivial, although the topics of gossip may be trivial in nature. Although the gossip topics may not always seem trivial to those involved, this dissertation argues that organizational gossip is not essential to the functioning of the organization. That is, although the content of the gossip may certainly be relevant to organizational politics and day-to-day interactions,

the organization would still be able to meet its goals (e.g., staying in business) without gossip.

Although gossip may be considered trivial, it continues to occur in the organization. Employees talk with their bosses, coworkers, and/or subordinates about other employees. The gossip receivers must decode the gossip messages they receive from others. The gossip content alone is not enough to interpret the gossip's validity. Gossip receivers need to consider contextual information when deciding whether or not they can believe the gossip. Some individuals in the organization have more to gain than others, and will be able to endure higher gossip costs with greater rewards. Individuals with the most to gain and the least to lose will be most inclined to spread false gossip (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). If someone can impress others by spreading false gossip about other employees with little risk resulting in getting caught, incentive for the gossip to lie increases. Supervisors have little to risk when gossiping downward with their subordinates, because their jobs are not at risk if the gossip turns out to be false. Subordinates spreading false upward gossip risk being called liars, but the payoffs of the gossip may be great. Employees gossiping horizontally with other employees of the same level have little to lose, yet little to gain, and therefore less incentive to lie. It seems likely that individuals will consider message direction when interpreting the believability of the gossip. Therefore,

H1: Horizontal gossip is more believable than upward or downward gossip.

Further, the gossip messages themselves, whether believable or not, will vary in interpretation of their meaning, depending on the status of the person. Previous research indicates that individuals higher in the organization are perceived as more political than

lower organizational members (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). However, no research to date has tested differences in interpretations of actual messages, only perceptions of politicalism as an organizational group trait. This dissertation argues that when gossip comes from a higher status person within the organization, the gossip message will be interpreted as more political.

Although the gossip from a higher status person is predicted to be more believable, the believable nature does not exclude the possibility of perception of personal gain. Applying the predicted outcome matrix (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Emerson, 1987), the higher status person is less likely to lie about someone while spreading gossip, a higher status person can choose gossip content strategically, thus emphasizing political gain. This political gain may also be of benefit to the gossip receiver, such as using gossip to build intimacy or explain organizational norms. Even when the message is believable, members higher in the organization are perceived to engage in more political behaviors. The conclusion seems likely that those perceived as engaging in political behaviors will also be perceived as verbally communicating in a political manner. Consistent with this line of thinking, those with lower organizational status would be less likely to be perceived as communicating in a political manner. With the topics of gossip being difficult to verify, it seems likely that the gossip messages themselves will be interpreted differently, when a higher status person is the source.

Supervisors have greater power than subordinates in the organization. Thus, supervisors will be able to receive more than they give in the power dynamic (Emerson, 1987). Spreading false gossip would seem to do little to help a supervisor because the channels of downward communication are more within the supervisor's control. If a

supervisor wanted to gossip with a subordinate, he or she controls the context, and would have opportunity to select truthful gossip to share.

Because horizontal communication is not sanctioned by the organization (Fayol, 1937; Harris, 2002), it may be possible to engage in organizational politics with fewer risks. However, horizontal gossipers also have little to gain. Individuals may be able to distort information from other organizational levels, and selectively choose how this information should be shared with others, if at all. Gandz and Murray (1980) and Madison et al. (1980) both found a greater perception of politicalism at higher levels of the organization. It seems likely messages traveling downward would contain the upper level value of politicalism. Therefore, it seems likely that gossip from a higher status person directed towards a lower status person (i.e., downward communication) is interpreted as more political than gossip from a lower status person directed towards a higher status person (i.e., upward communication) or between people of the same status (horizontal communication). Therefore,

H2: Downward gossip is interpreted as more political than upward or horizontal gossip.

When individuals have greater gains to be made from gossip, others may be able to interpret the gossip source's motive. Even without identifying a gossip source's actual motive, the perception of being able to identify a potential motive creates a view of how the gossip is operating in the mind of the receiver. These message symbols may be interpreted with the gossip sender's actual motives in mind or they may be interpreted to reveal a false motive for the gossip source. In either case, the mere perception of the gossip symbol used to interpret motive can influence how others perceive the gossip

source (Mead, 1934). Message interpreters may view those having the most to gain as most willing to take a risk by spreading false gossip, whereas those with little to gain would be less likely to risk their reputations without such benefit (Molm, 1987). If this is the case, individuals with motives to gossip may also have personal agendas. Consequently, individuals who are perceived as having motive to lie are also likely to be perceived as political, looking out for their own interests in the organization.

Similar to Edwards's (1998; 2000) findings on varying interpretation of messages based on biological sex of the message source, individuals may perceive male and female gossipers differently, thus influencing how they interpret messages. Edwards (1998) found that women are more likely to interpret messages as supportive, depending on the situation. In the organization, women are generally members of the organizational outgroup, although this depends on the individual organizational structure. Women make up close to 50 percent of the professional and managerial positions and yet less than five percent of the top management positions are held by women (Reinhold, 2002; Reutter, 2000). In Fortune 500 companies, the percentage of female executives is even lower at just 2.4 percent (Morin, 1998). When women are omitted from the upper echelons in large organizations, women are more likely to perceive the organization as political (Fedor et al., 1998). Because women see very few members of their own in-group (i.e., other women) making it to the top of the organization, it is difficult for them to understand the organizational politics (Fedor et al., 1998). Research shows women are more likely to be members of organizational outgroups than men (Lorenzo-Cioldi, et al., 1995). When organizational members are not part of the ingroups, they are less likely to understand the necessity of organizational politics, thus having greater perceptions of

workplace politicalism (Fedor et al., 1998). If women perceive organizations as a whole to be more political, the conclusion that they interpret gossip messages as more political seems logical. Therefore,

H3: Women are more likely than their male counterparts to perceive office gossip as political.

Nevo et al. (1994) and Ben-Ze-ev (1994) have suggested if the topic of gossip is sports-related, men may be more likely to engage in gossip as a form of entertainment. However, in most professional contexts, sports are not relevant to the business environment. Although talking about the personal affairs of others is not necessarily organizational business, the likelihood of topics such as personal relationships and physical appearance is more relevant in some organization contexts, as an outcome of expectations of professionalism. Women are socialized to emphasize relationship building and making connections in their lives, whereas men are taught to emphasize success and workplace outcomes. Because of the differences in how men and women are socialized throughout their lives (Wood & Dindia, 1998), and because these sex roles spill over into organizational communication (Gutek & Morash, 1982), it seems likely that men and women may use gossip for different functions.

Because of these identifiable differences in how men and women communicate, it seems likely that individuals may interpret messages from men and women as performing unique functions. Males are more likely to be seen as dominant (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996; Eagly, 1987), perhaps trying to control information or influence others. Whether or not the males are actually using gossip to inform or influence, it seems likely that individuals may view male source messages as containing these dominant themes when

trying to interpret the gossip. Put simply, male employees may use gossip for functions other than entertainment and intimacy building. Therefore,

H4a: Male source gossip is more likely to be interpreted as performing the news-bearing and influencing others functions more than when the same gossip message has a female source.

H4b: Female source gossip is more likely to be perceived as building intimacy and to entertain than the same gossip when the source is male.

Whereas gossip studies have thus far failed to identify sex differences in likelihood to gossip about general topics, research has identified that women are more likely to be viewed as gossip mongers (Schein, 1994; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, Nevo et al., 1994). In light of this stereotype of women as gossipers, individuals may view women in the organization as gossiping for the function of entertainment. Although entertainer status may help individuals to gain organizational popularity, it seems unlikely that it can help them to attain personal organizational goals, potentially contradictory to organizational goals. Because these entertainment goals are not likely to be political, it seems less likely that women speakers will be seen as engaging in office politics. Conversely, when upper management is seen as more political, and men are more frequently in those upper management positions, it seems likely that males may use gossip to perform other functions, such as males not wanting to conform to cross-gender stereotypes, use gossip functions such as news-bearing, influencing others (e.g. advice-giving), or some other function. Therefore,

H5a: Gossip is interpreted as more political when the source is male than when the source is female.

Because women who break the glass ceilings entering the echelons of upper management may be viewed as exceptions to the rule, perceptions about gossip from female executives may be perceived differently than males in the same positions. Traditional sex roles would indicate that women are less competitive and more concerned with building relationships than with getting ahead. However, women who achieve organizational success are more likely to be perceived as competitive, goal-oriented, and self-sufficient than women at lower levels in the organization (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Karau & Eagly, 1999).

Because females are not expected to be as competitive and driven as their male counterparts, those women who exhibit these qualities and thus get ahead in the organization may be seen as more political. Although gossip is traditionally thought of as a female activity, female supervisors may potentially be viewed as more agentic communicators. Agentic qualities in females may be more noticeable because they are less common and not expected. Previous research indicates that males are more likely to be perceived as political in an organization (Fedor et al., 1998). Females at higher organization levels may be more likely to be perceived similarly to men when they achieve organizational success. Further, because fewer females exhibit these qualities, the agentic females may stand out more, and thus be perceived as being even more political than their male counterparts. When female supervisors share gossip, it seems likely that their intent will be seen as political. These females who attained leadership positions are more likely to be masculine (Karau & Eagly, 1999). Gossip sex and rank will interact such that rank will be more strongly associated with gossip being seen as political for women than for men. Refer to figure 1 for a visual representation of the

interaction. For men, there will be a weaker relationship between rank and gossip being seen as political. Therefore,

H5b: Gossip from female executives is more likely to be interpreted as political than gossip from males holding high or low positions in the organization.

Perception of Gossip  
as Political

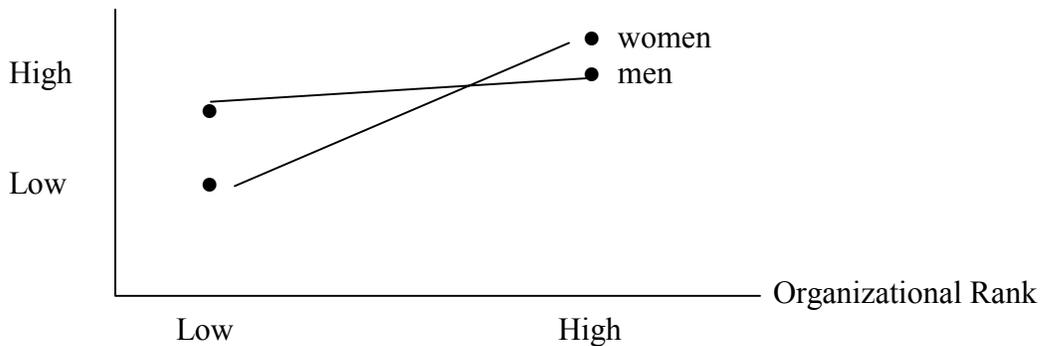


Figure. Interaction between sex and rank of gossip on politicalism in hypothesis 5b.

Edwards (1998) found a same-gender bias in the interpretation of messages. In other words, females had a more positive interpretation of messages from wives in a husband-wife scenario and males had a more positive interpretation of husband-source messages. In the same way, it seems possible that a similar type of bias may exist in the interpretation of workplace gossip. Therefore,

H6: There is a same-sex bias in interpreting gossip as (a) less political, and (b) more believable.

Previous research suggests that organizational members with more power in the organization have less incentive to lie (Kurland & Peled, 2000). Further, research in organizational politics (Fedor et al., 1988) suggests that organizational politics are more likely to be perceived at higher levels of the organization. Put together, these two lines of research would suggest a positive relationship between politicalism and believability at

high levels of the organization. However, the very nature of politicalism can include engaging in behaviors not sanctioned by the organization to get ahead. One possible way for individuals to get ahead in the organization without hard work may be to lie. If individuals perceive others as political it also seems likely that they would be less believable. The organization or specific levels of the organization may be perceived as political and people in higher levels would seem more likely to have more credible gossip sources, gain less from gossip, and therefore have less incentive to lie. However, when politicalism and believability are analyzed at the individual level, it seems likely that those individuals perceived as willing to do anything to get ahead, including not playing by the organizational rules, would also seem more inclined to deceive in their desperate attempts to climb the organizational ladder. Therefore,

H7: There is an inverse relationship between perceptions of gossip believability and perceptions of gossip source politicalism.

This chapter provided a review of the literature on gossip, message interpretation, and politicalism. Seven hypotheses were presented. Table 1 on the next page provides a summary list of all hypotheses. The next chapter will discuss the methods that were used to test the hypotheses set forth in this chapter.

### Table 1: Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Horizontal gossip is more believable than upward or downward gossip.

Hypothesis 2: Downward gossip is interpreted as more political than upward or horizontal gossip.

Hypothesis 3: Women are more likely than their male counterparts to perceive office gossip as political.

Hypothesis 4a: Male source gossip is more likely to be interpreted as performing the news-bearing and influencing others functions more than when the same gossip message has a female source.

Hypothesis 4b: Female source gossip is more likely to be perceived as building intimacy and to entertain than the same gossip when the source is male.

Hypothesis 5a: Gossip is interpreted as more political when the source is male than when the source is female.

Hypothesis 5b: Gossip from female executives is more likely to be interpreted as political than gossip from males holding high or low positions in the organization.

Hypothesis 6: There is a same-sex bias in interpreting gossip as (a) less political, and (b) more believable.

Hypothesis 7: There is an inverse relationship between perceptions of gossip believability and perceptions of gossip source politicalism.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The previous chapter set forth seven hypotheses. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methods and procedures that were used to collect and analyze the data.

Discussion will focus on participants, survey instruments, and statistical procedures that were used to test each of the hypotheses in this dissertation.

### Participants

A power analysis revealed 252 participants were needed for this study to obtain a medium effect size with an alpha of .05 and a power level of .89. These participants were randomly selected from a Fortune 500 pharmaceutical company with over 6000 employees worldwide, and over 2000 employees located at the company headquarters. The organization identified 693 potential participants based on access to a computer from work and their location at corporate headquarters or in the company's outside sales division.

A total of 274 full time employees participated in the study. One hundred ninety-eight participants were from the Fortune 500 pharmaceutical company and seventy-six participants were friends or family members of the pharmaceutical company employees. One hundred and ten participants (40.1%) selected sales as their job title, 67 (24.5%) selected middle management, 29 (10.4%) selected administrative/ support, 21 (7.7%) selected upper management/ executive, 18 (6.6%) selected technical/ professional, 2 (0.7%) selected operation/ production and 24 (8.7%) selected other, and 3 (1.1%) people did not specify their title. Eighty-eight participants in the study were supervisors (32.1%), ranging in how many employees they supervised from 1 – 100. The questionnaire did not allow participants to enter numbers over 100, although in retrospect

should have been changed to allow for unlimited number of employees supervised, as some participants supervise more than 100 employees (e.g., C.E.O.). With this range restriction limitation in mind, the mean number of employees the supervisors directed was 13.5,  $SD = 23.46$ . Participants ranged in age from 23 to 69 years,  $M = 40.21$  years,  $SD = 9.33$  years, with organizational tenure ranging from 0 to 34 years,  $M = 8.36$  years,  $SD = 7.41$  years. Females made up 54.7 % ( $n = 150$ ), males made up 43.8% ( $n = 120$ ), and 1.5% ( $n = 4$ ) did not indicate their sex.

### General Procedure

The data collected for this dissertation were obtained via a web survey. A table of random numbers was used to select the hyperlink to be sent to each participant, each hyperlink containing a different vignette stimulus. A member of the organization emailed potential participants a clickable hyperlink to a web address containing one of the twelve versions of the survey, and told them to “feel free to forward the hyperlink to friends and family that are full time employees.” Of the initial 693 emails sent, a response rate of 29.4% plus the additional responses from the emails forwarded to friends and family, for which the response rate for forwarded emails is unknown. After clicking their preassigned hyperlink, participants were first directed to the informed consent form (See Appendix A), where they clicked on a web button to indicate their consent. This button directed the participants to one of twelve versions of the survey based on the predetermined hyperlink sent to them (See Appendix B). After one week, a contact at the organization sent a voice mail to all possible participants thanking them for their participation and reminding them to participate in the survey if they had not already done

so. The organizational contact provided contact information to obtain a duplicate clickable hyperlink in case of deletion.

The questionnaire was available for approximately two weeks on the Louisiana State University College of Business Server. The questionnaire was broken up into sections assessing demographic information, a vignette of a gossip situation and message, items pertaining to the vignette, four items related to a manipulation check. Participants reported that the questionnaire took between two and twenty minutes to complete ( $M = 7.88$  minutes,  $SD = 3.32$ ).

The first vignette, containing a gossip message from a female supervisor about an unprofessional employee, had 35 respondents. The second vignette, containing a gossip message from a female supervisor about an employees employment history, had 18 respondents. The third and fourth vignettes on the same topics respectively, were from a male supervisor, and had 23 and 15 respondents, respectively. The fifth and sixth vignettes on the same two topics were from a same-level female coworker and had 22 and 24 respondents, respectively. The seventh and eighth vignettes, from a same-level male coworker, each had 21 respondents. The ninth and tenth vignettes, from a female subordinate, had 22 and 16 respondents, respectively. The last two vignettes were gossip messages from a male subordinate, and each contained 21 respondents.

Collecting data via the web has several advantages to paper and pencil surveys (Stanton, 1998). In addition to the ease of data collection and possible recruitment for survey participation via email, Stanton found a statistical advantage as well. He compared web based data collection to paper and pencil surveys in a controlled empirical investigation. Stanton (1998) found support for his hypothesis that web based surveys

are less likely to have missing data, and therefore “of higher quality” (Stanton, 1998, p. 716). No differences were identified for item variability or factor structure between web based surveys and paper and pencil surveys. He identified potential problems using the web, including lack of researcher control over participants and how long participants spent completing the survey. A web based survey was the best option in the current investigation because it allowed for an organizational sample to be reached with minimal costs and logistical difficulties in collecting information from a geographically diverse sample.

### Predictor Variables

The predictor variables are (a) gossip direction, (b) sex of the gossip receiver, and (c) sex of the gossip source. Gossip direction has three levels: downward, upward, and horizontal and was manipulated by presenting three versions of the message direction in the scenarios. In the downward gossip scenario the participant was instructed to “imagine your boss’s supervisor (an executive in the company)...” In the upward gossip scenario the participant is instructed to “imagine you are a supervisor and [name of gossip source], the person you supervise...” In the horizontal gossip scenario the participant was instructed to “Imagine your coworker...”

The sex of the gossip receiver was operationalized by the participants’ response to an item requiring them to mark a box marked “Male” or “Female” on the questionnaire. Sex of the gossip source was operationalized through a series of twelve vignettes. The vignettes include two different gossip messages, with the source of the gossip manipulated as to sex of the source (male, female) as well as direction (upward, downward, horizontal) of the gossip. For example, one vignette for the female source

downward communication says “Imagine Susan Hill, your boss’s supervisor (an executive in the company), spots you in the hallway as you are walking from another department. She comes over to you to say ‘hi’ as she ordinarily does. After Susan says hello and asks how things are going she leans in closer to you and says something about another employee. She says, ‘You know the conference we just got back from? Well, [the other employee] wasn’t exactly engaging in professional behavior if you know what I mean.’ After making the comment, Susan Hill is called away by someone else across the hall.” Participants were able to identify the sex of the gossip source through either the inclusion of a common female name and/or the pronoun “she” used to refer to the gossip source throughout the vignette. The direction of the gossip was identified by including the titles or organizational levels of the gossip source as well as his or her relationship to the gossip receiver (the participant).

Two different gossip messages were used for each gossip source. Using two messages allows for comparison tests between the gossip messages to determine if there are differences based on the message texts alone. Independent sample T-tests revealed no significant differences for message interpretation based on scenario differences. A complete list of vignettes used in this study can be found in Appendix C.

### Dependent Variables

The three dependent variables were (a) gossip purpose, (b) politicalism, and (c) believability. The gossip purpose variable had four dimensions including informative, influence, intimacy, and entertainment. The following section describes how each of the dependent variables was operationalized.

## Instruments

This section identifies and explains the survey instruments used to collect data for this project. Specifically, scales for gossip believability, politicalism, and gossip purpose are discussed. Reliability estimates are provided.

Gossip Believability Instrument. The Gossip Source Believability Scale (GSBS) was used to measure perception of believability of the gossip source by the participant (See Appendix D). The GSBS is an original scale developed for this study. It was adapted from The News Credibility Scale (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986), which Meyer (1998) designed to reflect news believability. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) did not report reliability for their scale, although Rimmer and Weaver (1987) reported the 12-item News Credibility Scale to have a Cronbach's alpha of .90 for both newspapers and television. The GSBS is a 7-item Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In the directions participants were asked to read the story (the vignette) and think about the named gossiper (e.g., Susan Hill) when answering the questions. The GSBS includes the following items: "Is fair," "Tells the whole story," "Is accurate," "Separates fact and opinion," "Can be trusted," "Is factual," and "Has quality sources." The GSBS created for the current investigation has a Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate of .84.

Politicalism Instrument. Kacmar and Baron (1999) defined organizational politics as "actions by individuals that are directed toward the goal of furthering their own self-interests without regard for the well-being of others or their organization" (p. 4). Politicalism includes organizationally unsanctioned activities ordinarily out of the scope of one's job and concealing one's intent from the target of the behavior. To measure

politicalism, ten items were originally constructed, based on similar information from the Perception of Organizational Politics Scale (Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). The scale used in this study is the Perception of Individual Politics Scale (PIPS). There are two main differences between the PIPS and the items originally contained in POPS. First, the POPS subscale has fifteen items pertaining to the political climate in the organization. For this dissertation, items were rewritten to assess the person gossiping, not the organization. For example, POPS item number six is “It is best not to rock the boat in this organization” (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997, p. 651). Item six of the POPS was rewritten as item 9 in the PIPS as “Telling you to agree with powerful people in the organization if you want to get ahead.” Both items capture the nature of organizational politics, one at the organizational level, the other at an individual level of measurement. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimate for all ten items was .87. A complete list of these items can be found in Appendix E.

Gossip Purpose Scale. Individual perceptions of the purpose of specific gossip messages was measured using the Gossip Purpose Scale (GPS), designed for this study. The GPS is an 18-item Likert-type scale measuring participant’s perceptions of the purpose of a specific gossip message, based on gossip purposes identified by Rosnow and Georgoudi (1985). The items were written, then examined by four other scholars confirming the items assessed the gossip purposes identified in the research. With a specific gossip vignette serving as a stimulus, participants were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements about the purpose of the gossip, such as “To share information,” “To convince others to think a specific way,” “To build intimacy between the gossipier and the listener,” and “To

amuse.” Four subscales measure the purpose of gossip as informative (news-bearing), influencing others, building intimacy, and to entertain (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). See Appendix F for a list of all items in the GPS.

In order to determine whether the scale differentiated the four functions of gossip, employees’ responses to the 18 items were submitted to principle components factor analysis. With eigenvalues greater than 1.00, four factors were obtained. Ten of the 18 items, loaded on the first factor. The items loading on factor one included both the intimacy function items as well as the entertainment items. A varimax rotation was conducted and four unique factors were obtained for the items pertaining to the four functions of gossip identified in the literature: to inform, to influence others, to build intimacy, and to entertain. Results of the principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation is found in Appendix G.

Individual reliability estimates for the subscales were very good. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), “ Group research is often concerned with the size of correlations and with mean differences among experimental treatments, for which a reliability of .80 is adequate” (p. 265). Cronbach’s alpha for the four-item subscale measuring the function of informing was .90. Cronbach’s alpha for the four-item subscale of influencing others was .86. Cronbach’s alpha for the four-item subscale measuring the function of building intimacy was .90. Cronbach’s alpha for the four-item subscale of entertainment was .92.

#### Manipulation Check

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure that participants were correctly able to identify the sex and organizational rank of the gossip source. The directions for

this section read, “In the story you read above, a person spreads gossip to you. What is the sex of that person spreading the gossip?” and provided clickable boxes for the participant to answer “Male” or “Female.” The next item asked “What is the job level of the gossiper in the story” and provided the options “Executive/ Your boss’s supervisor,” “Same-level coworker,” “Person working for you,” and “Not sure.”

Fourteen of the 274 participants (5%) failed to correctly identify either the sex or rank (indicating message direction) of the gossip source. This amount of missing data is not uncommon (Roth, 1994). Pairwise deletion was used to omit these participants from the analysis of hypotheses when gossiper sex or message direction were essential to the hypotheses (i.e., hypotheses one, hypothesis two, hypothesis three, hypotheses five, hypotheses six, and hypothesis seven). However, participant responses from those who failed to identify the sex or message direction were included in the analyses of hypotheses when the gossiper sex and message direction were not relevant to the hypotheses (i.e., hypothesis four and hypothesis eight). Roth (1994) argues that pairwise deletion preserves more information than listwise deletion, thus retaining more statistical power. For these reasons, pairwise deletion is superior to listwise deletion and should be used when possible (Roth, 1994).

### Statistical Analysis

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANCOVA) tested the full model. Following the MANCOVA, a series of one-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted to test the significant relationships identified in the overall model, examining differences by sex and message direction. Post-hoc analysis using Bonferroni procedure tested for differences between downward, upward, and horizontal gossip treatment

groups if necessary. Pearson's correlation coefficient statistics were used to test the relationships between believability and politicalism. Alpha for all tests was set at .05 and a power analysis indicated adequate power (.89) for all medium (.2) effect sizes (Cohen, 1977). Missing data were omitted using pairwise deletion. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) argue that pairwise deletion is superior to listwise deletion because more data are obtained. In this study, results from these statistical tests are reported in Chapter 4.

### Pilot Study

The preceding section explained the procedures and instruments that were used in conducting the study. Before data were collected at the organization, a limited pilot study was conducted using college students to understand further the possibility of using the methods laid forth in the preceding sections of this chapter. One hundred sixteen college students from Communication Studies classes at Louisiana State University participated in the study. Participants responded to one of eight versions of the questionnaire, each identical with the exception of the manipulated variables, gossip message source and/or message content. The pilot study manipulated the sex of the gossip source as well as the direction of the gossip (upward or downward). Horizontal communication was not measured in the pilot study because it was later added to the hypotheses, before the collection of the data for the main investigation.

The pilot study included the Gossip Believability Scale, the Gossip Purpose Scale, and the Politicalism Scale. Reliabilities for all scales were acceptable. For the Gossip Believability Scale, Cronbach's alpha = .79. If item 2 were deleted, reliability for the scale was .81. Item 2 of the scale is a reverse coded item anchored by "Is biased" and "Is unbiased." It seems possible that participants may have been confused by the reverse

coding or quite possibly the meaning of the term “biased.” In a more mature sample, the meaning of “bias” seems less problematic. The final instrument was changed to a 7-point likert-type scale to avoid confusion by the anchors on the survey, yet still allowed for “unbiased” as a reverse coded item.

The Gossip Purpose Scale contained four subscales including Informative, Influence, Intimacy, and Entertainment. The informative dimension had a reliability estimate of .69. If item 2 were deleted, the reliability estimate increases to .71. Item 2 is “To make an announcement.” This item may be different than the other items, in that it suggests a more formal, public transmission of gossip from source to many receivers. Item 2 of the Gossip Purpose Scale was omitted in the final instrument. The subscale to test the gossip purpose of influence attempt had a reliability estimate of .67. When item 8 was deleted, the coefficient alpha increased to .75. Item 8 is “To offer advice.” Offering advice may be different than trying to get another person to behave in a particular way. Participants may have viewed advice-giving as a more direct form of communication than trying to influence someone else’s behavior through sharing gossip. Item 8 was omitted in the final instrument. The five-item subscale for intimacy had a reliability estimate of .80 and therefore all items are retained in the final instrument. The five-item entertainment subscale had a reliability estimate of .84, and retained all items in the final instrument. The Politicalism Scale had an alpha reliability estimate of .80. If item 10 were deleted, the alpha increased to .81. Item 10 states that the gossip source is engaging in organizational politics. This item was retained in the final instrument, as it taps into the central idea of politicalism.

Results for the ANOVAs and Pearson correlation coefficients conducted for the pilot study were inconclusive. None of the hypotheses were supported. One potential reason for the lack of support for the hypotheses and research questions was the use of a student sample in the pilot study. The results of this dissertation are intended to be generalizable to full time employees with experience in a multi-level company. It seems likely that some of the perceptions regarding organizational politics and gossip may be learned and acquired through years on the job. The questionnaire for the dissertation asked employees the length of their tenure at their current organization.

Another potential problem with the pilot study was a weak stimulus. Although the vignettes were intentionally vague to allow for multiple interpretations, participants may have needed more information to feel comfortable making inferences about the purpose and nature of the gossip. The final instrument was changed to provide more detail for participants by expanding the vignettes to include more information about the context.

Further, some participants in the pilot study were confused about to whom the questionnaire was referring: the person spreading the gossip or the person the gossip was about. The final instrument used the name of the person spreading the gossip to add clarity. A manipulation check was also added to determine the participant's ability to identify the sex and organizational position of the gossip source in the vignette.

Finally, the pilot test most likely failed for lack of statistical power. For a medium effect size (.2), a sample of 252 is required. The sample for the pilot study was 116, less than half required to test for medium effects (.2). The power analysis indicated

statistical power was approximately .55 (Cohen, 1977). The final experiment had adequate power to conduct the analysis.

Although the pilot study lacked adequate power and had design flaws, corrections were made to insure adequate power and a comprehensive questionnaire in the final study for this dissertation. This chapter detailed the methods and procedures that were used to test the hypotheses laid forth in Chapter 2. The next chapter, Chapter 4, will reveal the results of hypothesis testing obtained via the aforementioned methods and procedures. The results from the statistical tests will be interpreted in the upcoming chapters.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The previous chapter identified the methods and procedures used to test the hypotheses in this dissertation. The results of the investigation will be reported in this chapter. In analyses involving the sex of the source or the message direction, data were removed when the participant failed to correctly identify the gossip source's sex or organizational rank on the manipulation check. The results of the full model will be discussed first, followed by the one-way ANOVAs tested from the MANCOVA.

### Control variable

Because individuals are more likely to experience and recognize organizational politics as they gain experience in the organization, age was controlled in the multivariate analysis of covariance. The questionnaire asked individuals how long they had worked for their current organization. However, the questionnaire did not ask how long the employee had worked for any organization in a full-time capacity. Although not ideal, age was used as a reasonable estimate for this type of information. A Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed relationships between age and politicalism,  $r = .218$ ,  $p = .001$ ; age and believability,  $r = -.224$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and age and the informative purpose of gossip,  $r = -.211$ ,  $p = .001$ .

### Statistical Results

The independent variables entered into the model were gossip sex, receiver sex, and message direction. The dependent variables were the gossip functions (informative, influence, intimacy, entertainment) believability and politicalism. Age was the control variable. The overall multivariate analysis of covariance revealed two significant main effects for the variables of sex of gossip receiver and message direction. No interactions

were found and no significant main effect was found for sex of the gossip sender. The following section reports the significant multivariate effects followed by the results of the associated univariate tests. Appendix H presents the means, standard errors, and confidence intervals for the significant univariate tests for the main effects. These results provide mixed results for the hypotheses.

The multivariate test for sex of the gossip receiver was significant, Wilk's lambda = .923,  $F(6, 206) = 2.62, p = .011$ . Specifically, sex of the gossip receiver had a significant effect on believability,  $F(1, 255) = 12.31, p = .001, \eta^2 = .055$ , and politicalism,  $F(1, 256) = 4.06, p = .045, \eta^2 = .019$ . Gossip interpreted as less believable and more political for women than men. Sex of gossip receiver was not found to influence perceptions of gossip purposes of information,  $F(1, 256) = .045, p = .833$ , influence,  $F(1, 255) = .486, p = .487$ , intimacy,  $F(1, 255) = 2.114, p = .147$ , or entertainment,  $F(1, 255) = .011, p < .918$ .

The multivariate test for message direction was significant, Wilk's lambda = .758,  $F(12, 412) = 5.094, p < .001$ . Specifically, message direction had a significant effect on believability,  $F(2, 255) = 3.01, p = .05, \eta^2 = .028$ , and the gossip purposes of information,  $F(2, 256) = 6.09, p = .003, \eta^2 = .055$ , influence,  $F(2, 255) = 7.52, p = .001, \eta^2 = .067$ , intimacy,  $F(2, 255) = 3.58, p = .03, \eta^2 = .033$ , and entertainment,  $F(2, 255) = 7.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .070$ . Message direction was not found to influence politicalism,  $F(2, 255) = 1.92, p = .149$ .

Hypothesis one predicted gossip from a same status person (i.e., horizontal gossip) is more believable than gossip from a lower status person directed towards a higher status person (i.e., upward communication) or gossip directed from a higher status

person towards a lower status person (i.e., downward communication). A Bonferoni follow-up procedure revealed a significant difference between horizontal ( $M = 2.39$ ) and downward communication ( $M = 2.19$ ), but not between upward ( $M = 2.23$ ) communication and either horizontal or downward communication. The results of the Bonferoni procedure indicate that gossip from same-level coworkers is more believable than gossip from supervisors. These findings partially support the relationship predicted in hypothesis one.

Hypothesis two predicted that downward gossip is interpreted as more political than upward or horizontal gossip. This hypothesis was tested with the MANCOVA. The data did not support this hypothesis.

Hypothesis three predicted that women are more likely than their male counterparts to perceive office gossip as political. This hypothesis was supported. A one-way analysis of variance showed differences between men and women's perception of gossip as political ( $F [1,245] = 6.644, p = .011, \eta^2 = .03$ ). The mean for men was 4.08 ( $SD = .806$ ) whereas the mean for women was 4.36 ( $SD = .857$ ). These results mean that women are more likely to interpret gossip messages as political than men. In other words, when a male or female at any level of the organization spreads gossip, women are more likely than men to interpret the gossip source as trying to get ahead by nonsanctioned means.

Hypothesis four had two parts, predicting male source gossip is more likely to be interpreted as performing the news-bearing and influencing others functions than when the same gossip message has a female source; and female source gossip is more likely to

be perceived as building intimacy and to entertain than the same gossip when the source is male. This hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis five also had two parts. Hypothesis 5a predicted that gossip is more likely to be interpreted as political when the source is male, than when the source is female. The second part of hypothesis five (Hypothesis 5b) predicted that gossip from female executives is more likely to be interpreted as political than gossip from males holding high or low positions in the organization. Hypothesis 5a and 5b were not supported. These data failed to confirm that men and women are not interpreted differently in terms of politicalism, regardless of organizational level.

Hypothesis six predicted a same-sex bias in interpreting gossip as (a) less political, and (b) more believable. Hypothesis six was not supported. There was no interaction between sex of participant and sex of gossip source and politicalism or believability. In other words, these data do not reveal that individuals do not view their own sex more favorably when interpreting workplace gossip.

Hypothesis seven predicted an inverse relationship between perceptions of gossip believability and perceptions of gossip source politicalism. This hypothesis was supported. A Pearson correlation coefficient revealed an inverse relationship between perceptions of gossip source believability and perceptions of gossip source politicalism,  $r = -.296$  ( $p < .001$ ). As predicted, gossipers perceived as political are less likely to be believed by other employees.

#### Additional Findings

When the data in this investigation were subjected to the MANCOVA, some nonpredicted relationships were revealed. Specifically, message direction was related to

perceptions of gossip functions. A Bonferoni follow-up procedure revealed a significant effect for message direction. Specifically, upward gossip was seen as most informative ( $M = 4.48$ ), influential ( $M = 5.37$ ), and intimate ( $M = 5.05$ ), followed by horizontal gossip as the second most informative ( $M = 3.82$ ) influential ( $M = 4.78$ ), and intimate ( $M = 4.72$ ), and downward gossip as the least likely to be perceived as informative ( $M = 3.55$ ), influential ( $M = 4.61$ ), and intimate ( $M = 4.45$ ). Upward gossip is more likely to be interpreted as entertaining than any of the other functions ( $M = 3.73$ ). Gossip is most likely to be perceived as serving the entertaining function when the gossip is horizontal ( $M = 4.47$ ), followed by upward gossip ( $M = 4.05$ ), and downward gossip ( $M = 3.73$ ).

This chapter presented the results for the hypotheses set forth in Chapter 3. Table 2 on the next page will recap the results of the hypotheses. Chapter 5 will discuss the results, interpret the findings, discuss limitations of the data, and offer directions for future research.

Table 2: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: Horizontal gossip is more believable than upward or downward gossip.

(Partially supported)

Hypothesis 2: Downward gossip is interpreted as more political than upward or

horizontal gossip. (Not supported)

Hypothesis 3: Women are more likely than their male counterparts to perceive office

gossip as political. (Supported)

Hypothesis 4a: Male source gossip is more likely to be interpreted as performing the

news-bearing and influencing others functions more than when the same gossip message

has a female source. (Not supported)

Hypothesis 4b: Female source gossip is more likely to be perceived as building intimacy

and to entertain than the same gossip when the source is male. (Not supported)

Hypothesis 5a: Gossip is interpreted as more political when the source is male than when

the source is female. (Not supported)

Hypothesis 5b: Gossip from female executives is more likely to be interpreted as

political than gossip from males holding high or low positions in the organization. (Not

supported)

Hypothesis 6: There is a same-sex bias in interpreting gossip as (a) less political, and (b)

more believable. (Not supported)

Hypothesis 7: There is an inverse relationship between perceptions of gossip

believability and perceptions of gossip source politicalism. (Supported)

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The previous chapter presented the results of the hypotheses testing. First, results will be discussed regarding the seven hypotheses presented in Chapter Two. Secondly, this chapter will discuss the limitations of this investigation. Third, this chapter will address the implications for this study. Next this chapter will suggest directions for future research, and finally, provide concluding remarks on the topic of message interpretation of workplace gossip.

### Interpretation of Hypotheses Testing

A total of seven hypotheses were tested in this dissertation. Three of the seven hypotheses received some support. In the following paragraphs, each of the seven hypotheses will be restated and results from the statistical analysis will be explained. Possible reasons for the support or lack of support for each hypothesis will be discussed.

The first hypothesis predicted that horizontal gossip is more believable than upward or downward gossip. This hypothesis was partly supported. As predicted, the most believable gossip is from same-level coworkers. It seems possible that individuals identify with their same-level coworkers, and may therefore potentially trust their coworkers more than their subordinates or supervisors. Perhaps similar to the same-sex bias found by Edwards (1998) in the interpretation of ambiguous messages in marital interactions, in the organization, a same-level bias may exist. Individuals perceive others at their same organizational level as more believable, perhaps trusting those others with similar motives to themselves. In downward and upward communication, the employee's communication contacts are determined by the organization. An individual is paid and required to communicate with her or his boss and/or her or his subordinates.

Additionally, horizontal communication is more likely to occur in informal, interpersonal workplace settings which result in a lower degree of uncertainty as compared to formal organizational communication channels (Holland et al., 1976).

Hypothesis two predicted that downward gossip is more political than upward gossip. The data did not support hypothesis two. The data failed to confirm that supervisors sharing gossip with subordinates are more likely to be perceived as political than subordinates sharing gossip with their supervisors. Previous research (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Madison et al., 1980) has identified a greater perception of organizational politics at higher levels of the organization, although senior level employees perceived more politicalism at lower organization levels.

Hypothesis three predicted that women are more likely than men to perceive gossip as political. Hypothesis three was supported by the data. Consistent with Fedor et al. (1998) who found women are more likely than men to perceive organizations as political, this dissertation extends these findings to the individual level. Women not only perceive the organizations they work in as more political than men working for those same organizations, but women also identify individual gossip messages as more political than men interpreting the same gossip. This finding is interesting because it supports previous research that claims gossip needs to occur face-to-face to allow for message adaptation while communicating with an individual, creating a customized message for the receiver (Elmer, 1994). If men and women interpret gossip differently, gossiping one on one allows for individuals to tailor what they say based on their audience. When communicating with women, individuals are more likely to be interpreted as engaging in politics. If gossipers wish to conceal their intent to engage in politics or are not engaging

in politics, messages should be tailored to downplay these political aspects, particularly when gossiping with women. These results are consistent with data collected at the organizational level finding that women are more likely to perceive the organization as political. Organizational level data, however, cannot be applied to the individual level. These data confirm that women interpret individual gossip messages as political. Burgoon (1991) found that women interpret messages more favorably than men. Perceptions of organizational politics are not a more favorable interpretation. These findings suggest that something unique occurs within the organization altering the context for female interpreters.

The fourth hypothesis predicted gossip from males and females would be interpreted as performing different functions. There was no relationship between sex and function of gossip. Although males and females are socialized differently (Eagly, Wood, & Deikman, 2000; Wood & Dindia, 1998) and are interpreted differently in terms of leadership roles (Carli & Eagly, 1999), no differences were determined for interpretation of different gossip functions. Women are more likely to be considered gossips (Rysman, 1977), but apparently, the function of female gossip is not interpreted differently from males. Both males and females use gossip to perform all of the functions, with only one difference between sexes as identified in the additional results: women are more likely to be interpreted as trying to influence others through gossiping. Perhaps the nature of workplace gossip is unique from other forms of gossip, and organizational gossip shows less bias. Alternatively, biological sex may not be as essential as message direction. In the workplace it seems as though sex may not be the most salient feature. Instead, these

data reveal that organizational level is more influential on the interpretation of gossip than is sex of the gossiper.

Hypothesis five predicted that gossip from males is more likely to be interpreted as political than gossip from females, but executive level females would be perceived as the most political. This hypothesis was not supported. Sex of the gossiper is not related to perceptions of the gossip as more political. Although this dissertation did confirm that women are more likely than men to perceive gossip as political, the sex of the gossip source is not a predictor for interpretations of the gossip as political. Although women are members of organizational outgroups, no significant differences were found for sex and politicalism.

Hypothesis six predicted that men and women would view their own sex more favorably when making interpretations of the gossip. Specifically, hypothesis six predicted that men would perceive gossip from other men as less political and more believable. Similarly, hypothesis six predicted women would perceive gossip from other women as less political and more believable. Unlike research findings by Edwards (1998) about marital communication, no differences were revealed between sexes and perceptions of gossip as political and believable. One possible explanation for this finding is that individuals are more likely to identify with others of their same level in the organization, making sex less of an issue. If individuals are able to identify with members of the opposite sex by their role in the organization, sex differences may be less pronounced.

The last hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between gossip believability and perceptions of politicalism. The data supported hypothesis eight. Indeed, the more

believable the gossip, the less political is the perception of the gossip. Individuals may lie to get ahead in the organization. By telling false tales about other organizational members, political individuals may be able to get ahead by making others look bad, influencing gossip receivers opinions, and revealing their own moral stance as superior to the subject of gossip. When the social exchange theory is applied, gossip receivers may interpret the motives of others as aggressively trying to get ahead, even at the cost of being dishonest. This finding is consistent with organizational level analyses analyzing behaviors individuals use to get ahead.

In addition to the predicted relationships, two other findings were identified. Gossip from individuals at the same level is most likely to be interpreted as believable. This same level bias may in part be explained by the truth bias found in interpersonal literature explaining why individuals are more likely to interpret messages from loved ones as truthful (Burgoon, 1998). A second additional finding is that women are more likely to believe organizational gossip, regardless of the source. Overall women are better detectors of deception than men, possibly because of their ability to detect more subtle nonverbal cues (Burgoon, 1998). These data are interesting because even though women are better detectors of actual deceptive messages, they were more likely to believe the messages provided in the vignettes. These data may suggest that women are not merely more suspicious of others, but actually want to believe others are telling the truth. When women accurately detect deceptive messages, this may be in spite of their truth bias instead of merely being more on the lookout for deception.

## Limitations

This dissertation has three main limitations. First of all, most of the data were collected from one organization. The organization is made up of predominantly white/Caucasian employees and not all of the employees at the organization were available to complete the survey. Only employees at the headquarters and sales division were identified for participation for reasons known to the organization. Possible reasons for exclusion of the entire company may include limited time, internet access, or contact information. Some employees work outside of English-speaking countries and language barriers may be problematic. The data may be skewed to be more representative of the sales and corporate positions. Some organizational positions, such as manufacturing and research and development, were extremely limited in their representation. This underrepresented aspect of the population may limit generalizability of the findings.

Secondly, this dissertation was based on vignettes, instead of actual gossip. Simulating a fictitious message allows for greater researcher control, but may be less realistic for participants (McGrath, 1982). Although no test was conducted to compare realism between the vignettes and actual gossip, participants did indicate they related to the vignettes and the vignettes seemed realistic. Therefore, it seems likely that any limitations presented by the use of vignettes are minor, as nearly all of the participants could identify with the vignettes. Threats to external validity in this instance seem minor, as participants were able to relate to the vignettes.

A third limitation is that there were only two gossip topics created for this investigation. Although no statistical differences were detected between the two gossip vignettes used in this dissertation, perhaps different vignettes would provide alternative

results. For this investigation, ambiguous gossip vignettes were necessary to test for varying interpretations of the gossip as believable, political, and performing different functions. In a research setting, it is impossible to recreate the infinite number of gossip scenarios that may occur in an organization. Because there were no differences between the two gossip topics, it is unlikely that the results presented in this dissertation are topical. However, it remains possible that using different gossip topics may yield different results.

### Implications

This dissertation has several implications for scholars. Perhaps most important is the contribution this dissertation makes to the body of knowledge about gossip. Very little research has been conducted testing the relationship between gossip and other variables. Although research has determined why people use gossip, no research to date has explored how individuals interpret gossip. This dissertation found that individuals interpret gossip differently, dependent on the sex of the receiver as well as the direction of the gossip (i.e., downward, upward, horizontal).

Prior to this dissertation, politicalism had only been identified as an organizational and group level variables. One contribution this dissertation makes is to identify and test politicalism as an individual level variable. This dissertation concludes that not only organizations may be interpreted as political, but messages may reveal the perceived political intentions of individual employees. It is important to note that cross-level data is not interchangeable (James, 1982). In other words, findings at the organizational data level do not indicate findings at the individual level and vice-versa. Political organizations do not indicate the politicalism of any of its members, nor does a political

individual indicate he or she is a member of a political organization. This dissertation makes the distinction by extending this variable to the individual level. Rosseau (1985) argues that organizational researchers must test constructs at varying levels of analysis. Research found for the organizational level may not be applied to the individual.

Another implication of this dissertation is to extend the functions of downward, upward, and horizontal communication to include gossip. Although previous research has identified directional communication as a means to convey information about others, previous research has not identified these directional communication channels as including other functions of gossip, such as influencing others, building intimacy or entertaining. Gossip from both men and women at all levels of the organization is interpreted as performing each of the gossip functions: conveying information, building intimacy, influencing others, and entertaining. This study contributes to the scholarly knowledge about message direction. Prior to this dissertation, the role of downward, upward, and horizontal communication was limited to sharing of business information (Fayol, 1937). Gossip does not serve essential business information exchange, but rather allows individuals to share information about non-business topics. Information sharing is not the only function of gossip. The functions of intimacy building, influencing others, and entertainment were also tested and confirmed as factors to gossip in the corporate setting, occurring in all message directions. These gossip functions should be included in the study of message direction as possible functions for each type of communication (downward, upward, horizontal).

Methodologically, this dissertation contributes one new scale to the field of communication. Prior to this dissertation, no scales measuring any aspect of gossip or its

relationship to other variables had been established. This dissertation is the first study to present a scale to measure gossip purpose. The Gossip Purpose Scale (GPS) is used to identify which function of gossip a particular gossip message is perceived to be occurring by the gossip receivers. Additional testing on the scale's validity needs to be conducted for future studies.

Finally, this dissertation serves as a historical document, revealing a part of organizational life in the United States at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Organizational historians should note the prevalence of gossip in the organization as typical. Most of the participants in this study said the scenarios presented were realistic and they could identify with the situations. These findings suggest that gossip is common at all levels of the organization, and that downward, upward, and horizontal communication are all conduits for gossip.

#### Directions for Future Research

One possible direction for future research is to explore the role of social exchange theory in interpreting gossip outside of the workplace. Gossip in social circles where communication is not mandatory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) may extend the findings presented in this dissertation to a broader population. Gossip interpretation may function differently in contexts that allow individuals to choose with whom they communicate. In the organization, these channels are organizationally defined, and sometimes individuals have limited capacity to choose their communication encounters. In situations where individuals select their communication partners, gossip believability may be less of an issue, as it seems likely that trust is established prior to the communication.

A second suggestion for future research is to explore the role of gossip as social influence. Previous studies have identified men to be perceived as more controlling (Aries, 1998; Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). Perhaps because gossip is something women do, people perceive gossip as a means for women to exert their influence over others. Falbo and Peplau (1980) found that women are more likely to use indirect influence strategies than men. French and Raven (1959) found that individuals are more likely to use direct strategies when they have power over another and indirect strategies when they do not have power over another. Perhaps gossip considered an indirect strategy, used by women to influence male dominated organizations. Future studies should test this relationship.

Researchers should also explore perceptions of gossip message as dependent on the rank of the gossip receiver. The current investigation analyzed the role of the gossip source and the direction of gossip message, but did not analyze the perceptions of the gossip based on the rank of the gossip receiver. To develop the findings of Gandz and Murray (1980) that senior level employees perceived greater politicalism at lower organization levels future research should test how interpretation of gossip politicalism changes as level of the gossip receiver changes.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to determine the effects of sex and message direction on the interpretation of workplace gossip. Chapter one introduced the key concepts tested in this study. Utilizing a symbolic interactionist standpoint and predicting relationships based on the social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), seven hypotheses were proposed in chapter two. The methods for testing the hypotheses proposed in chapter two were presented in chapter three. A web-based survey was

administered to full time employees, who completed three original scales developed to measure gossip source believability, gossip purpose, and perception of gossip sources as political.

In summary, this dissertation had several findings. Horizontal gossip is more believable than downward gossip. Women are more likely to interpret others as engaging in politics as they spread organizational gossip. And finally, the more political individuals perceive a particular gossip message, the less likely they are to find the gossip believable.

This dissertation is important because it extends the research on gossip which has been extremely limited to this point. This study is the first quantitative study of gossip in an organization. Politicalism is extended from an organizational level variable to an individual level variable. The functions of downward, upward, and horizontal communication are extended to include gossip, with varying believability and politicalism interpretations based on gossip receiver. This dissertation presents three new scales measuring gossip source believability, gossip purpose, and politicalism. This dissertation is also an indication of gossip as a typical communication pattern within organizational life. Future research should continue to examine gossip in the organization.

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## APPENDIX A INFORMED CONSENT FORM

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### INFORMED CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

The study in which you are being asked to participate concerns organizational communication. Your participation in this research project will help us further understand how employees communicate at work. Your voluntary participation will aid Kristen Berkos, a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University in conducting her dissertation.

Attached is a questionnaire that focuses on a particular situation where a message was shared. Please read the message and answer the questions with that specific situation in mind. Your responses are critical to this project. The questionnaire is short and should take less than 20 minutes to complete.

Participation is completely voluntary, and consequently, you may withdraw from the study at any time you choose and you may leave any question unanswered without consequence. Your participation in this study will not affect your evaluation in this organization in any way. There are no right or wrong answers. Be sincere and honest in your answers. Do not put your name on the questionnaire to keep your answers anonymous. Your participation in this study and your answers to this questionnaire will be kept in the strictest confidence. The data collected will be used for research purposes. In the future, other scientists may use the data you provide for secondary analysis. There are no foreseen risks to you based on your participation in this study. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.

Should you have questions, you may contact Kristen Berkos at (225) 578-6889 or e-mail her at [kberkos@earthlink.net](mailto:kberkos@earthlink.net). You may also call Dr. Renee Edwards at (225) 578-6821.

If you decide to participate, please enter your email as your electronic signature. This email will be kept confidential, separate from your answers, and will not be sold or shared with anyone. Please place it in the addressed and stamped envelope provided.

Entering your email below indicates your understanding of the above and your willingness to participate in our project. *Thank you for your assistance.*

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Submit

---

APPENDIX B SURVEY INSTRUMENT

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SURVEY OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

1. Sex (Circle one):            Male            Female
  
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Race (Please circle all that apply):  
  
White/ Caucasian    Latino/a            African American/ Black  
  
Asian American/ Asian    Middle Eastern American    Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. How many years and months have you been a full time employee at any organization?  
\_\_\_\_years, \_\_\_\_months
  
4. How many years and months have you worked for your current organization?  
\_\_\_\_years, \_\_\_\_months
  
5. Are you considered a supervisor? (please circle)    Yes            No
  
6. If you answered Yes for question #5, how many levels of employees do you manage,  
directly or indirectly? \_\_\_\_\_

Please read the following statement:

**Imagine your boss’s supervisor, Stephanie Jones, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. She says, “They weren’t exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean.”**

*Instructions:* Please think about Stephanie Jones in the story you read. Please circle the number between each pair of words and phrases that best represents how you were feeling about that person.

1. Is fair                    5            4            3            2            1            Is unfair

2. Is biased	5	4	3	2	1	Is unbiased
3. Tells the whole story	5	4	3	2	1	Doesn't tell the whole story
4. Is accurate	5	4	3	2	1	Is not accurate
5. Separates fact and opinion	5	4	3	2	1	Doesn't separate fact and opinion
6. Can be trusted	5	4	3	2	1	Cannot be trusted
7. Is factual	5	4	3	2	1	Is opinionated
8. Has quality sources	5	4	3	2	1	Does not have quality sources

Directions: Below is a list of possible purposes of gossip. Please indicate which of the following seem to describe the gossip you just read. Use the following scale:

*1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = Strongly Agree*

- \_\_\_\_ 1. To share information
- \_\_\_\_ 2. To make an announcement
- \_\_\_\_ 3. To deliver news
- \_\_\_\_ 4. To convey information
- \_\_\_\_ 5. To inform others
- \_\_\_\_ 6. To persuade others to behave in a particular way
- \_\_\_\_ 7. To convince others to think a specific way
- \_\_\_\_ 8. To offer advice
- \_\_\_\_ 9. To get others to see the gossiper's point of view

- \_\_\_ 10. To influence others
- \_\_\_ 11. To convey a close relationship between the gossip and the gossip listener
- \_\_\_ 12. To build intimacy between the gossip and the listener
- \_\_\_ 13. To build a relationship between the gossip and the listener
- \_\_\_ 14. To show that the gossip trusts the listener
- \_\_\_ 15. To reveal friendship between the gossip and the listener
- \_\_\_ 16. To entertain
- \_\_\_ 17. To amuse
- \_\_\_ 18. To pass the time
- \_\_\_ 19. To make others smile or laugh
- \_\_\_ 20. To avoid boredom

Directions: Please indicate which of the following seem to describe the meaning of the gossip message you just read. Use the following scale:

*1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree,  
4 = agree, 5 = Strongly Agree*

- \_\_\_ 1. The speaker wants to get ahead in the organization without working for it.
- \_\_\_ 2. The speaker is backstabbing
- \_\_\_ 3. The speaker is retaliating for something else
- \_\_\_ 4. The speaker wants to be influential in the organization
- \_\_\_ 5. The speaker breaks organizational norms/ rules to look good.
- \_\_\_ 6. The speaker is trying to get a raise or promotion
- \_\_\_ 7. The speaker wants something from the person he/she told about the gossip.

\_\_\_ 8. The speaker is trying to build themselves up by tearing someone else down.

\_\_\_ 9. This message is telling the listener to agree with powerful people in the organization if they want to get ahead.

\_\_\_ 10. The speaker is engaging in organizational politics.

Please answer the following questions:

In the story you read above, a person spreads gossip to you. What is the sex of that person spreading the gossip?

\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_ Female

What is the job level of the gossiper in the story

\_\_\_ Executive/ Your boss's supervisor

\_\_\_ Same-level coworker

\_\_\_ Person working for you

\_\_\_ Not sure

Can you identify with the story? \_\_\_ (Strongly agree through strongly disagree)

This story seems realistic. \_\_\_ (Strongly agree through strongly disagree)

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## APPENDIX C GOSSIP SOURCE VIGNETTES

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### Female Source Downward Gossip

Imagine your boss's supervisor, Stephanie Jones, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. She says, "They weren't exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean."

Imagine your boss's supervisor, Elizabeth Smith, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. She says, "Did [the mutual acquaintance] ever tell you why they left their last job? I've heard a few things."

### Male Source Downward Gossip

Imagine your boss's supervisor, Mike Henderson, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. He says, "They weren't exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean."

Imagine your boss's supervisor, Joe Harrison, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. He says, "Did [the mutual acquaintance] ever tell you why they left their last job? I've heard a few things."

### Female Source Upward Gossip

Imagine you are a supervisor at an organization and Laura Baker, the person you supervise, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company.

She says, “Did [the mutual acquaintance] ever tell you why they left their last job? I’ve heard a few things.”

Imagine you are a supervisor at an organization and Susan Lane, the person you supervise, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. She says, “They weren’t exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean.”

#### Male Source Upward Gossip

Imagine you are a supervisor at an organization and Matt Long, the person working for you, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. He says, “Did [the mutual acquaintance] ever tell you why they left their last job? I’ve heard a few things.”

Imagine you are a supervisor at an organization and Jim Lewis, the person working for you, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. He says, “They weren’t exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean.”

#### Female Source Horizontal Gossip

Imagine your coworker, Christine Foster, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. She says, “They weren’t exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean.”

Imagine your coworker, Karen Calhoun, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. She says, “Did [the mutual acquaintance] ever tell you why they left their last job? I’ve heard a few things.”

#### Male Source Horizontal Gossip

Imagine your same-level coworker, Ben Chandler, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. He says, “They weren’t exactly engaging in professional behavior at the conference, if you know what I mean.”

Imagine your same-level coworker, Tim Carter, tells you something in passing about a mutual acquaintance at the company. He says, “Did [the mutual acquaintance] ever tell you why they left their last job? I’ve heard a few things.”

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APPENDIX D GOSSIP BELIEVABILITY INDEX

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*Instructions:* Please think about the person in the story you read. Please circle the number between each pair of words and phrases that best represents how you were feeling about that person.

1. Is fair	5	4	3	2	1	Is unfair
2. Is unbiased	5	4	3	2	1	Is biased
3. Tells the whole story	5	4	3	2	1	Doesn't tell the whole story
4. Is accurate	5	4	3	2	1	Is not accurate
5. Separates fact fact and opinion	5	4	3	2	1	Doesn't separate fact and opinion
6. Can be trusted	5	4	3	2	1	Cannot be trusted
7. Is factual	5	4	3	2	1	Is opinionated
8. Has quality sources	5	4	3	2	1	Does not have quality sources

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## APENDIX E GOSSIP PURPOSE SCALE

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Directions: Below is a list of possible purposes of gossip. Please indicate which of the following seem to describe the gossip you just read. Use the following scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree Nor Disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*

1. To share information
2. To make an announcement
3. To deliver news
4. To convey information
5. To inform others
6. To persuade others to behave in a particular way
7. To convince others to think a specific way
8. To offer advice
9. To get others to see the gossiper's point of view
10. To influence others
11. To convey a close relationship between the gossiper and the gossip listener
12. To build intimacy between the gossiper and the listener
13. To build a relationship between the gossiper and the listener
14. To show that the gossiper trusts the listener
15. To reveal friendship between the gossiper and the listener
16. To entertain
17. To amuse
18. To pass the time

19. To make others smile or laugh

20. To avoid boredom

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## APPENDIX F PERCEPTION OF INDIVIDUAL POLITICALISM SCALE

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Directions: Please indicate which of the following seem to describe the meaning of the gossip message you just read. Use the following scale:

*1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree,  
4 = agree, 5 = Strongly Agree*

- \_\_\_1. The speaker wants to get ahead in the organization without working for it.
  - \_\_\_2. The speaker is backstabbing
  - \_\_\_3. The speaker is retaliating for something else
  - \_\_\_4. The speaker wants to be influential in the organization
  - \_\_\_5. The speaker breaks organizational norms/ rules to look good.
  - \_\_\_6. The speaker is trying to get a raise or promotion
  - \_\_\_7. The speaker wants something from the person he/she told about the gossip.
  - \_\_\_8. The speaker is trying to build themselves up by tearing someone else down.
  - \_\_\_9. This message is telling the listener to agree with powerful people in the organization if they want to get ahead.
  - \_\_\_10. The speaker is engaging in organizational politics.
-

APPENDIX G ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX OF GOSSIP PURPOSE ITEMS  
 FACTOR ANALYSIS USING PRINCIPLE COMPONENTS FACTORING WITH  
 VARIMAX ROTATION

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1. To share information	.103	.00	<b>.842</b>	-.117
2. To deliver news	.00	.00	<b>.896</b>	.00
3. To convey information	.00	.103	<b>.884</b>	.00
4. To inform others	.154	.146	<b>.827</b>	.191
5. To persuade others to behave in particular way	.00	.00	.00	<b>.810</b>
6. To convince others to think a specific way	.00	.00	.00	<b>.864</b>
7. To get others to see the gossiper's point of view	.149	.168	.00	<b>.777</b>
8. To influence others	.00	.185	.00	<b>.834</b>
9. To convey a close relationship between the gossiper and listener	.121	<b>.791</b>	.129	.305
10. To build intimacy	.128	<b>.814</b>	.154	.257
11. To build a relationship	.102	<b>.869</b>	.00	.210
12. To show that the gossiper trusts the listener	.175	<b>.813</b>	.00	.00
13. To reveal friendship	.287	<b>.751</b>	.00	.00
14. To entertain	<b>.829</b>	.270	.161	.00
15. To amuse	<b>.856</b>	.184	.151	.00

16. To pass the time	<b>.882</b>	.105	.00	.00
17. To make others smile or laugh	<b>.868</b>	.00	.128	.00
18. To avoid boredom	<b>.824</b>	.155	.00	.156

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Note. Bold numbers indicate highest factor loadings

APPENDIX H MEANS FOR THE SIGNIFICANT EFFECT OF GOSSIP RECEIVER  
SEX AND MESSAGE DIRECTION

Effect	Dependent variable	Group	Mean	SE	95%
					Confidence Interval
Receiver Sex	Believability	Male	2.40	.05	2.29 – 2.50
		Female	2.11	.05	2.03 – 2.21
	Politicalism	Male	4.12	.08	3.95 – 4.28
		Female	4.35	.07	4.20 – 4.49
	Informative	Male	4.02	.14	3.74 – 4.31
		Female	3.93	.13	3.68 – 4.19
	Influence	Male	4.80	.12	4.56 – 5.04
		Female	5.00	.11	4.79 – 5.21
	Intimacy	Male	4.64	.12	4.41 – 4.87
		Female	4.82	.10	4.62 – 5.03
	Entertainment	Male	4.08	.13	3.82 – 4.34
		Female	4.09	.12	3.86 – 4.32

Message Direction	Believability	Downward	2.18	.06	2.07 – 2.30
		Upward	2.40	.06	2.28 – 2.53
		Horizontal	2.19	.06	2.07 – 2.31
	Politicalism	Downward	4.27	.09	4.08 – 4.45
		Upward	4.35	.10	4.15 – 4.56
		Horizontal	4.07	.09	3.88 – 4.26
	Informative	Downward	3.60	.16	3.30 – 3.92
		Upward	4.49	.17	4.14 – 4.83
		Horizontal	3.84	.16	3.52 – 4.16
Influence	Downward	4.55	.14	4.28 – 4.81	
	Upward	5.38	.15	5.04 – 5.63	
	Horizontal	4.81	.14	4.54 – 5.09	
Intimacy	Downward	4.44	.13	4.19 – 4.70	
	Upward	4.98	.14	4.70 – 5.25	
	Horizontal	4.77	.13	4.52 – 5.03	
Entertainment	Downward	3.73	.14	3.45 – 4.02	

Upward	3.95	.16	3.64 – 4.26
Horizontal	4.57	.15	4.28 – 4.86

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## VITA

Kristen Berkos is a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University where she is majoring in communication studies and minoring in management. Prior to her doctoral studies she completed her Master of Arts and Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies from California State University at Long Beach. Her master's thesis was titled, "Students Use of Imagined Interactions in Reaction to Teacher Misbehaviors." She is a member of the National Communication Association, The Western Communication Association, and the International Communication Association. Currently, Kristen Berkos is an assistant professor of Communication at Bryant College in Smithfield, Rhode Island. She continues to teach and conduct research in interpersonal, organizational, and instructional contexts.