

Who's Gossiping in the Workplace? A Study of Dispositional Envy and Organizational Identification

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The present study employed self-consistency and self-evaluation perspectives to investigate how dispositional envy and organizational identification influence workplace gossip and also the moderating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between envy and gossip. Data was gathered from a variety of Taiwan industries including semiconductor, service, manufacturing, and chemistry. Results from the 248 full-time worker participants demonstrated that dispositional envy has positive influences on both types of gossip at work (positive and negative gossip). Further, organizational identification was favorably linked to positive gossip, and disidentification with the organization was connected favorably to negative gossip. Organizational identification moderates the correspondence between dispositional envy and negative, rather than positive, gossip, whereas the moderating effect of organizational disidentification was nonsignificant. Therefore, organizational identification has both direct and moderating effects on workplace gossip. The study also discussed empirical results related to theory and practice.

Keywords: *dispositional envy, organizational identification, organizational disidentification, workplace gossip*

Extended Abstract

Workplace gossip is an essential interpersonal activity in an organization (Elmer, 1994). It provides employees with temporary social mobility (Noon & Delbrige, 1993) to escape from the reality of work. However, the question of who gossips in the workplace remains unanswered. To fill this gap from the perspective of individual–environment interaction, this study used self-evaluation maintenance theory (Tesser, 1988) and self-consistency theory (Korman, 1970, 1976) to elucidate how dispositional envy (Smith et al., 1999) and organizational identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) influence workplace gossip. It hypothesized that dispositional envy (H1) and organizational identification (positive and negative identification; H2 and H3) have significant effects on workplace gossip (positive and negative gossip).

In addition to the main effect, this study hypothesized

that there is an interaction between dispositional envy and organizational identification. Specifically, it hypothesized that organizational identification moderates the relationship between dispositional envy and workplace gossip (positive and negative gossip; H4 and H5). In the context of organizational identification, the collective identification of “us” and the cognition of the in-group (Gaviria et al., 2021) may affect how dispositionally envious individuals make social comparisons in terms of the target selection, process, and result. More precisely, when dispositionally envious individuals classify their target as belonging to the same group as themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), their negative cognition and emotion may be less likely to activate under upward social comparisons (Lam et al., 2011), thus preventing harm to the individuals' self-evaluation.

In sum, this study argued that workplace gossip can

be a way to cope with the negative cognition and emotion caused by dispositional envy. Moreover, we introduced the concept of organizational identification into the study of workplace gossip to suggest that the connection between employees' self-identity and their organizations directly impacts workplace gossip behaviors and acts as a boundary condition. Our study also extended the study of organizational identification to the domain of informal organizational communication by expanding on the vital role the identification plays in such communication.

Method

Sample

We collected data from diverse industries (e.g., manufacturing, technology, and financial services) in Taiwan. Data were collected in two waves with a 1-month interval. Specifically, we collected data on dispositional envy and organizational identification at Time 1 and on workplace gossip and demographics at Time 2. We sent out 304 questionnaires, of which 248 valid questionnaires were returned, yielding an 81.57 % valid response rate.

Measures

Dispositional envy

We adopted the single-factor Dispositional Envy Scale (DES) developed by Smith et al. (1999). It consists of eight items (e.g., "When I see others succeed easily, I feel frustrated and distressed").

Organizational identification

We adopted the 8-item Organizational Identification Questionnaire from Kreiner and Ashforth (2004). It measures both positive (e.g., "When my company is criticized, I feel humiliated") and negative organizational identification (e.g., "Being a member of my company makes me embarrassed"), with six items for each construct.

Workplace gossip

We adopted the Workplace Gossip Questionnaire developed by Kuo (2012). The questionnaire measures

positive (e.g., "Talk about employees' good performance") and negative gossip (e.g., "Talk about employees' poor performance"), with eight items for each construct.

The above measurements were measured on 6-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." We also measured demographic variables, namely gender, age, marital status, tenure, and education, as the control variables. These variables have been proved to influence workplace gossip.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

We used LISREL8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) to examine convergent validity and discriminant validity. The result showed a fair fit between the hypothetical model and the collected data (Hughes et al., 1986), which indicated that it was a

Correlation analysis

Dispositional envy was positively related to negative organizational identification ($r = .24, p < .001$), positive gossip ($r = .15, p < .05$), and negative gossip ($r = .35, p < .001$). Positive organizational identification was negatively related to negative organizational identification ($r = -.37, p < .001$) and positively related to positive gossip ($r = .31, p < .001$). Negative organizational identification was positively related to negative gossip ($r = .18, p < .01$). Positive gossip and negative gossip were positively correlated with each other ($r = .55, p < .001$). Among the demographic variables, gender was negatively related to both positive gossip ($r = -.14, p < .05$) and negative gossip ($r = -.14, p < .05$).

Regression analysis

The regression analysis results are given in Table 3. Hypothesis 1 predicted that dispositional envy is related to negative but not positive gossip. Significant results were found for both negative ($\beta = .34, \Delta R^2 = .11, p < .001$) and positive gossip ($\beta = .13, \Delta R^2 = .02, p$

< .05). Hypothesis 1 was thus only partially supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted that positive organizational identification is related to both types of gossip. However, we only found a direct effect on positive gossip ($\beta = .33$, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $p < .001$) and not negative gossip. Hypothesis 2 was thus only partially supported. Hypothesis 3 predicted that negative organizational identification is related to both types of gossip. We found a direct effect on negative gossip ($\beta = .21$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p < .001$) but not positive gossip ($p > .05$). Hypothesis 3 was thus only partially supported. Hypothesis 4 predicted that positive organizational identification has a moderating effect on the relation between dispositional envy and workplace gossip. However, the moderating effect was only significant on the relation between dispositional envy and negative gossip ($\beta = .14$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $p < .05$) but not on that between dispositional envy and positive gossip ($\beta = .09$, n.s.). Hypothesis 4 was thus only partially supported. Hypothesis 5 predicted that negative organizational identification has a moderating effect on the relationship between dispositional envy and workplace gossip. However, the moderating effect was not significant for either positive ($\beta = .01$, n.s.) or negative gossip ($\beta = .02$, n.s.). Hypothesis 5 was thus not supported.

Discussion

Conclusions

(1) Dispositional envy had a significant positive effect on negative gossip, which indicates that individuals tend to maintain a consistent personal identity by acting in line with their dispositions. As dispositional envy leads to malicious intention, hatred, negative affectivity, and negative cognition, negative gossip behaviors are likely to occur. (2) Dispositional envy had a significant positive effect on positive gossip, which contradicted the proposed hypothesis. A possible explanation is that envious employees engage in positive gossip as a self-enhancement strategy (Lange & Crusius, 2015; Lange et al., 2018). By using positive gossip to enhance their status, power, and influence, they may be able to protect or maintain their identity (McAndrew et al., 2007). (3)

Positive organizational identification was positively related to positive gossip, and negative organizational identification was positively related to negative gossip. These results indicate that individuals tend to transmit messages that are consistent with their self-identity, meaning that organizational identification influences informal communication. (4) Positive organizational identification moderated the relationship between dispositional envy and negative gossip, but not that between dispositional envy and positive gossip. Negative organizational identification did not have a significant moderating effect on either positive or negative gossip. These results indicate that the mechanism underlying the effects of dispositional envy on workplace gossip as related to organizational identification might be far more complicated than expected (Alicke & Zell, 2008).

Research limitations and future directions

Although the above findings are promising, our study design was subject to several limitations that leave room for future research. First, we adopted a unitary construct for envy that was similar to malicious envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009). However, scholars have recently proposed the concept of benign envy and called for its examination (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Thus, future research could investigate how these two types of envy influence workplace gossip differently. Second, future research could consider different classification frameworks for organizational identification to clarify how it influences workplace gossip. For example, Elsbach (1999) proposed a framework consisting of schizo-identification and neutral-identification as well as the well-known constructs of identification and disidentification. Lastly, this study found a significant positive relationship between positive and negative gossip, i.e., that these two types of gossip might occur simultaneously. This implies that individuals may have a tendency or need to gossip, which could be investigated in future research.

Managerial implications

First, dispositional envy could be a criterion for employee selection in organizations. Dispositional envy

increases negative gossip, which damages the work climate in groups or organizations (e.g., Baker & Jones, 1996). By ruling out candidates with high dispositional envy, organizations could reduce negative gossip and potential threats to individual and organizational performance. Second, organizations could invest in the development and management of employees' organizational identification. Strengthening their positive

organizational identification could sustain positive gossip, while decreasing their negative identification could prevent negative gossip. Thus, managers should utilize the socialization process in organizations to teach employees not only work-related knowledge, skills, and procedures but also the organizations' values, norms, and beliefs to strengthen the employees' attachment to their workplace.