MORE THAN IDLE TALK: EXPLORING GOSSIP IN ORGANIZATIONAL

SOCIALIZATION

by

REBECCA B. LEACH

Bachelor of Arts, 2015
University of Montevallo
Montevallo, Alabama

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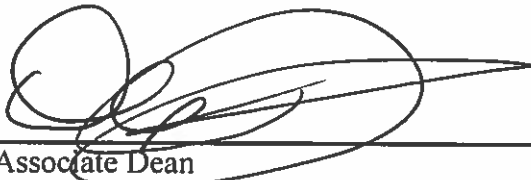More Than Idle Talk: Exploring Gossip in Organizational Socialization

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_____   4 /20/18
Committee Chair   Date

_____   4/20/18
Committee Member   Date

_____   4/20/18
Committee Member   Date

_____   4-27-18
Associate Dean   Date

More Than Idle Talk: Exploring Gossip in Organizational Socialization

Rebecca B. Leach

Texas Christian University, 2018

Advisor: Johny Garner, Ph.D.

Extant research on gossip has treated this communicative phenomenon as a negative activity or mere "idle talk" with little consequence. This study examined gossip's role in organizational socialization by positioning gossip as a means of information gathering. Participants ($n = 204$) reflected on their organizational experience by completing measures such as Brady, Brown, and Liang's (2017) workplace gossip scales and Gailliard, Myers, and Seibold (2010) organizational assimilation index. The variety of relationships between types of workplace gossip and the dimensions of organizational socialization were assessed. Results supported gossip's ability to highlight familiarity in workplace relationships, benefits of positive workplace gossip, and a moderated relationship between negative workplace gossip and acculturation.

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Appropriate organizational socialization is vital to employee success (Bullis, 1993). Being well integrated into an organization leads to increased organizational commitment, increased job involvement, and decreased role ambiguity (Madlock & Chory, 2014). Information seeking is the linchpin of socialization. Individuals often seek out a variety of information and feedback to supplement their experience and better adapt to an organization's expectations (Morrison, 2002). One possible source of information for newcomers and established members alike is gossip.

Gossip thrives in organizations because it is an inherently social phenomenon (Waddington, 2005). Existing literature frequently treats gossip as a negative phenomenon or dismisses gossip as mere "idle talk" with little consequence (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Blithe, 2014). However, gossip is a surprisingly complex phenomenon (Waddington, 2005), and it may be more useful to frame gossip as a means of gathering information. The present study makes such a move in examining the relationship between different types of workplace gossip and the dimensions of effective organizational socialization.

Gossip in Organizations

Defining Gossip

The definition of gossip is not as straightforward as one would think. Gossip is commonly confused with similar forms of informal communication such as teasing (Baumeister et al., 2004), spreading rumors (Waddington, 2005), and participating in the proverbial "grapevine" (Newstrom, Monczka, & Reif, 1974). Scholars have attempted to differentiate some of these activities by examining the subject of the communication activity (i.e., events or people) (Newstrom et al., 1974). For example, the "grapevine" and rumors are primarily interested in

current and upcoming events (Newstrom et al., 1974), whereas gossip may include events but is primarily focused on the people who participate in those events. Newstrom et al. (2017) argued that the "grapevine" possesses similarities to gossip because both are somewhat based on truth. In contrast, rumors are not based on truth or credible evidence (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003).

To simplify these comparisons, Mills (2010) noted that "the most common definitional dimensions for gossip are (a) that it is informal, (b) has some degree of veracity, and (c) it is personally focused (usually on an absent third party)" (p. 216). With these criteria in mind, the present study used Brady, Brown, and Liang's (2017) definition of workplace gossip: "informal and evaluative (i.e., positive or negative) talk from one member of an organization to one or more members of the same organization about another member of the organization who is not present to hear what is said" (p. 3). From this definition, Brady et al. (2017) distilled four types of workplace gossip: negative gossip about a supervisor, positive gossip about a supervisor, negative gossip about coworkers, and positive gossip about coworkers.

Functions of Gossip

Gossip is frequently villainized as an illegitimate practice in organizations (Clegg & Iterson, 2009) or even a form of aggression between two parties (Baumeister et al., 2004). Again, the stigmatization of gossip is at least partially borne from unclear definitions of gossip, particularly those that group gossip, rumors, and other forms of informal communication into a single mass. Without nuanced treatment for these different forms, the disadvantages of one type of informal communication (i.e., gossip, rumor, grapevine) are more easily associated with another. As negative connotations of gossip become more popularized, the act of gossiping may elicit feelings of guilt or caution. For example, organizational members often exercise caution when gossiping to avoid being perceived negatively or as someone who is likely to divulge

others' secrets (Bello, Brandau-Brown, & Ragsdale, 2014). Employees tend to limit themselves to what they believe is positive gossip with instrumental ties, but indulge in both positive and negative gossip with expressive friendship ties (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). In other words, individuals typically only gossip both negatively and positively in the company of trusted friends. Interestingly, individuals perceive both strangers and friends negatively when they engage in gossip, regardless of that gossip's valence (Turner, Mazur, Wendel, & Winslow, 2003). This suggests that many people's negative views on gossip are deep-rooted, even in the face of positive information sharing. When perceptions of gossip are particularly negative, it is no surprise that gossip is more likely to function as a source of relational ruin rather than social glue in interpersonal relationships (Turner et al., 2003).

Despite negative evaluations of gossip, this communicative phenomenon plays several important roles in organizations. Gossip can function as both organizational regulation and resistance (Hafen, 2004). Even in virtual workplaces, organizational members rely on gossip as a source of information, opportunity for human connection, and space to vent (Blithe, 2014). Most importantly, gossip reveals what is socially and culturally normative in an organization through storytelling (Baumeister et al., 2004). Positive gossip reveals what behaviors are praiseworthy to organizational members, and negative gossip similarly reveals what behaviors are discouraged in the workplace. Gossip can also highlight shifts in office dynamics, such as workplace romances, and evaluations thereof (Cowan & Horan, 2014). In this way, gossip qualifies as a form of observational learning (Baumeister et al., 2004) and an information seeking tactic (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Information gained from gossip can also serve as a sense-making tool for information previously gained from formal channels of communication (Mills, 2010). These

connections between gossip and information gathering and processing are particularly important as organizations socialize new members.

Organizational Socialization

Stages of Organizational Socialization

Socialization is the process of joining, potentially adapting to, and leaving an organization (Kramer & Miller, 1999; Miller & Kramer, 1999). Most scholars use a four-stage model when conceptualizing organizational socialization: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit (Kramer, 2010).   The anticipatory socialization stage occurs before an individual arrives at an organization and contains two phases within it: vocational anticipatory socialization and organizational anticipatory socialization (Jablin, 2001). In vocational anticipatory socialization, an individual chooses a career among a variety of influences, including: family members, educational institutions, part-time job experiences, peers and friends, and the media (Jablin, 2001). The individual moves to organizational anticipatory socialization as he or she decides on a specific organization to join. In this phase, individuals learn about an organization through literature such as job advertisements and through people who have knowledge about the organization (Jablin, 2001). As such, organizational anticipatory socialization is concerned with how individuals develop their first impressions of an organization.

The encounter stage marks a critical point in a newcomer's relationship with an organization (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). Also known as the "breaking in" stage or entry stage, organizational encounter begins when an individual becomes an official member of the organization (Jablin, 2001). This is the stage in which individuals receive the label of "new" or "newcomer" (Jablin, 2001). Established members provide this label to newcomers, but it is also

important to recognize that individuals often self-label themselves as "new" too. The "new" label

provides newcomers some degree of leniency (Jablin, 2001) as they attempt to learn both the

formal and informal expectations of the organization (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Overall, the

encounter stage is characterized by feelings of uncertainty, surprise, and even culture shock that

keep the newcomer constantly occupied (Jablin, 2001).

Although an individual's entry point in an organization is easily identifiable, the

transition to the metamorphosis stage is more nebulous. The end of the encounter stage is not

decided by a passage of time, but rather a psychological change (Kramer, 2010). In the

metamorphosis stage, the organizational member sheds the "new" label and no longer identifies

as a newcomer. The established member's goals are to "adjust to group norms and values,

develop reciprocal relationships with supervisors and coworkers, and constantly modify their

roles to suit their needs and abilities" (Kramer & Miller, 1999, p. 359). Another name for the

metamorphosis stage is the role management stage (Feldman, 1976). Organizational transitions

and promotions can occur during this third stage, which means established members of an

organization will still have reason to seek out information and maintain a flexible mindset

(Kramer, 2010; Kramer & Noland, 1999).

The final stage of organizational socialization is exit, which may be involuntary or

voluntary. In the latter case of an exit based on a mutual decision, this stage is also known as

organizational disengagement (Jablin, 2001). Much like the encounter stage, organizational exit

is not a one-time decision or action (Jablin, 2001) and still involves information seeking, albeit to

a much lesser extent. No matter which stage of organizational socialization is the point of focus,

organizations will find that their members are continually learning and adapting in the face of

new circumstances. Communication is thus the common thread that connects all the stages of organizational socialization.

Dimensions of Organizational Socialization

Although the stages of organizational socialization are crucial for conceptualizing socialization as a developmental process (Bullis, 1993), a stage perspective alone does not sufficiently describe communication that is fundamental to socialization. Myers and Oetzel (2003) first proposed that organizational socialization or assimilation contained six communicative dimensions: familiarity with others, acculturation, recognition, involvement, job competency, and role negotiation. Gailliard, Myers, and Seibold (2010) later revised this index to relabel "familiarity with others" to "familiarity with supervisors" and to add a seventh dimension of "familiarity with coworkers". Familiarity with supervisors and coworkers refers to how well individuals know and get along with their supervisors and coworkers, respectively. Acculturation occurs when individuals have learned and accepted their organization's culture and norms. Recognition is the feeling of being valued by both the organization and supervisors. Involvement manifests in an individual's workplace behavior and desire to contribute to the organization (e.g., volunteering for additional tasks). Job competency is a self-assessment of the individual's ability to complete their job and related tasks. Finally, role negotiation refers to the individual's willingness to compromise on job expectations and duties. As an organizational member's scores on these dimensions increase, one can say that he or she is being socialized, that the member is moving from early stages of socialization to metamorphosis (Gailliard et al., 2010).

Information Seeking During Organizational Socialization

As should be clear by now, communication is the defining feature of organizational socialization. This communication is most noticeable in employees' information seeking

behaviors that stem from a desire to learn. Organizational members must learn how to

communicate within an organization's accepted boundaries to increase their chances of career

success (Bullis, 1993). The desire to learn is most evident in organizational newcomers because

they experience the most amount of uncertainty in the encounter stage of socialization (Miller &

Jablin, 1991). However, organizational newcomers are not the only ones who desire feedback on

individual performance (Morrison, 2002). Again, socialization is a longitudinal process that does

not terminate after organizational entry. Even established members of organizations have

socialization needs.

    Although several theories (e.g., organizational sense-making, social exchange theory, and

social identity theory) provide insight in this area, uncertainty reduction theory is particularly

useful for explaining why organizational members seek information throughout their career

(Kramer, 2010). The general premise of uncertainty reduction theory is that individuals are

motivated to reduce their uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The source of uncertainty for

an organizational newcomer is obvious: a new job and environment (Miller & Jablin, 1991). For

an established member in an organization, sources of uncertainty may include major

organizational changes and job transitions. Established members, also known as veteran

employees, even experience five types of uncertainty related to the arrival of a newcomer:

newcomer appraisal, newcomer referent, newcomer relational, transformation, and newcomer

initiative (Gallagher & Sias, 2009).

    To reduce uncertainty throughout the socialization process, organizational members will

engage in information seeking (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Information seeking is the clearest

representation of communication's vital role during socialization. Organizational members use

communication to actively seek out three general types of information: referent, appraisal, and

relational (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Referent information communicates job requirements and expectations. Appraisal information provides an evaluation of how successful an organizational member is performing in a role. Finally, relational information provides information about the organizational member's relationship with someone else (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Alternatively, information can be categorized into six socialization content areas: performance proficiency, politics, language, people, history, and organizational goals and values (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). Sources of information include top management, supervisors, coworkers, and subordinates (Hart, 2012), but organizational members will generally gravitate towards conversations with coworkers due to the informal nature of such relationships (Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, & Johnson, 1994).

After selecting a source of information, organizational members use a variety of information seeking tactics ranging from the overt to the discreet: asking overt questions, asking indirect questions, approaching third parties, testing limits of situations, disguising conversations, observing others' behaviors, and conducting surveillance (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Many of these information seeking tactics (questions, third parties, disguised conversations, observation, and surveillance) can manifest in the form of gossiping, assuming the situation in which such tactics are used fulfill the definitional criteria for gossip.

Discreet tactics like disguised conversations, observation, and surveillance are more likely to yield ambiguous information than overt tactics, but organizational members often prefer them nonetheless (Miller & Jablin, 1991). This is because organizational members weigh the potential rewards and costs of information seeking before taking any action (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Ideally, information seeking will yield memorable messages that provide valuable information on an organization's norms and values (Stohl, 1986). The reward of high quality

information is also associated with increased organizational commitment (Sias, 2005). However, these rewards are offset by the heavy costs on an individual's ego, image, and effort (Morrison, 2002). Such costs may seem amplified if an individual is seeking information through gossip. By this logic, the ideal situation for an organizational member is one in which useful information is simply gifted because unsolicited information poses little to no risk on the listener (Kramer, Callister, & Turban, 1995). Realistically, most organizational members do not have the luxury of simply waiting for information because they wish to adapt to the organization as quickly as possible. Knowing that individuals utilize a variety of information seeking tactics (Miller & Jablin, 1991), it is within reason to assume that organizational members may view gossip as one possible means of information seeking to gain clarity during their socialization. However, the relationship between gossip and organizational socialization remains understudied.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Organizational socialization is a core aspect of an individual's workplace experience that revolves around communication (Bullis, 1993). However, gossip remains an overlooked form of communication in organizations despite its inevitability and availability to organizational members (Waddington, 2005). When gossip is framed as a viable source of information, its potential significance in organizational socialization creates a compelling research agenda. Moreover, gossip's role in information seeking and information gathering suggests that individuals' gossiping behaviors may be indicative of the state of their organizational socialization.

By definition, the subject of workplace gossip is about an organizational member (e.g., supervisor, coworker, subordinate) who is not present during the gossiping conversation (Brady et al., 2017). If an individual is positively gossiping about a supervisor, such communication may

indicate a positive relationship between the gossiper and the supervisor. Likewise, negative

gossip may belie a negative relationship between the two parties. As such, my first hypothesis

addresses the valence of gossip about supervisors and the individual's familiarity with the

supervisor:

H_{1A}: Positive workplace gossip about supervisors (PWGS) will be positively related to

familiarity with supervisors.

H_{1B}: Negative workplace gossip about supervisors (NWGS) is inversely related to

familiarity with supervisors.

The valence of gossip about coworkers would hypothetically function in the same way as

gossip about supervisors. Positive gossip about coworkers would suggest positive, comfortable

relationships. Positive gossip about coworkers is also linked to an individual's networking ability

(Brady et al., 2017, Dubrin, 2009). With a larger network, organizational members have

increased flexibility in reaching out to different people for information during the socialization

process. Conversely, negatively gossiping about coworkers implies a lack of connection or

understanding between coworkers. Additionally, negative gossip about coworkers is positively

related to perceived coworker incivility (Brady et al., 2017), which is not conducive of close

relationships in the workplace. Therefore, my second hypothesis is:

H_{2A}: Positive workplace gossip about coworkers (PWGC) is positively related to

familiarity with coworkers.

H_{2B}: Negative workplace gossip about coworkers (NWGC) is inversely related to

familiarity with coworkers.

A key argument of the present study is that gossip is a viable source of information and

means of information seeking. Seeking out and learning information about one's organization

reflects the heart of acculturation within organizational socialization. For this dimension of organizational socialization, both positive and negative workplace gossip would be invaluable means of determining which behaviors are approved and disapproved of in the organization. Learning an organization's culture and norms cannot occur without information, and a higher volume of information provides more opportunities for reinforcing the values and standards of the organization. Thus, my third hypothesis is:

> H_3: Positive and negative workplace gossip about supervisors and coworkers will be positively related to acculturation.

The dimensions of organizational socialization reflected in the first three hypotheses of this study (familiarity with supervisors, familiarity with coworkers, and acculturation) share a focus on information retrieval. The remaining dimensions of organizational socialization (involvement, recognition, job competency, and role negotiation) extend beyond information gathering and reflect how individuals believe they are fitting within their organization. Once again, the valence of the gossip serves as the individual's evaluation of their organizational experience. Given that negative gossip is positively related to workplace anxiety and negatively related to perceptions of organizational justice (Brady et al., 2017), it is likely that negative workplace gossip reflects overall dissatisfaction in the organizational experience. Such dissatisfaction would be a barrier to involvement, recognition, job competency, and role negotiation. In contrast, positive gossip implies satisfaction with the organization and its members, and would likely facilitate positive organizational outcomes. My fourth hypothesis is therefore:

> H_{4A}: Positive workplace gossip about supervisors and coworkers will be positively related to involvement, recognition, job competency, and role negotiation.

H_{4B}: Negative workplace gossip about supervisors and coworkers will be inversely

related to involvement, recognition, job competency, and role negotiation.

Gossip is a complex communicative phenomenon by itself, but that complexity only

grows when gossip is also construed as a dispositional tendency (Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi,

1993). In other words, some individuals may simply be more psychologically inclined to gossip

than others. Presumably, an individual with a high tendency to gossip will gossip more with

organizational members regardless of the gossip's valence or subject, and thus have a larger pool

of information compared to the average organizational member. Possessing a favorable

disposition to gossip may thus alter gossip's relationship with organizational socialization. This

leads me to pose the following the research question:

RQ_1: To what extent does one's tendency to gossip moderate the relationship between

workplace gossip and organizational socialization?

Method

Participants

 Students taking the basic communication course at a midsized, private university each

recruited three participants for this study in exchange for minimal course credit. Students

provided the emails of possible participants, and I then sent a link to the survey to those email

addresses. Participants met the following criteria: 1) they were at least 18 years old, 2) they

worked at least 20 hours per week, and 3) they were not self-employed. Participants ($n = 204$)

ranged in age from 18 to 64 ($M = 36.07$, $SD = 15.08$). The sample included 95 men and 109

women, a majority of whom were Caucasian (87.3%).

Measures

Workplace Gossip. I measured the subject, valence, and frequency of workplace gossip

with the Workplace Gossip (WG) scales (Brady et al., 2017). The measure contains 20 items that

ask respondents to reflect on their negative workplace gossip about a supervisor (NWGS, 5

items, e.g., "criticized your supervisor while talking to a work colleague"), positive workplace

gossip about a supervisor (PWGS, 5 items, e.g., "complimented your supervisor's actions while

talking to a work colleague"), negative workplace gossip about coworkers (NWGC, 5 items, e.g.,

"told an unflattering story about a co-worker while talking to another work colleague"), and

positive workplace gossip about coworkers (PWGC, 5 items, e.g., "defended a co-worker's

actions while talking to another work colleague"). Participants responded using a 7-point

response scale (1 = *never,* 7 = *more than once a day*). In a past study, the WG scales were both

valid and reliable, producing a Cronbach alpha of .94 for NWGS and a .95 for PWGS, NWGC,

and PWGC (Brady et al., 2017). In the present study, the alpha coefficients were .91, .89, .90,

and .89 for NWGS, PWGS, NWGC, and PWGC.

Organizational Assimilation. I measured organizational socialization (also known as

organizational assimilation) with an extended and revalidated version of the Organizational

Assimilation Index (OAI) (Gailliard et al., 2010). Myers and Oetzel (2003) created the original

OAI. The extended OAI contains 24 items that recognize seven interrelated factors: familiarity

with coworkers (3 items, e.g., "I consider my coworkers friends"), familiarity with supervisors (3

items, e.g., "I feel like I know my supervisor pretty well"), acculturation (4 items, e.g., "I know

the values of my organization"), recognition (4 items, e.g., "My supervisor recognizes when I do

a good job"), involvement (3 items, e.g., "I talk about how much I enjoy my work"), job

competency (4 items, e.g., "I have figured out efficient ways to do my work"), and role

negotiation (3 items, e.g., "I have changed some aspects of my position"). Participants responded

using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree*). In a previous study, all

dimensions produced suitable alpha coefficients of .86, .87, .84, .95, .83, .79, and .80,

respectively (Gailliard et al., 2010). In the current study, the alpha coefficients for these

dimensions were .79, .79, .81, .89, .78, .64, and .73.

Tendency to Gossip. I measured a participant's tendency to gossip with the Tendency to

Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ) (Nevo et al., 1993). The questionnaire begins with a message

assuring participants that the tendency to talk about people is almost a daily occurrence. The

measure contains 20 items that evaluate a participant's tendency to gossip about various subjects

that may relate to work (e.g., "talk with friends about other people's success at work") or may

not (e.g., "talk with friends about educational level of celebrities"). Participants responded using

a 7-point response scale (1 = *never, 7 = always*). The TGQ produced a Cronbach alpha of .87 in

a previous study (Nevo et al., 1993) and a .94 in the present study.

Data Analysis

To investigate the relationships between gossip and organizational socialization, I

conducted bivariate analyses using Pearson Correlation. Brady et al.'s (2017) types of workplace

gossip were the independent variables and Gailliard et al.'s (2010) seven dimensions of

socialization were the outcome variables. To explore potential moderators, I used multiple linear

regression. In my preliminary analysis, I also tested demographic variables of interest (i.e., age,

sex, and organizational tenure), but these results were not significant.

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Results

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Table 1 includes the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and Pearson correlations of

all variables in the study. As predicted in hypothesis 1, positive workplace gossip about

supervisors was positively related to familiarity with supervisors (H1a), $r = .32, p < .01$.

Additionally, negative workplace gossip about supervisors was inversely related to familiarity with supervisors (H1b), $r = -.21$, $p < .01$. Thus, the first hypotheses were supported.

Hypothesis 2 addressed the relationships between gossip about coworkers and familiarity with coworkers. The data offered support for H2a, but not H2b. As such, positive workplace gossip about coworkers positively predicted familiarity with coworkers, $r = .33$, $p < .01$. However, the relationship between negative workplace gossip about coworkers and familiarity with coworkers was not statistically significant, $r = .11$, $p > .05$.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that both positive and negative workplace gossip about supervisors and coworkers would be positively related to acculturation. This hypothesis was partially supported. As predicted, positive workplace gossip about coworkers was positively related to acculturation, $r = .19$, $p < .01$. Interestingly, negative workplace gossip about supervisors was inversely related to acculturation, $r = -.20$, $p < .01$. That is to say, as negative workplace gossip about supervisors increases, familiarity with the organization's norms and standards decreases. Two types of gossip were not significantly related to acculturation: positive workplace gossip about supervisors, $r = .13$, $p > .05$, and negative workplace gossip about coworkers, $r = -.12$, $p > .05$.

Hypothesis 4a predicted that positive workplace gossip about supervisors and coworkers would be positively related to beneficial outcomes such as involvement, recognition, job competency, and role negotiation. Positive workplace gossip about supervisors positively predicted involvement, $r = .39$, $p < .01$; recognition, $r = .28$, $p < .01$; and role negotiation, $r = .16$, $p < .05$. However, positive workplace gossip about supervisors was not significantly related to job competency, $r = .10$, $p > .05$. As predicted, positive workplace gossip about coworkers was positively related to involvement, $r = .29$, $p < .01$; recognition, $r = .17$, $p < .05$; job

competency, $r = .26$, $p < .01$; and role negotiation, $r = .22$, $p < .01$. Thus, Hypothesis 4a was partially supported.

Hypothesis 4b predicted that negative workplace gossip about supervisors and coworkers would be inversely related to involvement, recognition, job competency, and role negotiation. This was partially supported. Negative workplace gossip about supervisors was inversely related to involvement, $r = -.28$, $p < .01$, and recognition, $r = -.35$, $p < .01$. It was not significantly related to job competency, $r = -.03$, $p > .05$, and role negotiation, $r = -.05$, $p > .05$. Negative workplace gossip about coworkers was not significantly related to any of the following: involvement, $r = -.11$, $p > .05$; recognition, $r = -.09$, $p > .05$; job competency, $r = .09$, $p > .05$; and role negotiation, $r = .04$, $p > .05$.

Finally, this study's research question asked if an individual's tendency to gossip moderated the relationship between workplace gossip and organizational socialization. Various interactions were tested, but the only statistically significant interactions were between tendency to gossip and negative workplace gossip about coworkers. These variables were first mean-centered and entered in step one of a regression analysis. Step two of the analysis also included the interaction term. The interaction was a significant predictor of acculturation, $F(3,188) = 10.23$, $p < .01$, and recognition, $F(3,188) = 4.84$, $p < .05$. Figure 1 plots the interaction effect with acculturation as the dependent variable, and Figure 2 plots the interaction effect with recognition as the dependent variable. In both cases, increasing the individual's tendency to gossip shifts the direction of the relationship of interest. More specifically, when an individual has a low tendency to gossip, negative gossip about coworkers is positively associated with acculturation. However, when an individual possesses a high tendency to gossip, negative gossip

about coworkers is inversely associated with acculturation. This also applies to the relationship

between negative gossip about coworkers and recognition.

Discussion

The present study expands the understanding of how gossip functions in the workplace,

particularly in relation to organizational socialization. By positioning gossip as a viable source of

information and a means of information gathering, this study highlights the more productive

functions of gossip that are often neglected in both academic and workforce arenas. At the same

time, these findings also confirm the previous literature's position that gossip can negatively

impact a workplace, but adds greater nuance to such situations. The present study offers three

major contributions to the literature by drawing attention to (1) gossip's ability to highlight

familiarity in relationships, (2) the benefits of positive workplace gossip, and (3) an unusual

relationship between negative workplace gossip and acculturation.

Gossip and Familiarity in Relationships

First, this study shows connections between individuals' gossiping behaviors and their

familiarity with others in the organization. As one might expect, positively gossiping about

supervisors and coworkers is positively associated with greater familiarity with these parties.

Similarly, negatively gossiping about one's supervisor indicates a lack of familiarity with that

supervisor. If a supervisor-subordinate relationship lacks the familiarity that facilitates

interpersonal connection, there may be less opportunities for fostering feelings of recognition in

the subordinate. Although recognition can certainly come from coworkers, the supervisor

remains an attractive source of commendation for individuals who wish to be recognized as

important organizational members. As seen in the present data set, when individuals negatively

gossip more about their supervisors, they are likely to feel less involved with the organization's mission.

These results demonstrated connections between negative workplace gossip about supervisors and several unfavorable outcomes (i.e., decreased familiarity with supervisors, decreased acculturation, decreased recognition, and decreased involvement in the organization). Each of these outcomes is cause for concern in an organization, but the combination thereof is even more troubling because it indicates that an individual is not effectively socializing into the organization. Crafting strong supervisor-subordinate relationships is certainly not a novel focus in organizational communication literature (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and studies often elaborate on the many benefits of a positive supervisor-subordinate relationship. Conversely, a negative supervisor-subordinate relationship possesses disadvantages such as decreased job satisfaction. This study's finding regarding negative workplace gossip about supervisors serves as a cautionary tale that a negative relationship with one's supervisor may be an indication of ineffective socialization, which in turn relates to the individual's ability to succeed within the organization (Bullis, 1993).

Positive Workplace Gossip and Related Benefits

Second, this study draws attention to the one of the most understudied faces of gossip: positive workplace gossip. Positive workplace gossip about supervisors is positively associated with five dimensions of socialization (i.e., familiarity with supervisor and coworkers, recognition, involvement, and role negotiation), and positive workplace gossip about coworkers is positively related to all seven dimensions of organizational socialization. Most notably, positive workplace gossip about coworkers is the only type of gossip that positively predicts an individual's acculturation and job competency. Perhaps positive workplace gossip creates a

space not only for information gathering, but also a space for meaningful celebration of socially

desirable behaviors in the organization. Positive workplace gossip allows individuals to

simultaneously praise organizational members and set standards for exemplary practices in

organizational roles. Positive workplace gossip may also be a means of identifying

organizational heroes or role-models. Listening to positive gossip about a coworker is also a low-

risk method of information seeking, and thus more desirable than asking supervisors direct

questions about job expectations (Miller & Jablin, 1991).

Negative Workplace Gossip and Acculturation

Third, the present study also elaborates on an unexpected relationship between negative

workplace gossip and acculturation. Originally, this study predicted that all forms of gossip

would be positively related to acculturation, regardless of the gossip's valence. This reasoning

was guided by the notion that a large, diverse sampling of information appeared to be a logical

prerequisite to acculturation, or an individual's ability to understand organizational norms and

standards (Gailliard et al., 2010). Instead, findings revealed that as negative workplace gossip

about supervisors increased, acculturation to the organization decreased. This finding suggests

that negative workplace gossip generally impairs an individual's ability and/or motivation to

learn about the organization. This is a feasible scenario, given that negative gossip is often

condemned as a destructive and distracting force in organizations (Clegg & Iterson, 2009).

However, there is an important exception to this finding: when an individual has a low tendency

to gossip, negative gossip about coworkers tends to increase acculturation. For those with a high

tendency to gossip, negative gossip about coworkers tends to decrease acculturation. In other

words, the relationship between negative gossip about coworkers and acculturation is not

significant for those with an average tendency to gossip, but becomes significant for those with low or high tendencies.

An individual's tendency to gossip may significantly affect this relationship because personal tendencies could be related to how the individual views gossip as an information gathering tool. Presumably, an individual who does not gossip often would not normally seek out opportunities to gossip in the workplace, especially in comparison to those who do gossip frequently. Having a low tendency to gossip and participating in a high amount of negative workplace gossip about coworkers is an unlikely pairing, but it might be explained by a motivation to gather information about the organization's norms, which would thereby increase acculturation. Following this logic, those who have a high tendency to gossip may be motivated by factors other than information gathering such as enjoyment of gossip. If individuals are not using negative gossip as an information gathering tool, then a decrease in acculturation is likely. Future research could explore additional moderators that may affect the relationship between negative workplace gossip and acculturation. Scholars can also extend their focus and explore potential moderators for other combinations of types of workplace gossip and dimensions of organizational socialization.

Practical Applications

Gossip is generally labelled as an unwelcome presence in organizations. Despite this, gossip continues to thrive in organizations due to its inherently social and communicative nature. Rather than try to prohibit gossip or dismiss it as mere idle talk, organizations should utilize gossip as a device for checking the temperature of the information environment. In other words, organizations should be wary of information environments characterized by negative workplace gossip and welcoming of information environments that cultivate positive workplace gossip. An

organization burdened with negative gossip is a warning sign that individuals are likely

dissatisfied and unable to effectively socialize into their roles. An organization filled with

positive gossip is one that will likely facilitate more opportunities for learning and improvement

during the socialization process. Organizations should also attempt to monitor the content of

workplace gossip, as popular conversations may be an indication of what topics need more

attention in formal channels of communications. In short, organizations benefit more from

viewing gossip as a means of information gathering rather than a force to be destroyed.

Limitations of Present Study

The present study offers new insights on potential functions of gossip, but is not without

limitations. First, the sample for this study was predominantly Caucasian (87.3%). Because

students at a predominantly Caucasian university recruited this study's participants, this

limitation was unsurprising, but a more diverse sample would be ideal. With a more diverse

sample, the variety of organizations in which participants work may also expand. Another

limitation of this study is the possibility of social desirability bias among participants that comes

from self-report surveys. Some questions on the survey such as the negative workplace gossip

scales may have elicited socially desirable answers. To combat this, the survey rarely used the

word "gossip" to avoid triggering any preconceived notions about gossiping. However, future

research should investigate gossip beyond self-reported, retrospective surveys. Surveys could be

designed to be other-focused rather than self-focused. Alternatively, ethnographic research

methods may be an effective way of investigating gossip as it naturally unfolds in organizations.

Directions for Future Research

This study adds to a body of research that examines gossip alongside outcome variables

in organizations and the relationships therein. The knowledge that significant relationships exist

between workplace gossip and organizational socialization should serve as an impetus for examining how gossip is communicatively constructed and constrained in organizations. Research questions should extend beyond a content analysis of gossip interactions and into an investigation of the organizational discourse surrounding gossip practices. As structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) would suggest, an organization's structure may simultaneously enable and constrain the ability to gossip. Considering this study's findings, it would be particularly interesting to investigate how organizations facilitate positive gossip, if at all. Such investigations would lay the groundwork for offering specific recommendations to organizational managers. Future research could also explore the role of technology in workplace gossip. Although gossip is primarily envisioned in face-to-face settings, the increasing selection of media channels in organizations is a contextual factor that may change how individuals choose to gossip and socialize with others.

Conclusion

The present study expands the academic approach to studying workplace gossip and its outcomes in organizations. First, an examination of an individual's gossiping behaviors is positively associated with the individual's familiarity with certain parties. Second, the many benefits of positive workplace gossip support the claim that not all gossip is destructive in organizations. Third, this study found that negative workplace gossip typically decreases acculturation, but the interaction between low tendency to gossip and negative gossip about coworkers is a noteworthy exception. Moving forward, the combination of workplace gossip and organizational socialization is a promising avenue for exploring questions about the communicative power of informal information sharing in organizations.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for All Variables

Variables	*M*	*SD*	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. NWGS	2.01	1.14	.91	–												
2. PWGS	2.80	1.11	.89	.00	–											
3. NWGC	2.24	1.12	.90	.48*	.15*	–										
4. PWGC	3.05	1.11	.89	.31*	.57*	.48*	–									
5. OAI	5.51	0.80	.92	-.25**	.32**	-.03	.33**	–								
6. Familiarity with Coworkers	5.64	0.95	.79	-.13	.25**	.11	.33**	.74**	–							
7. Familiarity with Supervisor	5.31	1.27	.79	-.21**	.32**	-.02	.27**	.78**	.56**	–						
8. Acculturation	5.99	0.92	.81	-.20**	.13	-.12	.19**	.80**	.63**	.56**	–					
9. Recognition	5.59	1.16	.89	-.35**	.28**	-.09	.17*	.82**	.53**	.67**	.53**	–				
10. Involvement	5.12	1.25	.78	-.28**	.39**	-.11	.29**	.73**	.53**	.44**	.54**	.59**	–			
11. Job Competency	5.56	0.88	.64	-.03	.10	.09	.26**	.69**	.46**	.40**	.56**	.43**	.33**	–		
12. Role Negotiation	5.21	1.18	.73	-.05	.16*	.04	.22**	.58**	.21**	.37**	.34**	.34**	.33**	.43**	–	
13. Tendency to Gossip	2.67	1.05	.94	.40**	.11	.40**	.24**	-.26**	-.10	-.15*	-.31**	-.22**	-.15*	-.18*	-.18*	–

Note. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01

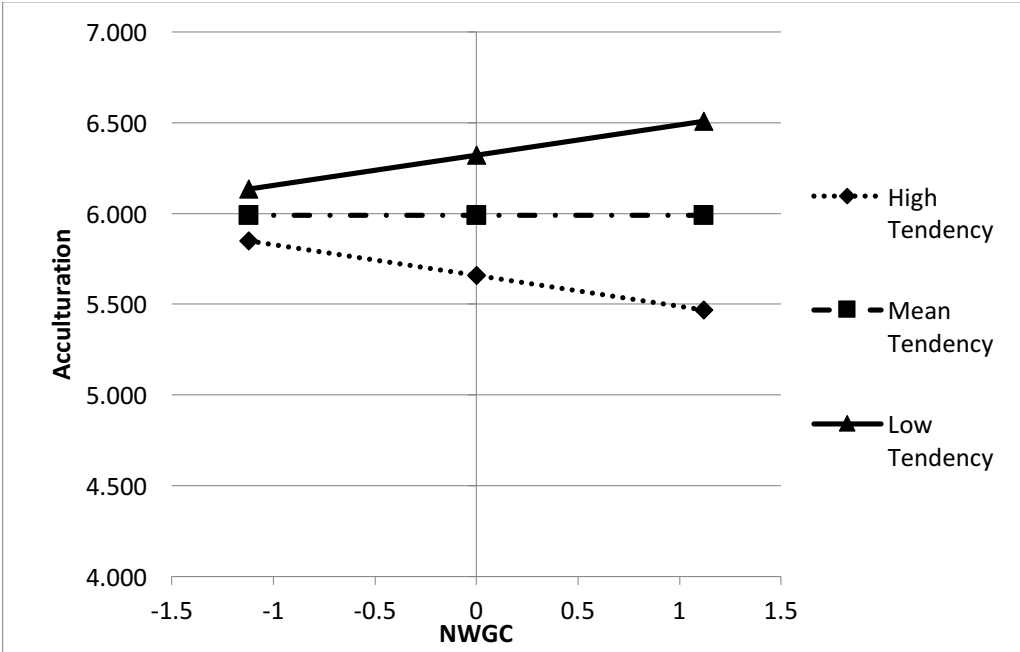Figure 1: Interaction effect between Tendency to Gossip and NWGC on Acculturation

Figure 2: Interaction effect between Tendency to Gossip and NWGC on Recognition
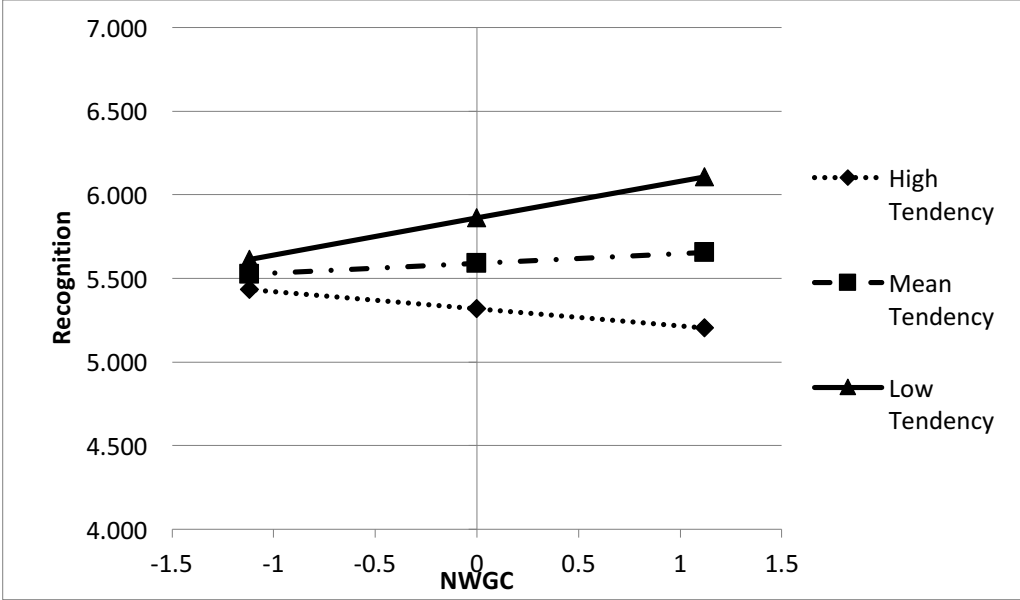
Appendix

Directions: To begin, please answer the following demographic questions.

1. What is your biological sex?
    1 Male
    2 Female

2. What is your age? _____

3. What is your ethnicity or race?
    1 White
    2 African American
    3 Hispanic American
    4 Native American
    5 Asian American
    6 Other (please specify) _____

4. How long have you worked at your current job? _____

5. What type of organization do you work for (What field do you work in?) _____

Directions: The following questions are about workplace conversations in which you talked about your supervisor when he/she was not present to hear what was said. In the last month, how often have you… (use the following scale)

Never	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Once a week	2-3 times a week	Once a day	More than once a day
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. asked a work colleague if they have a negative impression of something that your supervisor has done	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. questioned your supervisor's abilities while talking to a work colleague	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. criticized your supervisor while talking a work colleague	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. vented to a work colleague about something that your supervisor has done	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. told an unflattering story about your supervisor while talking to a work colleague	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

In the last month, how often have you…

Never	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Once a week	2-3 times a week	Once a day	More than once a day
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. complimented your supervisor's actions while talking to a work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. told a work colleague good things about your supervisor	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. defended your supervisor's actions while talking to a work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. said something nice about your supervisor while talking to a work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. told a work colleague that you respect your supervisor	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Directions: The following questions are about workplace conversations in which you talked about a co-worker when he/she was not present to hear what was said. The co-worker could be any co-worker who is not your supervisor.

In last month, how often have you…

Never	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Once a week	2-3 times a week	Once a day	More than once a day
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. asked a work colleague if they have a negative impression of something that another co-worker has done	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. questioned a co-worker's abilities while talking to another work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. criticized a co-worker while talking another work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. vented to a work colleague about something that another co-worker has done	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. told an unflattering story about a co-worker while talking to another work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

In the last month, how often have you…

Never	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Once a week	2-3 times a week	Once a day	More than once a day
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. complimented a co-worker's actions while talking to another work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. told a work colleague good things about another co-worker	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. defended a co-worker's actions while talking to another work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. said something nice about a co-worker while talking to another work colleague	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. told a work colleague that you respect another co-worker	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Directions: This questionnaire concerns the tendency of people to talk about other people. It is a tendency that occurs almost everyday, and most people engage in it. Read the statements below carefully, and try to estimate the extent to which each statement characterizes your own behavior.

Never						Always
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	N						A
1. Read gossip columns in newspapers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Talk with friends about other people's clothes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Talk with friends about relationships between men and women	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Prefer listening to conversations about other people rather than taking part in them	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Gossip about people who left the country	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Talk with friends about other people's grades and achievements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Can contribute interesting information in conversations about people	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. Talk with friends about other people's problems at work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Analyze with friends the compatibility of couples	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. Talk with friends about other people's personal appearance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. Talk with friends about educational level of celebrities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. Analyze with friends other people's motives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. Talk with friends about other people's salaries	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. Discuss personal appearance of others after social events	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Talk with friends about other people's success at work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. Know what is going on, who is dating, etc.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. Talk with friends about other people's love affairs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. Read biographies of famous people	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. Tell friends about interesting details of others	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. Tend to gossip	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Directions: For each statement, please indicate how much you agree using the scale.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	SD						SA
1. I consider my coworkers friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I feel comfortable talking to my coworkers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I feel like I know my coworkers pretty well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I feel like I know my supervisor pretty well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. My supervisor sometimes discusses problems with me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. My supervisor and I talk together often	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I understand the standards of the organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I think I have a good idea about how this organization operates	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I know the values of my organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I do not mind being asked to perform my work according to the organization's standards	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. My supervisor recognizes when I do a good job	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. My supervisor listens to my ideas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I think my supervisor values my opinions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I think my supervisor recognizes my value to the organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. I talk to my coworkers about how much I like it here	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. I volunteer for duties that benefit the organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. I talk about how much I enjoy my work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. I can do others' jobs, if I am needed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. I have figured out efficient ways to do my work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. I think I'm an expert at what I do	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I often show others how to perform our work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I have helped to change the duties of my position	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I have changed some aspects of my position	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I do this job a bit differently than my predecessor did	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Directions: For each statement, please choose the number to indicate your degree of agreement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

	SD				SA
1. I receive recognition for a job well done	1	2	3	4	5
2. I feel close to the people at work	1	2	3	4	5
3. I feel good about working at this company	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel secure about my job	1	2	3	4	5
5. I believe management is concerned about me	1	2	3	4	5
6. On the whole, I believe work is good for my physical health	1	2	3	4	5
7. My wages are good	1	2	3	4	5

8. All my talents and skills are used at work   1   2   3   4   5
9. I get along with my supervisors   1   2   3   4   5
10. I feel good about my job   1   2   3   4   5

Directions: For each statement, please choose the number to indicate your degree of agreement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

	SD				SA
1. I would prefer another more ideal job than the one I now work in	1	2	3	4	5
2. I have thought seriously about changing agencies since I began working here	1	2	3	4	5
3. I hope to be working for this agency until I retire	1	2	3	4	5
4. I seriously intend to look for another job within the next year	1	2	3	4	5

Directions: Please answer the following questions about your supervisor/leader at work.

1. Do you know where you stand with your leader…do you usually know how satisfied your leader is with what you do?

Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

2. How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs?

Not a Bit	A Little	A Fair Amount	Quite a Bit	A Great Deal
1	2	3	4	5

3. How well does your leader recognize your potential?

Not at All	A Little	Moderately	Mostly	Fully
1	2	3	4	5

4. Regardless of how much formal authority he/she has built into his/her position, what are the chances that your leader would use his/her power to help you solve problems in your work?

None	Small	Moderate	High	Very High
1	2	3	4	5

5. Again, regardless of the amount of formal authority your leader has, what are the chances that he/she would "bail you out," at his/her expense?

None	Small	Moderate	High	Very High
1	2	3	4	5

6. I have enough confidence in my leader that I would defend and justify his/her decision if he/she were not present to do so?

Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. How would you characterize your working relationship with your leader?

Extremely Ineffective	Worse than Average	Average	Better than Average	Extremely Effective
1	2	3	4	5

Directions: Please answer the following questions about your coworkers.

1. Do you know where you stand with your coworkers…do you usually know how satisfied your coworkers are with what you do?

Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

2. How well do your coworkers understand your job problems and needs?

Not a Bit	A Little	A Fair Amount	Quite a Bit	A Great Deal
1	2	3	4	5

3. Regardless of how much formal authority they have built into their positions, what are the chances that your coworkers would use their power to help you solve problems in your work?

None	Small	Moderate	High	Very High
1	2	3	4	5

4. Again, regardless of the amount of formal authority your coworkers have, what are the chances that your coworkers would "bail you out," at their expense?

None	Small	Moderate	High	Very High
1	2	3	4	5

5. I have enough confidence in my coworkers that I would defend and justify their decisions if they were not present to do so?

Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

6. How would you characterize your working relationship with your coworkers?

Extremely Ineffective	Worse than Average	Average	Better than Average	Extremely Effective
1	2	3	4	5

Directions: For each statement, please choose the number to indicate how accurate it is according to *your* experience in the organization.

Definitely False	Somewhat False	A Mixture of True and False	Somewhat True	Definitely True
1	2	3	4	5

Observation about the Organization	DF				DT
1. "Yes-people" are the most likely to be promoted.	1	2	3	4	5
2. You need a mentor or buddy to figure out what is expected of you.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Top-level managers act like they are a private club that is difficult to join.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Laughing at the boss's humor really works.	1	2	3	4	5
5. An effective way to convince people is to say, "This is what the corner office would be like."	1	2	3	4	5
6. What counts around here is not what you know but who you know.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The company talks a lot about welcoming diversity but I don't see much evidence that it is true.	1	2	3	4	5
8. There are some people on the payroll who do appear to have a real job.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Flirting with the boss is a good way to get a bigger than average salary increase.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Some of the different divisions in the company act like warring tribes.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Not attending a company social event can get you out of favor.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Exchanging gossip is a daily activity.	1	2	3	4	5
13. E-mail is often used to explain why somebody is right and somebody else wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
14. The distribution lists on many e-mail messages are used mostly to impress other people.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Top-level management is known to spy on other workers.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I have seen or heard about lots of backstabbing.	1	2	3	4	5
17. You see more cliques around here than you would in a high school.	1	2	3	4	5
18. It is common practice for managers to steal ideas from subordinates.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Being a kiss-up helps you get ahead in this place.	1	2	3	4	5
20. People in key positions tend to look alike and talk alike.	1	2	3	4	5
21. We have a lot of in-groups and out-groups.	1	2	3	4	5
22. You need a lot of face time with your manager to get on his or her good side.	1	2	3	4	5
23. The messenger of bad news falls into disfavor quickly.	1	2	3	4	5
24. The executives think they should be treated like royalty.	1	2	3	4	5