What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Others? Evidence for the Primacy of the Horizontal Dimension of Social Evaluation in Workplace Gossip

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we describe a bottom-up exploration of the social evaluations that emerge from the gossip people hear about others in a workplace context. We used the Dual Perspective Model (DPM: Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014, 2018) to code open-format gossip stories provided by 522 participants for evaluations of gossip targets' warmth and morality (i.e., communion) and competence and assertiveness (i.e., agency). We additionally coded evaluations of work-effort, self-control, and stress, as well as the gossip topic. Our analysis revealed that communion facet evaluations were more frequent than agency facet evaluations. Additionally, gossip was predominantly negative, reflecting the fact that evaluations usually conveyed information about low warmth, morality and competence; assertiveness was an exception, with high evaluations more common than low. These negative evaluations were most frequently contained in gossip about the negative character of the target and work-related norm transgressions. Our analysis further revealed distinct patterns of co-occurrence for the DPM facets, providing further evidence of the utility of distinguishing not only between the major dimensions of social evaluation, but also their facets. This research provides new insights regarding the variety, prevalence, and valence of social evaluations that emerge from workplace gossip. Most important in the present context, it shows the usefulness of the DPM facets in understanding the content of gossip.

GOSSIP AND SOCIAL EVALUATION

Gossip is defined as talk about people who are not present (Dores Cruz et al., 2021a). This kind of talk appears to be ubiquitous in daily conversations across a wide range of social contexts, including the workplace (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Michelson et al., 2010; Robbins & Karan, 2019). Although historically neglected in the literature, there is increasing evidence that gossip shapes our understanding of social targets and our social milieu (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Foster, 2004). These kinds of social evaluations are a fundamental aspect of social life because our beliefs about the nature of those around us shape our understanding of our social world (e.g., as one that is benign or hostile) as well as our behavioral responses to those we encounter (Abele et al., 2021; Cuddy et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2008). When forming social evaluations, there are several sources of information that we can draw on. Most directly, we can draw on our interactions with others; that is, how they behave towards us. Somewhat less directly, we can draw on our observations of others as they go about their lives. At the most indirect end of the spectrum, we can draw on the descriptions of others' behaviors, qualities, or attitudes that we receive in the form of gossip (Wojciszke et al., 1998; Hauke & Abele, 2020).

Gossip may be one of the main ways in which we gather information and form evaluations about people we do not know personally (e.g., the work colleagues of friends or family members). This kind of indirect information about strangers can be crucial in many social contexts typical of everyday contemporary life (i.e., contexts involving large, mobile social groups). In such contexts, interactions with acquaintances or strangers are likely and people can use the gossip that they have received to assess whether another person is likely to help or harm them, and thus, how they should behave towards this other person (e.g., Nowak & Sigmund, 1998). Gossip also plays a key role in helping individuals to understand the principles, norms, and values that guide the behavior of people around them (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Martinescu et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2017). The capacity of gossip to inform people's social evaluations of unacquainted others may explain why people are avid collectors of gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, 2012; Feinberg et al., 2014; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2016a, 2016b).

However, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., recent work by Dores Cruz et al., 2021b and Hauke & Abele, 2020), the role of gossip in social evaluation has been largely overlooked. At present, we do not have a good understanding of what people talk about when they talk about others, and thus of the social evaluations that emerge about gossip targets. Indeed, this lack of knowledge was recognized by Giardini and colleagues (2021), who called for research examining the content of social evaluations that arise from the partial and muddled information that people receive about others in daily life. Therefore, we need to better understand what we talk about when we talk about others. In order to effectively capture the social evaluations that emerge from gossip, this paper takes a bottom-up approach to an analysis of gossip stories.

CURRENT INSIGHTS ON SOCIAL EVALUATION: THE DUAL PERSPECTIVE MODEL

At present, the Dual Perspective Model (DPM: Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014, 2018) is the dominant perspective on interpersonal social evaluation. According to the DPM, people evaluate others along two main dimensions: agency and communion. These dimensions are related to two fundamental challenges of life, where the first is achieving individual goals (which requires agency) and the second is maintaining supportive social bonds (which requires communion; Ybarra et al., 2008). Recent work that integrates different models of social evaluation (Abele et al., 2021; Ellemers et al., 2020; Koch et al., 2021) provides a strong basis for expecting that these two dimensions are universal. *Agency,* or the vertical dimension, refers to qualities relevant for goal attainment like being assertive, smart, capable, efficient, and ambitious. *Communion*, or the horizontal dimension, refers to qualities relevant in establishing and maintaining social relationships, like being friendly, trustworthy, fair, cooperative, and emotionally expressive (Abele et al., 2008; 2016; 2021). There is also an increasing recognition that it is not only possible to further divide each of these dimensions into two distinct facets but that, because they can have different social consequences, it is desirable to do so (Abele et al., 2016). Agency consists of the facets of assertiveness (determined, assertive) and competence (competent, efficient). These facets recognize the fact that successful goal pursuit requires both motivation (assertiveness) and ability (competence). Communion consists of the facets of warmth (warm, caring) and morality (fair, trustworthy). The communal facets recognize that maintaining supportive bonds with others requires both interpersonal warmth and affection and fair and honest treatment.

There is a growing body of work that has aimed to understand the role of the two dimensions of social evaluation and their facets in social life. One of the major discoveries of this work is that communion has primacy over agency in interpersonal impression formation (e.g., Abele et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske, 2018). That is, when evaluating others, people pay more attention to information about communion than about agency (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Wojciszke et al., 1998).

In accounting for this, researchers have argued that if people wish to maximize their gains and minimize their losses when interacting with others (a universal desire) they need to seek out actors who are benevolent and avoid those who are malicious or exploitative. In other words, they need to evaluate others according to their communal traits and seek out those who are high (not low) on that dimension. Evaluating another person's agency is, in contrast, less important for most everyday social interactions (Wojciszke, 2005). This is because while agentic traits are integral to a person's ability to achieve their own goals, they are, in many everyday circumstances, of little consequence to those around them. For instance, while evaluating a person as knowledgeable and strong-willed may give us confidence that they will succeed at work, master a musical instrument, or stick with a fitness program, it is unlikely to give us confidence that they will be a loyal friend or collaborator (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007).

The finding that people are more concerned about communion than agency has implications for the content of gossip. Specifically, it seems reasonable to expect that the traits that matter to people (and the behaviors that support these trait inferences) will dominate what people talk about when they gossip. At present, however, there are very few studies that examine people's evaluations of gossip targets, which provides a limited basis for predicting the relative occurrence of different dimensions or facets of social evaluation. For example, in an experience sampling study of everyday gossip, Dores Cruz et al. (2021b) found that evaluations in terms of target warmth, morality, dominance, and competence were about equally common. We therefore develop two competing lines of reasoning.

First, the argument that a fundamental purpose of gossip is to help people avoid free riders or those who are likely to do them harm (Sommerfeld et al., 2007) supports the above-mentioned possibility that gossip will primarily concern the communion of targets. In line with this possibility, research shows that the impressions people form about gossip targets are most strongly influenced by information about the communion facet of morality (Hauke & Abele, 2020). There is also evidence that people rate gossipers as more moral when they share information about a target's high or low morality, perhaps because they perceive this information as especially useful (Peters & Kashima, 2014). Thus, based on these findings and previous research showing that communion is the dominant dimension for evaluating others (Abele et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske, 2018), we predict that evaluations of communion (and the facets of warmth and morality) will be more prominent in gossip than evaluations of agency (and the facets assertiveness and competence) (Hypothesis 1).

Second, however, there are some contexts in which agentic traits are also likely to be important and salient for social evaluation. For example, in task related contexts, people are expected to achieve specific goals, complete tasks, and perform well in order to deliver on their obligations and create value for their organization. For this reason, in work contexts people are usually evaluated and rewarded for the agentic traits and behaviors that relate to in-role performance. Importantly, there is some evidence that a person's status, which is a form of social recognition in the workplace, is related to evaluations of their agency (specifically, assertiveness), but is not related to evaluations of their communion (Louvet et al., 2019). On the basis of this work, we formulate a competing prediction: when gossip relates to behaviors in the workplace (as it does in this study), evaluations of agency and its facets will be more prominent in gossip than evaluations of communion and its facets (Hypothesis 2).

We have one final expectation regarding the valence of the content of gossip. Recent empirical work has revealed that people are equally likely to report exchanging negative, neutral, or positive gossip in their daily life (Dores Cruz et al, 2021b); indeed, there is some evidence that gossip may predominantly have neutral valence (Robbins & Karan, 2019). At the same time, however, negative stories are likely to be more accessible in memory because learning about and responding to dangers rather than opportunities may be more adaptive (Baumeister et al., 2004). For this reason, we expect that when people are asked to recall an item of gossip that was previously shared with them, they would be more likely to mention negative rather than positive gossip (Hypothesis 3).

A BOTTOM-UP EXPLORATIVE APPROACH

Previous research has extensively documented the occurrence, characteristics, and consequences of the two broad dimensions that underpin the DPM (see Abele et al., 2021; Cuddy et al., 2008; Koch et al., 2021; Ybarra et al., 2008). However, most previous research has taken a top-down approach by measuring or manipulating communion and agency to better understand their role in social life (e.g., Abele et al., 2016; Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Hauke & Abele, 2019; 2020; Wojciszke, 1994; Ybarra et al., 2008). These approaches have brought valuable insights regarding the role of agency and communion in social evaluation. At the same time, however, they limit the likelihood that aspects that are not neatly captured by the DPM will be noticed and their importance for social evaluation be explored. Along these lines, Nicolas and colleagues (2022) have recently shown the utility of exploring the content of people's spontaneously generated stereotypes for different groups. Such open-ended, free-response approaches are pivotal for gaining

additional insights into social evaluation, and for revising and improving current theories.

In order to more comprehensively capture the evaluations that are formed based on (behavioral) descriptions of social targets communicated in natural language, we take a bottom-up explorative approach. Using a similar approach to Hauke and Abele (2019, Study 4), we asked participants to recall and report in an open response format a recent situation in which someone shared a story with them about a target whom they did not know personally. Participants were also asked to indicate how they would describe the traits or behavior of the target in the story. Guided by the DPM framework (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014, 2018), two trained coders independently extracted and categorized social evaluations of targets that emerged from the stories and descriptions of the target. To maximize our chance of sampling gossip that relates to both agency and communion, we focused on stories people heard about another's work colleague. In sum, we explore the content of freely reported gossip stories that relate to an unknown person in a work context as well as the social evaluations that receivers form based on these stories.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

After receiving approval by the University's Ethics Board, we posted a survey on Prolific, an online panel survey provider, and received responses from 522 participants. Inclusion criteria were that participants worked full time and had advanced English language skills. Participants completed the survey anonymously and were paid 2.10 GBP. We excluded 27 participants from the analyses because they provided unclear stories ($n = 24$) or did not respond in English ($n = 3$). Furthermore, we excluded 17 participants who described a story about targets they knew personally. Therefore, the analyses reported below are based on 482 respondents.

The average age of participants was 31.96 years ($SD = 10.56$); 228 participants were female, 250 were male, and 4 indicated 'other.' Participants had different education levels (1 primary, 27 secondary, 183 high-school or technical degree, 149 bachelor's degree, 101 master's degree, 19 PhD degree, and 2 did not indicate). Participants resided in 26 countries; the most frequent locations were UK, $n = 195$, US, $n = 87$, Poland, $n = 54$, and Portugal, $n = 44$. Participants worked in different domains, of which the most frequent were retail, $n = 41$, IT, $n = 32$, and health care, $n = 32$. The most frequent job roles were administrative or support staff, $n = 67$, middle management, $n = 62$, and skilled laborer, $n = 62$.

Participants were asked to recall a story they had recently heard from someone in their network (e.g., a friend, family member, an acquaintance) about another person at the storyteller's work who was not known personally to the participant and who was absent when the story was shared (cf. Dores Cruz et al., 2021a). We did not use the term 'gossip' in our instructions to reduce the chance that negative connotations of the term could bias responses (Baumeister et al., 2004; Foster, 2004). We asked participants to report a story by answering two open questions: (1) what the storyteller had told them about one of his/her colleagues, and (2) how they would describe the traits or behaviors of this colleague (i.e., the story target). We also asked participants who had told them the story. These data were collected as part of a broader project focusing on gendered dynamics in workplace gossip. A list of additional measures not used in the present paper is provided in the online supplement.

CODING

Two independent coders rated participants' responses to the questions of what the storyteller told them and how they would describe the target. Although we asked participants to answer two questions, one about the story content and one about target description, in practice their answers were often intertwined, such that many participants spontaneously included trait descriptions when reporting what the storyteller had told them (e.g., 'he said that this person is two-faced'; 'Someone in a meeting being very awkward and not agreeing to any group decision'; 'An incompetent manager in their factory who ignored help requests from workers and slowed down production as a result'). Consequently, responses to the two open questions were very coherent, simultaneously describing the behaviors that support trait inference and the inferred traits; therefore, to capture this coherence we coded social evaluations using responses to both open questions.

Drawing on the DPM (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014, 2018), we aimed to determine whether gossip targets were described in terms of the communion facets of warmth and morality, and the agentic facets of assertiveness and competence. During the coding process we noted that the DPM facets did not neatly capture the variety of target descriptions conveyed via gossip stories. For example, some stories described targets who exhibited contradictory 'agentic' behaviors (e.g., high assertiveness and low self-control, or high competence and low effort). In other stories the evaluative valence of the behavior/traits did not align (e.g., being confident is not necessarily positively evaluated, but working hard is). Additionally, there were particular constellations of traits (notably, hard-working plus morality) as well as stories that dealt with targets' negative emotional responses to events, whose meaning would have been lost if only DPM agency codes were used. Therefore, we created additional coding categories for work-effort, self-control, and stress.

In each story, the DPM facets and the additional aspects of social evaluation were assessed by coders (see Table 1 for example stories). When the DPM facets and the additional categories of work effort and self-control were detected, our codes distinguished between descriptions that related to low levels of the facet or category (e.g., immoral, lazy) and those that related to high levels (e.g., moral, hard-working); when stress was detected, it was always coded high (while it was theoretically possible for a story to describe a target's calm response to a difficult event, this never occurred). When DPM facets or additional aspects were not detected, they were marked as absent. In a first round of coding, 59 stories were coded, and agreement rates were between .47 and .71 (Cohen's Kappa). After several rounds of coding and discussion of subsets of stories, the coders had achieved high levels of agreement (Cohen's Kappa coefficients between 0.90 and 0.98); any remaining disagreements were resolved through discussion.

DPM facets
Warmth was coded as low if targets could be characterized as aloof, insensitive, or rude, and coded as high if targets were portrayed as caring or affectionate.

Morality was coded as low if targets could be characterized as dishonest, untrustworthy, or insincere, and coded as high if portrayed as honest, righteous, or having integrity. Codes for warmth and morality were subsumed under the dimension *communion*.

Assertiveness was coded as low if targets could be characterized as unsure, submissive, or humble, and coded as high if described as confident, arrogant, or dominant. *Competence* was coded as low if targets could be characterized as unknowledgeable, incompetent, or incapable, and coded as high if portrayed as knowledgeable, skilled, or intelligent. Codes for assertiveness and competence were subsumed under the dimension of *agency*.

Additional aspects of social evaluation
Work effort was coded as low if targets could be characterized as lazy, careless, or distracted, and coded as high if portrayed as hard working or persevering. *Self-control* was coded as low if targets could be characterized as dependent, needy, or impulsive, and coded as high if portrayed as independent, self-reliant, or self-controlled. *Stress* was coded as present (i.e., high) if targets could be characterized as having a difficult time or not coping well. Importantly, these targets were generally responding to difficult circumstances beyond their control (e.g., a death, health problem).

Valence of social evaluations and gossip story
Codes for the facets warmth, morality, competence, work-effort, and self-control overlapped with the valence of social evaluation, such that low codes denoted negative valence, whereas high codes denoted positive valence. Assertiveness and stress were not related to valence—for example, both arrogance and leadership represent high assertiveness, but arrogance is a negative trait, while leadership is positive. Similarly, experiencing negative emotions in response to stressful circumstances was not consistently associated with positive or negative evaluations of the target. Therefore, in assessing the overall valence of a gossip story we inspected codes on morality, competence, work-effort, and self-control. Story valence was coded as negative if the story received only low codes on one or more of these evaluation categories, mixed if it received both high and low codes, and positive if it received only high codes.

Content of gossip story
The first author also coded the topic of the stories. No a-priori classification was used, but topic categories were created in a bottom-up way by extracting major themes and categorizing them using a thematic analysis approach. In coding the topics, we aimed to extract the central theme of the story, grouping stories that referred to similar themes into the same topic category. An overview of topics that emerged in the stories and examples are provided in the online supplement, Table 1.[1]

RESULTS

Participants had heard the stories most frequently from a friend ($n = 236$) or their partner/spouse ($n = 109$). The targets were mostly colleagues ($n = 333$) or superiors ($n = 96$) of the storyteller. We were able to apply our coding scheme to the vast majority of stories. Specifically, 458 (95%) of the stories either referred to behaviors that supported the inference of the DPM facets or additional coded aspects, or directly referred to them. The remaining 5% of stories contained content that could not be coded according to our scheme (e.g.,* '... their work colleague had been off work due to being in hospital'). In all, 233 stories (48%) received codes for one aspect, 176 (36.5%) for two aspects, and 49 (10%) for three or more aspects.

FREQUENCY OF EVALUATION CATEGORIES
Hypotheses 1 and 2 present contrasting expectations about the relative frequency of communion and agentic evaluations. To test these expectations, we examined the occurrence of DPM codes. We found that evaluations of the DPM communion facets of warmth and/or morality were together present in two-thirds of stories (also see Table 1). The individual facets of warmth and morality occurred with approximately equal frequency (warmth: 40.0% of stories; morality 37.6% of stories), and a McNemar Chi-Square test showed that these

frequencies did not differ, $\chi^2 = 0.45$, $p = .50$. In contrast, evaluations of the DPM agentic facets of assertiveness and/or competence were together present in only 28.8 % of stories. The individual facets of assertiveness and competence again occurred with approximately equal frequency (assertiveness: 15.6 % of stories; competence 16.8% of stories), and a McNemar Chi-Square test showed that these frequencies did not differ, $\chi^2 = 0.21$, $p = .65$. Importantly, a McNemar Chi-Square test showed that evaluations of communion were more frequent than evaluations of agency, $\chi^2 = 95.79$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 1 rather than Hypothesis 2.

We found that the stories also conveyed evaluative content that was not well captured by the DPM facets. Specifically, work effort was mentioned in 18.9% of stories and self-control emerged in 13.3% of them. In 11.2% of stories, targets were described as stressed or going through a difficult time. Given the relevance of work effort and self-control for goal achievement, we considered the possibility that this content may relate to an 'extended' dimension of agency. Subsuming effort under an 'extended' dimension raised the prevalence of agentic evaluations to 42.5% of stories; subsuming self-control under a yet-broader dimension raised the prevalence of agentic evaluations to 51.5% of stories. However, even with this extended agentic dimension, communion remained more prevalent, McNemar $\chi^2 = 16.89$, $p < .001$.

Stories with multiple codes

In order to understand how the different evaluative facets and aspects co-occurred, we examined the patterns of codes for all stories that were coded on more than one aspect of social evaluation ($n = 225$). This revealed, first, that if stories were coded on warmth ($n = 125$), in 42% of cases they were also coded on morality. Indeed, stories coded on warmth were more likely to also be coded on morality than on any of the extended agentic aspects of social evaluation, all McNemar $\chi^2 > 9.19$, all $p < .002$. This finding is in line with the DPM, which sees warmth and morality as related facets of communion. If stories were coded on morality ($n = 106$) then they were more likely to also be coded on work effort (32% of cases) than on competence (12%), McNemar $\chi^2 = 9.76$, $p = .002$, or assertiveness (15%), McNemar $\chi^2 = 7.23$, $p = .007$. This suggests that people were often perceived as immoral based on their low work effort. This points to the importance of gossip about free-riders (i.e., those who benefit from group work without contributing to it).

VALENCE

Hypothesis 3 stated that gossip is more likely to have negative than positive valence. To assess this, we examined the occurrence of low versus high codes for facets and aspects that mapped onto social evaluation valence. We found that low codes were indeed more frequent than high codes (see Table 1): warmth (64.2%

CODE	n	% (OF TOTAL N)	N LOW CODE	% LOW CODE (WITHIN CODE)	EXAMPLE LOW	EXAMPLE HIGH
Warmth	193	40	124	64.2	She's mean and she always thinks that she is the best of all.	I've been told that he's funny and gets along well with everyone.
Morality	181	37.6	170	93.9	Person A did something illegal. It could result in a lot of people losing their jobs.	She is honest and genuine.
Assertiveness	75	15.6	17	22.7	Person A always cries after the boss tell[s] her something.	A delivery driver refused to deliver to a customer who was being rude to them.
Competence	81	16.8	64	79	His colleague took responsibilities he cannot do properly.	The work colleague was an incredible problem solver [...] no matter how complicated.
Work effort	91	18.9	71	78	Their co-worker was very lazy and didn't do work without being asked.	He's a good bloke to work with, hard worker.
Self-control	64	13.3	61	95.3	One of her coworkers got drunk and shouted at the boss at a Christmas party.	Person A [...] must be very centered, easy going, relaxed, disciplined or perhaps they have practiced meditation.
Stress	54	11.2	NA	NA		She now suffers from anxiety crises at work, and she cries without a reason even during work.

Table 1 Frequency of codes for the different categories of social evaluation.
$N = 482$.

of codes), morality (93.9%), competence (79%), work-effort (78%), and self-control (95.3%). Chi-square tests revealed that for each of these facets or aspects, low codes occurred significantly more than high codes, all $\chi^2 > 15.67$, all $p < .001$. Assertiveness, which does not map consistently onto social evaluation valence, was an exception to this pattern. Specifically, only 22.7% of assertiveness codes were low compared to high, $\chi^2 = 22.41$, $p < .001$.

In order to test Hypothesis 3, which proposed that the majority of (recalled) gossip will be negative, we considered the consistency of a story's codes on warmth, morality, competence, work-effort, and self-control. Of stories coded on at least one of these facets ($N = 415$), 76.1% only received one or more negative (i.e., low) codes, 16.9% only received one or more positive (i.e., high) codes, and 7% received negative and positive codes; a chi-square test showed that these frequencies differed significantly, $\chi^2 (2) = 348.35$, $p < .001$, providing support for Hypothesis 3.

SOCIAL EVALUATIONS WITHIN GOSSIP TOPICS

This dataset also provided a unique opportunity to gain an overview of topics addressed in daily life gossip, and of social evaluations of targets when discussing different topics (see Table 2).

First, 152 stories (32%) were about targets' negative character, for example: '*Someone in a meeting being very awkward and not agreeing to any group decision. Awkward, argumentative, disruptive, not a team player, selfish.*' Furthermore, the majority of stories focusing on target's negative character concerned targets who engaged in interpersonally harmful behaviors (55%), e.g., '*About his new boss, who was a very difficult person. He recalled how aggressive, controlling and reactionary this person was. Controlling, aggressive and hostile micromanager.*' Stories focusing on target's negative character frequently conveyed low warmth (60%), low morality (38%), and to a lesser extent high assertiveness (16%); these frequencies were significantly different from each other, all McNemar $\chi^2 > 11.11$, all $p < .001$.

Second, 145 stories (30%) were about in-role norm violations committed by targets, such as underperforming in the job role, e.g.: '*Person A always wants to take credits in her work but in reality, most of the time she doesn't even do her work. Other people do it for her. She takes advantage of other people.*' In most stories describing in-role norm violations, targets were coded as low on morality (48 %) and low on effort (46%), and in fewer cases as low on competence (28%); frequencies of low morality and low effort did not differ McNemar $\chi^2 = 0.05$, $p = .82$, but did exceed frequency of low competence, all McNemar $\chi^2 > 7.60$, all $p < .006$.

Third, 59 stories (12%) concerned target romantic relationships, often infidelity, e.g.: '*Person A cheats on his wife often. Person A is unhappy with his life and has an addictive personality.*' These stories most often conveyed low morality (44 %), but also low self-control (19%) and occurrence of stress (19%); low morality codes were significantly more frequent than codes for low self-control and stress, all McNemar $\chi^2 > 5.93$, all $p < .02$.

Target positive character was discussed in 41 stories (9%), e.g.: '*They told me that Person A is really nice and it's good working with them.*' In these stories, high warmth emerged most frequently (73%). Drinking and drug abuse was discussed in 23 stories (5%), e.g.: '*That their manager got too drunk at a Christmas do*' and in these stories low self-control emerged most frequently (87%). Other topics covered in the stories were health, sexual harassment and discrimination, money, career, and favoritism. These are illustrated in the online supplement, Table 1.

DISCUSSION

In this study we aimed to investigate the occurrence and type of social evaluations that spontaneously emerge upon hearing gossip about unacquainted people in the work domain. Supporting our first rather than our second hypothesis, communion was the predominant dimension along which people evaluated traits of gossip targets in a work context. In line with the Dual Perspective Model (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014, 2018), we found that communion was primary, emerging in about two thirds of gossip stories. The two facets of communion—morality and warmth—occurred to a similar extent. Indeed, evaluations of warmth and morality often co-occurred in the same story, particularly when they were both negative. This typically occurred in stories that addressed targets' negative character. Our data also showed that, whereas evaluations of morality were almost exclusively negative, evaluations of warmth were positive about one third of the time. Positive warmth evaluations typically occurred in stories that discussed targets' positive character.

Second, despite the fact that the gossip originated from a work context, less than one third of stories conveyed agentic evaluations of targets in terms of assertiveness and/or competence. Both of these agentic facets occurred to a similar extent. These findings indicate that, even in a work setting, people were most likely to talk about others' communal (vs agentic) traits.

Third, work effort emerged as a prominent aspect of social evaluation. Although the DPM does not explicitly include effort among the agentic themes, this aspect has been previously described as belonging to the dimension of agency (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Louvet et al., 2019). In line with this, Dubois and Beauvois (2012) categorize agency as having 3 components, *competence*, *assertiveness*, and *effort*, where effort denotes task-oriented intentions. If, in line with this categorization, we include effort in a broader vertical dimension, then

GOSSIP TOPIC	FREQUENCY*	% OF TOTAL N	WARMTH %		MORALITY %		ASSERTIVE-NESS %		COMPETENCE %		WORK EFFORT %		SELF-CONTROL %		STRESS %
			LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	HIGH
Negative character	152	32	60	4	38	0	3	16	7	0	6	1	10	1	11
In-role norm violation	145	30	15	8	48	1	2	7	28	3	46	1	10	0	6
Romantic relationships	59	12	8	12	44	0	7	3	7	0	0	3	19	0	19
Positive character	41	9	2	73	0	10	0	17	5	12	5	17	2	2	0
Health	32	7	6	19	3	9	3	13	16	3	0	13	9	0	31
Drinking and drugs	23	5	13	26	30	0	9	4	13	0	9	4	87	0	26
Other/miscellaneous	21	4	5	29	10	0	5	5	14	10	0	0	5	5	14
Sexual harassment	21	4	57	10	43	19	5	14	0	0	0	0	5	0	10
Money	15	3	0	7	33	7	13	7	20	7	7	7	13	0	13
Career	13	3	8	8	8	8	0	46	15	15	15	31	8	0	38
Favoritism	10	2	10	10	70	0	0	30	20	20	30	0	20	10	0

Table 2 Codes for gossip topics and categories of social evaluation (as % within gossip topics).

N = 482; *49 stories were coded on more than one topic.

the prevalence of this dimension is substantially higher. Our data suggest that work effort was an important aspect of social evaluation. Interestingly, targets who were perceived as exhibiting low work effort were often also seen as immoral, and these evaluations typically emerged in stories about work-related norm violations. Findings suggest that in a work context, where people often have highly interdependent tasks, those who are lazy also harm others, and are therefore seen as immoral. This may not be the case in other contexts where people are more independent.

Fourth, targets were also often perceived as lacking self-control, although, like work effort, this aspect is not part of the DPM. In most cases, lack of self-control was coded in stories about alcohol and drug abuse, negative character, or in-role norm violations. Self-control has been associated with rationality, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007). As such, this finding raises the question of whether self-control is conceptually related to the dimension of agency; for example, because people who are better able to resist temptations may be more able to focus on fulfilling work goals, and 'getting ahead.' Even if these additional aspects were included into the dimension of agency, this dimension was still less frequent than the communion dimension, again supporting the primacy of communion.

In line with Hypothesis 3, we found that the social evaluations that emerged from workplace gossip were mostly negative: The vast majority of stories communicated information about people who committed transgressions, whether these were work-related or not. Thus, most stories portrayed targets negatively, perhaps because these cautionary tales are the most effective in helping receivers understand and react to the behavior of others in their social environment (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2004).

Our research is largely consistent with the DPM by showing that most stories conveyed evaluations on the communion facets of warmth and morality and that evaluations on the agentic facets of assertiveness and competence were less frequent. While the overall incidence of the facets within each DPM dimension was very similar, there were differences in their patterns of co-occurrence with other evaluations. In particular, while warmth was prevalent in stories of negative and positive character, morality was particularly likely to co-occur with work effort in stories of norm violation. Further, in contrast to the other DPM facets, assertiveness did not map consistently onto social evaluative valence, suggesting that how people evaluate assertiveness is likely to depend on other facets. These particularities point to the utility of looking beyond the 'Big Two' to the facets that underpin them.

This study also brings into focus additional aspects of social evaluation—work effort and self-control—that were important for understanding the content of gossip

and that were not easily subsumed under the existing DPM facets. To the extent that these aspects facilitate goal achievement at work, they may be integrated in an extended agentic dimension. Our study points to the need to consider how these aspects that emerged spontaneously in gossip stories fit into a broader categorization. This could contribute to the development of a more comprehensive model of social evaluation (Nicolas et al., 2022).

Our work also has important implications for gossip theory. Broadly, the findings are consistent with previous research regarding the universal presence of gossip in daily life (e.g., Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Michelson et al., 2010; Robbins & Karan, 2019), and its role in communicating social norms and shaping one's view of one's social environment and the self (Hauke & Abele, 2019, 2020). Moreover, we encourage researchers to build on our study from the perspective of communication-as constitutive of organizations (CCO), by considering gossip originating in the workplace which is spread outside its borders as organizational communication (Cooren et al., 2011). By facilitating contact with an organization via stories about people who work there, gossip may be a key mechanism not only for interpersonal evaluation of people in the work domain, but also for how people perceive an organization and its ethos.

Like any study, this has a number of limitations that need to be considered. First, we collected data from an online sample, which allowed us to collect data from diverse participants regarding country of residence, education, gender, age, and employment, increasing the generalizability of our findings. However, online sampling can at the same time raise questions regarding self-selection of participants, and hence the validity of responses. Another potential limitation of the current study is that coding content that emerged spontaneously from open responses can be biased, as coders may be subjective in extracting categories from behavioral descriptions of targets. We tried to mitigate this risk by having two independent coders code the data, but we cannot exclude the possibility that the coders were biased in similar ways. As such, we encourage future research to build on this study and conduct research in other contexts, using complementary methodologies.

NOTE

1 Our survey was conducted to also investigate gendered dynamics in workplace gossip and included a number of metric scales for this purpose. These are reported in the online supplementary file, Table 2. Of relevance for the current paper is that participants' ratings of their gender stereotype inferences from the gossip relate to our codes in expected ways. Specifically, our code of warmth was positively correlated with participants' ratings of the target's concern for others, $r = .49$, $p < .001$, and sociability, $r = .44$, $p < .001$; coded and measured

morality were also highly correlated, $r = .45$, $p < .001$; coded competence was related to instrumental competence, $r = .18$, $p < .001$ and leadership competence, $r = .16$, $p < .001$, and coded effort was related to instrumental competence, $r = .31$, $p < .001$; finally, coded stress was related to participants' ratings of emotional sensitivity, $r = .16$, $p < .001$.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Online supplementary file.** A list of additional measures with supplementary table 1 and 2. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.687.s1

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