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Gossiping as Moral Social Action: A Functionalist Account of Gossiper Perceptions

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Abstract

It appears that there are two universal dimensions of social cognition, capturing a person's intention to be good or to do good things (i.e., morality) and his or her capacity to carry out his or her intentions (i.e., competence, or Heider's "can"). Perceivers are strongly biased towards the former dimension, as they are more likely to seek out and act upon information concerning a person's morality than his or her competence. It has been suggested that this bias is an adaptive response to the fact that an individual's morality (but not competence) has implications for the wellbeing of others. If morality information is particularly important for success in the social world, then the human propensity for sharing information about each other's actions and attributes (i.e., gossiping) should be highly functional when this gossip concerns a target's morality. Indeed, as the result of its ability to affect the wellbeing of the audience, gossiping should itself be perceived as an intrinsically moral action, and gossipers who share information that benefits the audience (i.e., diagnostic morality information) should be perceived to be particularly moral. We tested this functionalist account of gossiping in three experiments and as expected found that gossipers who shared diagnostic information about the morality of a target were judged to be more moral themselves. At the group level, this meant that single items of gossip affected perceptions of ingroup morality and participants' attachment to the ingroup both directly (by affecting target perceptions) and indirectly (by affecting gossiper perceptions). This suggests that gossip has a richer ability to regulate group life than has hitherto been anticipated.

Gossiping as Moral Social Action: A Functionalist Account of Gossiper Perceptions

> Gossip is a sort of smoke that comes from the dirty tobacco-pipes of those
> who diffuse it: it proves nothing but the bad taste of the smoker.
>
> George Eliot

Eavesdrop on the average conversation, and you are unlikely to find the participants discussing the state of the economy, the American election, the upcoming Olympics, or indeed any of the very many worthy topics that occupy the broadsheets. Instead, chances are that you will catch the participants enthusiastically exchanging gossip about the actions or attributes of some absent person. Estimates that we spend the majority of our conversational life exchanging gossip of one form or another (e.g., Dunbar, Duncan & Marriot, 1997; Emler, 1994; Marsh & Tversky, 2004) are particularly startling when we consider that gossiping is widely viewed with opprobrium — in Eliot's view, above, gossiping is a disgusting habit that merely serves to pollute our social surroundings. Further evidence of the general disapproval of gossip comes from an examination of the 129 unique gossip quotes compiled in four popular websites of aphorisms (further details available on request). Of these, a full 60 percent were concerned with condemning gossip for its wicked nature and harmful effects (e.g., When of a gossiping circle it was asked, 'what are they doing'? The answer was, 'swapping lies'). Although another 23 percent of the quotes did acknowledge positive aspects of gossip — such as being informative and entertaining — they nevertheless tended to do so in ways that served to reinforce its immorality (e.g., Never trust the teller, trust the tale; If you haven't got anything nice to say about anyone, come sit next to me).

Fortunately — particularly for the more voracious gossipers among us — it appears that sharing gossip may not be the universally immoral act that folk wisdom implies. In particular, some scholars have recently suggested that gossip may actually

make possible the generally high levels of cooperation that are observed in human communities (e.g., Smith, 2010). The reasoning here is that gossip can help people to gain a better understanding of others in their environment by allowing them to gather information about the actions of these individuals even when they are not able to directly observe their behaviours. This becomes increasingly important as groups become larger and members more mobile as under these circumstances direct observation becomes increasingly rare (e.g., Dunbar, 2004). By helping people to track the trustworthy and untrustworthy individuals in their environment, gossip should allow communities to avoid the cheats and free riders that pose a threat to cooperation within groups (e.g., Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Smith, 2010; see also Peters & Kashima, 2007; Peters, Kashima & Clark, 2009).

If these claims are correct, and gossip does serve pro-social functions, then it seems unlikely that people will universally obey societal exhortations to judge gossipers negatively: after all, why would individuals share useful information about the behaviours of others if they were punished for doing so? In this chapter, we will present our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions which argues that because gossipers can affect the wellbeing of the audience (by helping them to successfully negotiate the social world) and the target (by affecting their reputation) gossiping is an action that is intrinsically located in the morality domain (i.e., it is an action with the capacity to help or harm others). This account further argues that gossipers will only be perceived to be immoral when they share gossip that neither improves the wellbeing of the audience nor the target. This functionalist account is therefore distinct from the existing valence account of gossiper perceptions, which argues that gossipers will be perceived negatively for sharing any negative social information (e.g., Wyer, Budesheim and Lambert, 1990). We will present evidence that supports our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions and explore the implications of this account for our understanding of the group regulatory consequences of gossip.

Gossiping as Moral Social Action

Show me someone who never gossips, and I'll show you someone who isn't
interested in people.

                                                                    Barbara Walters

It appears that sharing gossip — information about the actions and attributes of
absent parties — is one of our more frequent social actions (e.g., Dunbar, Duncan &
Marriott, 1997; Hess & Hagen, 2006). For instance, in a diary study looking at students'
daily conversations, 60 percent of the reported conversations consisted of retelling
social events, telling stories about academics, romances and sharing pure descriptions of
family or other people (Marsh & Tversky, 2004). Similarly, when researchers
surreptitiously listened to conversations in public spaces, they classified approximately
65 percent as concerning social topics, including talk about explicitly social activities,
personal relationships and likes or dislikes (Dunbar et al., 1997; see also Emler, 1994).
Further, when the topics of 2000 conversations between the Zinacantan Indians in
Mexico were analysed, almost 78 percent of them concerned social topics (Haviland,
1977).

Although social scientists have been slow to recognise the importance of gossip
in social life (traditional perspectives have considered gossip to be trivial or 'cheap' talk;
e.g., Aumann, 1990; for a discussion see Skyrms, 2002), this has started to change. In
particular, more recently a number of scholars have suggested that because gossip is
able to improve people's understanding of their social environment it may help groups
to counter the threats posed by free riders and other cheats and so achieve high levels of
cooperation (Baumeister, Zhang & Vohs, 2004; Rosnow, 2001). In particular, if gossip
improves people's understanding of the trustworthiness of the individuals around them
then it should help audiences to regulate their interactions in adaptive ways, for

instance by helping them to seek out trustworthy others for cooperation and avoid possible cheats and free riders (e.g., Dunbar, 2004; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998; Smith, 2010).

There is some evidence that is consistent with this claim. In particular, Enquist and Leimar (1993; see also Nowak & Sigmund, 1998) used a computer simulation to show that while free riders were initially more successful in an environment where people were required to collaborate to survive, honest members were more successful when they were able to exchange a modest amount of information about free riders and used this to inform their behaviour. Although behavioural evidence that gossip is able to shore up cooperation is to date very limited, Ahn, Esarery and Scholz (2009) demonstrated that when populations who were playing repeated mixed motives games were allowed to learn about the characteristics of others indirectly (i.e., through information exchange) they achieved higher levels of cooperation than when they relied on their direct experience alone.

In this experiment, players were provided with an initial financial endowment that they were able to invest in order to play a prisoner's dilemma game with another participant. The payoff structure for a prisoner's dilemma game is such that while mutual cooperation is rewarded more than mutual defection, unilateral defection (where one player defects and the other cooperates) provides a large incentive to cheat as in this case the defector gets the largest payoff and the cooperator the smallest. This incentive tends to erode mutual cooperation and thus reduce payoffs. Players were able to nominate any number of the other 13 players in their population with whom to play the prisoner's dilemma in the next round, although the fixed costs for playing rose exponentially with each extra game that was played. Importantly, games were only played when both players nominated each other. This meant that across the 20 experimental rounds, players could keep profitable partnerships and break off unprofitable ones. A baseline condition, where participants learned on the basis of their

direct experience with other players, was compared to two information conditions, where participants were additionally able to learn through indirect experience. Participants in the broadcast information condition, who were able to post positive or negative recommendations about others on a central bulletin board, performed no better than baseline. However, participants in the local information condition, who were able to solicit recommendations from their current partners, significantly outperformed the other conditions. Arguably, this latter condition provides an analogy for the beneficial impact of gossip in communities where members have long-term relationships and the capacity to selectively interact with one another.

Another interesting point about this study is that it provided some evidence that individuals value gossip, as they were required to make a small payment to either request or provide recommendations about other players. This corresponds with other findings that people perceive gossip to provide useful information. In particular, Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs (2004) asked students to recall the most interesting gossip that they had heard in the past week, month and year, and (among other things) to then indicate whether they had learned a lesson from the gossip. Participants responded affirmatively for approximately two-thirds of gossip items that they had heard. Similarly, Baxter, Dun and Sahlstein (2001) concluded that gossip helped people to learn rules about appropriate behaviour in interpersonal relationships, as university students who completed daily diaries recording their learning of relationship rules reported learning about 18 percent through gossip.

Further evidence that people value gossip comes from a finding that people will use gossip about a potential partner's behaviours to inform their interactions with others even if they have directly witnessed the behaviours in question. In particular, participants in Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann and Milinski's (2007) experiment had the opportunity to engage in a repeated indirect reciprocity game with other members of their 9 member groups. In particular, in each round participants were partnered with

one other player and given the opportunity to donate part of their endowment to this player. This donation was multiplied so that it was worth more to the recipient than to the donor. The payoff structure again presents a classic social dilemma as collective payoffs are greatest if all participants agree to make the donation, but unilateral defection can increase individual payoffs. Importantly, at set points in the session participants were presented with information about their next partner's previous behaviours either through direct observation (i.e., a factual summary of these previous decisions), indirect observation (i.e., the gossip that another player wrote describing these previous decisions) or both. Impressively, when participants had access to both sources of data, their decisions were still influenced by the content of the gossip: in 44 percent of cases participants changed their decisions as a consequence of the gossip; in the vast majority of these cases (79 percent) their decision corresponded with the content of the gossip.

It appears that the functional aspects of gossip are not unrecognised by defectors, and that one reason that gossip can increase levels of cooperation is by reducing defection levels. For instance, Piazza and Bering (2008) varied whether participants who played a dictator game had (or had not) provided identifying information to a confederate, such as their name, address and degree programme, and did (or did not) believe that this confederate would find out about their allocation in the game. In a dictator game, one individual (the dictator) is provided with some endowment and allowed to choose how to share this with another individual (the recipient). Although there are no direct consequences to retaining the entire endowment, dictators typically allocate a non-zero amount to the recipient. In this case, the authors found that participants were more generous in their allocations when they believed that a confederate who could identify them would be informed about this allocation. Although not concerned with gossip per se, this finding suggests that people's decisions can be affected by concern for their reputation.

More direct evidence for the role of gossip in reducing levels of defection comes from Feinberg, Willer, Stellar and Keltner (2012, Study 4). In this study, participants played a trust game (Berg, Dickhaut & McCabe, 1995) — a two-player game that provides one player (the donor) with an endowment and the opportunity to give any amount of this endowment to the second player (the recipient). The recipient receives three-times the amount that was gifted by the donor and then has the opportunity to return any of this to the donor. Under high levels of trust, donors should give more of their endowment to the recipient, maximising joint pay offs. Participants in this study were assigned to the role of the recipient and either were (or were not) led to believe that a third party who observed their behaviour in one set of games would be able to share gossip about their behaviour to the individuals that they were due to play in a subsequent set of games. In line with the findings above, participants returned more to donors under the threat of gossip.

In sum, there are a number of lines of evidence that are consistent with claims that gossip is functional and may play a role in facilitating group cooperation. The utility of gossip comes from the fact that in most circumstances (i.e., those where it is not possible to directly observe a large proportion of an individual's behaviour) it is the foremost means of obtaining vital information about other actors in the social world. As the studies above have shown, gossiping has implications for the wellbeing of both the audience (by helping them to negotiate their social world) and the target (by manipulating their reputation). This suggests that gossip is a behaviour that falls in the moral domain, which concerns an individual's social intentions; their trustworthiness, honesty and goodness (Leach, Ellemers & Barreto, 2007). By implication then, gossip does not fall into the second major behavioural domain — that of competence, which concerns an individual's ability to realise their intentions.

Further evidence for the moral nature of gossip comes from recent findings that prosocial motives may drive the sharing of gossip when this gossip may protect a

vulnerable audience from an untrustworthy target. In particular, across 3 studies, Feinberg et al. (2012) found that participants who witnessed another participant defect in a social dilemma game almost without exception chose to share gossip that contained a warning about this person's likely behaviour to their future partner. They further demonstrated that more prosocially-oriented participants were more likely to share this gossip, and were willing to pay more in order to do so.

Therefore, because gossip is motivated by moral concerns and has social consequences, we expect that perceptions of gossipers will mainly fall in the moral domain; there is no reason to suppose that people will be judged as more or less competent on the basis of the gossip that they share. This supports our first hypothesis:

H1   *The gossip that gossipers share will affect evaluations of their morality rather than their competence.*

Further, in line with our arguments above, we expect this to occur because gossip has the potential to indirectly help or harm the audience by providing them with information that allows the audience to protect him or herself from a potentially harmful other. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2   *Judgments of gossiper morality will be positively related to the perceived utility of the gossip with regard to allowing the audience to form a more accurate understanding of the target.*

We have recently collected data that provides provisional evidence for H1 and H2 (Peters, Kashima, Cann & Everett, 2012). In this study, 75 participants (54 females, *M*=20.45, *SD*=1.23 years of age) were brought into the laboratory in groups of 3 or 4 individuals and led to believe that they would each write a story describing an event in the life of someone that they knew and then swap this story with another participant in their group. In fact, in exchange for their story, all participants were given a sheet containing one of five different pieces of gossip hand-written in a colloquial style (see Table 1).

Participants were then asked to rate the impressions that they formed on the basis of this story on identical 7-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). Following Leach et al. (2007), participants first rated the gossiper's morality with 3 traits: This student is "honest", "sincere" and "trustworthy" (α=.84); they then rated the gossiper's competence with an additional 3 items: This student is "skilled", "competent", "intelligent" (α=.74). Finally, as a measure of gossip utility, participants rated the ability of the gossip to help them regulate their relationship with the target: "This story gives me an idea of what the target is like"; "This story gives me useful information for knowing how to behave towards the target" (r=.59, p<.001).

Figure 1 depicts average ratings of gossiper morality and competence as a function of gossip item. In line with H1, we found that gossiper morality ratings (dark bars) did vary significantly more than gossiper competence ratings (light bars). Further, In line with H2, there was a significant correlation between perceptions of the ability of the gossip item to help the audience regulate their relationship with the target and judgments of the gossiper's morality, indicating that gossipers were evaluated as being more moral when they shared gossip that was perceived by the audience to be useful. In contrast, perceptions of the utility of the gossip item had no impact on judgments of the gossiper's competence.

In sum, this study supports the first claim of our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions — namely, that gossiping is a behaviour that falls primarily in the moral domain which means that judgments of a gossiper's morality will vary more as a function of the gossip that they tell than judgments of their competence. This study also supports the second claim of our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions — namely, that judgments of gossiper morality (but not competence) will vary with perceptions of the regulatory functions of gossip, so that gossipers who share gossip that helps an audience to regulate their relationship with the target will be perceived to be more moral.

The Morality of Sharing Morality Gossip

So far, our focus has strongly been on morality rather than competence. Not only have we claimed that gossipers will be perceived as more or less moral (rather than more or less competent) as a consequence of the gossip that they share, but in our review of research examining the beneficial consequences of gossip the majority of studies examined morality gossip — gossip that discussed a target's defection or cooperation — rather than competence gossip — gossip concerning a target's ability to achieve their goals. We suggest that this latter focus is not a mere oversight, and that the utility of gossip largely resides in morality gossip.

Specifically, we argue that gossip that pertains to the morality of the target will have greater implications for the audiences' ability to regulate their own behaviour towards this target than gossip that pertains to the competence of the target (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007; Peeters, 1992; Ybarra, Chan, Park, Burnstein, Monin & Stanik, 2008). In other words, information about a person's morality is essential for effective social action; information about their competence is not. Evidence for this claim comes from research demonstrating that morality information has primacy in social cognition: people base their social judgments more strongly on morality information and preferentially seek out this information about others.

For instance, Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini and Yzerbyt (2011) measured participants' global evaluations of a fictional immigrant group as a function of whether they received positive or negative information about the group's morality, competence or sociability (a third dimension that is sometimes distinguished from morality under a broader dimension of warmth). In two studies they found that although positively valenced information generally led to more positive group evaluations, this effect was most marked when the information pertained to morality. In a final study, they examined whether the relative importance of morality information for group evaluations was due to the social implications of morality by examining whether

the effect of morality on judgments was mediated by perceptions that the group was threatening. As expected, they found that morality (but not competence or sociability) information was related to threat perceptions and that this could account for the impact of morality on judgments.

There is also evidence that perceivers are most interested in obtaining information about a person's morality (Wojciszke, 2005). For instance, Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi and Cherubini (2011) presented participants with traits related to morality, competence and sociability and asked how important it would be to gather information related to each trait in order to form a global impression of a person, or in order to make a decision that was relevant to this person's morality (i.e., tell them a secret), competence (i.e., employ them) or sociability (i.e., invite them to a party). Although participants emphasised the importance of morality, sociability or competence traits when the decision was specifically relevant to that domain, they prioritised information related to morality when forming a global impression of the person.

There is evidence that this concern with morality information applies to gossip. For instance, Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells and Weiser (2000) found that while participants indicated that they disapproved of gossip that they saw to be self-serving, where the gossip concerned an individual's immoral actions and thus would allow the detection of free riders, they would actually punish those who did not pass the gossip on. These same concerns are evident in people's responses to the gossip that is shared about them. In particular, Ybarra, Park, Stanik and Lee (2012) presented Korean and US university students with a scenario that asked them to imagine that gossip was circulating that either claimed that they had failed an exam (evidence of incompetence) or that they had cheated on it (evidence of immorality). Across both cultures, participants reported higher levels of distress at the possibility that others doubted their morality than that others doubted their competence.

Interestingly, this strong concern for morality may even extend into task-based interactions in work settings, where a person's competence could be expected to be the primary consideration. In particular, Casciaro and Sousa Lobo (2008) examined the impact of an individual's liking for another individual and their perceptions of this individual's competence on their work-related engagement with that individual (such as approaching the individual for advice or problem solving assistance). Across three different organisations and different types of task-related interactions, they found that individuals were more likely to engage with more likeable, less competent colleagues than less likeable, more competent colleagues. In other words, it appears that people need to like others before they will seek to exploit their competence. Although this study did not examine morality specifically, their findings are impressive for demonstrating that concerns about competence are secondary to more social concerns even in explicitly task-oriented settings.

On the basis of this research, it seems that gossip that provides diagnostic information about a target's morality — allowing audiences to identify those individuals who should be approached and those who should be avoided — will be most useful to audiences as they navigate their social world. Consequently, we expect that audiences will evaluate gossipers who share extreme morality gossip (gossip that concerns very moral or immoral actions) as especially moral. This leads to the third hypothesis of our functionalist account of gossiper perception:

> H3   *Gossipers will be evaluated as more moral when they exchange extreme information about a target's morality (i.e., there will be a positive quadratic relationship between target morality and gossiper morality).*

Although we have argued that gossip that concerns a target's competence has few implications for the audience, it is still possible that the audience will perceive it to have implications for the target's wellbeing by contributing positively or negatively to the target's reputation, or at least communicating an intention on the part of the

gossiper to affect the target's reputation in these ways. Therefore, when the gossip concerns the competence of the target, we expect that audiences will base their perceptions of the gossiper's morality on the extent to which the gossip presents the target in a positive light. This therefore leads to the fourth hypothesis of our functionalist account of gossiper perception:

> H4   *Gossipers will be evaluated as more moral when they exchange positive information about a target's competence (i.e., there will be a positive linear relationship between target competence and gossiper morality).*

In distinguishing between the consequences of morality and competence gossip, our functionalist account of gossiper perception differs from the existing *valence* account of gossiper perception, which argues that gossipers who share positively valenced gossip (regardless of content) will be liked more than gossipers who share negatively valenced gossip. Essentially, this perspective assumes that perceptions of a gossiper are entirely driven by perceptions of the gossiper's intentions towards the target, so that gossipers who say positive things about a target are seen to have friendly intentions towards this target and consequently will be perceived as warm and likeable. This perspective neglects the functionalist considerations that drive our distinction between morality and competence gossip. It is only when the gossip does not help the audience to negotiate their social world by helping them to identify trustworthy and untrustworthy others (i.e., when the gossip concerns competence) that we expect the gossiper to be judged on the basis of their intentions towards the target; when the gossip does affect the audience's wellbeing (i.e., when it concerns morality) then gossipers should be judged on this basis instead.

However, there is evidence that supports the valence account. For instance, Wyer, Budesheim and Lambert (1990) found that participants who listened to a recording of two individuals gossiping about a target liked gossipers more when they described the target favorably than when they described the target unfavorably.

Similarly, Wyer, Budesheim, Lambert and Swan (1994) found that participants who listened to a recording of two individuals reflecting on one of these individual's behaviours liked gossipers who discussed this individual's positive behaviours more than gossipers who discussed this individual's negative behaviours.

The mechanism proposed by the valence account has received some empirical support. In particular, Gawronski and Walther (2008) were able to show that participants' greater liking of individuals who were said to like multiple target individuals was a function of a propositional mechanism — such as the conscious inference of the source's intentions toward the target — rather than an associative one — i.e., the mistaken association of the concept 'likeable' with sources who liked others (see Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). Although this study was not strictly speaking a communication study, it does suggest that judgments of gossipers are based on some propositional evaluation of the information that they communicate.

Although the valence account implies that the content of gossip should not matter, the preceding studies did not explicitly examine any content effects. In contrast, Ames, Bianchi and Magee (2010) have shown that valence drives judgments of a gossiper's agreeableness whether they share competence or sociability gossip. Specifically, participants were presented with an email that had been purportedly written by a coworker discussing the sociability or competence of a new work colleague. In two studies they found that participants evaluated gossipers who expressed positive evaluations of a target as more agreeable than gossipers who expressed negative evaluations of the target. Importantly, they found some evidence that this effect occurred in part because positive gossipers were seen to have positive social intentions, for instance by taking pleasure in being nice to others.

Although these studies do provide support for the valence account, it is important to note that they were not designed to distinguish between the valence and functionalist accounts. In particular, with the exception of Ames et al. (2010), these

studies did not distinguish between different kinds of gossip content, or different aspects of gossiper evaluations. Further, although Ames et al. (2010) show that whether gossip concerns agreeableness or competence does not affect judgments of a gossiper's agreeableness, there is evidence that agreeableness (i.e., sociability) related information is not perceived to have the utility of morality information, and is thus processed differently (Brambilla et al., 2011). Consequently, to test whether our functionalist account provides a better account of gossiper perceptions, it is necessary to examine the relationship between target morality and competence perceptions and gossiper morality perceptions.

In a series of three studies, Peters, Kashima, Muir and Tavenor (2012) have done precisely that. Participants were presented with 1 (Study 1), 4 (Study 2) or 8 (Study 3) gossip scenarios which described how an ingroup member approached them and told them a piece of gossip about another group member. The gossip items were designed to describe the moral, immoral, competent or incompetent behaviour of another individual (see Table 2). After reading through each scenario, participants were asked to rate the competence and morality of the gossip target and the gossiper. In all three studies, participants' judgments of the target's competence and morality were found to affect their perceptions of the gossiper's morality, but not the gossiper's competence, providing further evidence that gossiping is an intrinsically moral action (see H1).

In addition, these studies demonstrated that the content of the gossip did affect perceptions of the gossiper's morality in the specified ways. In particular, hierarchical linear regression revealed that target morality had a positive quadratic relationship with gossiper morality (in line with H3) and target competence had a positive linear relationship with gossiper morality (in line with H4). In other words, gossipers who shared diagnostic morality gossip and positive competence gossip were perceived to be especially moral. These findings therefore provide support for our functionalist account

of gossiper perceptions rather than the valence account. Figure 2 depicts the form of these relationships by graphing the Study 3 estimated regression lines.

Study 3 provided further support for our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions as participants were asked to indicate whether the item of gossip performed a number of different functions, including (a) helping them to regulate their relationship with the target by improving their understanding of the target and his or her likely behaviours and allowing them to alter their relationship accordingly, (b) consolidating ingroup norms, (c) providing entertainment or (d) meeting Gricean conversational rules (i.e., assessing whether the gossip is seen to be relevant, appropriate and truthful). Mediation analysis demonstrated that the quadratic relationship between target morality and gossiper morality was mediated by the ability of the gossip to regulate the participant's understanding of and relationship with the target; the linear relationship between target competence and gossiper morality was instead mediated by Gricean conversational rules. Therefore, this study demonstrated that gossip that conveys morality and competence information is seen to fulfil different functions, and judgments of gossipers are based on these functions. Moreover, in line with H2, gossipers who share diagnostic morality gossip are seen to be more moral because this gossip contributes to the audience's wellbeing. In sum, these studies provide convincing support for our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions.

Gossip and Group Regulation

One final implication of our functionalist account of gossiper perceptions is that any piece of gossip is likely to have greater implications for group regulation than has previously been recognised. Although most of the focus has been on the effect of gossip on people's behaviour towards the target of the gossip, this chapter so far has demonstrated that sharing gossip has larger implications for judgements of the gossiper's morality, and therefore for the audience's regulation of their own behaviour with the gossiper. In a group context, it further suggests that any piece of gossip has the

potential to affect group judgments through two pathways. In particular, any gossip that affects the reputation of an ingroup target will also affect perceptions of the ingroup gossiper, and both of these perceptions can provide the basis for evaluations of the ingroup.

There should be a straightforward mapping of the competence or morality content of the gossip onto group perceptions when this occurs through target perceptions, so that more or less competent and moral targets will be perceived to belong to more or less competent and moral groups. However, the implications of the content of the gossip for group perceptions will be less straightforward when it occurs through gossiper perceptions. Specifically, if gossiping is an intrinsically moral action, any gossip (whether it concerns a target's competence or morality) should affect perceptions of ingroup morality through gossiper perceptions. Interestingly, there is evidence that evaluations of ingroup morality are particularly important for group member evaluations of their group (Leach et al., 2007). This suggests that the ability of gossip to affect perceptions of the gossiper may be generally more important for individuals' attachment to their group than its ability to manipulate the reputation of the target.

This logic leads to our final two hypotheses:

H5   *Gossip will have a direct impact on participants' evaluations of the ingroup's morality and attachment to the ingroup through judgments of the target's morality and an indirect impact through judgments of the gossiper's morality.*

H6   *Gossip will have a direct impact on evaluations of the ingroup's competence through judgments of the target's competence only.*

The results of Peters, Kashima, Muir and Tavenor (2012) provide support for these final two hypotheses. In particular, in Study 2 participants were asked to rate the ingroup's morality and competence in addition to rating the gossiper and target's

morality and competence as before. In addition, they were asked to rate their attachment to this group (e.g., I am pleased to be a member of my group). As expected (and in line with H5), target morality ratings affected ratings of the ingroup's morality *directly*; target competence ratings also affected ratings of the ingroup's morality *indirectly* — through perceptions of the gossiper's morality. In contrast (and in line with H6), gossip appeared to only affect ratings of ingroup competence *directly* — through perceptions of target competence. Finally, target competence was found to predict ingroup attachment indirectly, as this effect was mediated through gossiper morality. Therefore, the content of gossip appears to affect ingroup attachment indirectly through gossiper judgments.

Conclusion

It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about nowadays saying things against one, behind one's back, that are absolutely and entirely true.

Oscar Wilde

Folk wisdom about gossip appears to be less than wise, privileging the feelings of the target above the possibility that he or she may do others harm. Indeed, the functionalist accounts of gossip and gossiper perceptions suggests that if people yielded to the exhortations of popular culture and resisted sharing gossip, not only society's capacity for contributing to the common good but also their capacity for maintaining high levels of social integration (i.e., strong connections between individuals, and between individuals and their groups) would be eroded. This is because it is only by knowing who is trustworthy and who is not that community members have some chance of outsmarting the free riders and cheats that pose such a threat to their ability to cooperate. It is also because gossiping — as a behaviour that instantiates a social triad of gossiper, target and audience (see Peters & Kashima, 2007) — has the capacity to simultaneously regulate the relationships between the audience and target, the audience and the gossiper, and the audience and ingroup, and has a particular capacity

to regulate impressions of the ingroup's morality, which appear to be especially important for group evaluations (Leach et al., 2007). Therefore, we suggest that George Elliot could not have been more wrong: where gossip serves these functions, it acts as the carbon scrub that keeps in check the immoral behaviours that pollute our social environment.

We have argued strongly in this chapter that the gossip that serves these important functions is diagnostic morality gossip — gossip that concerns the trustworthy and untrustworthy behaviours of another — rather than competence gossip. If so, this raises a number of interesting possibilities. First, to the extent that social information has been shown to disseminate more readily through communication chains than non-social information (Mesoudi, Whiten & Dunbar, 2006), we would expect to observe differences in the spread of social information as a function of its content. Specifically, morality-related social information should travel further and faster than competence-related social information. In line with this idea, a number of studies have found that the moral emotion of disgust is a particularly strong driver of dissemination (Heath, Bell & Sternberg, 2001; Peters, Kashima & Clark, 2009).

Second, it begs the question of whether negative competence gossip could ever be perceived to affect the audience's wellbeing and therefore lead to favorable judgments of the gossiper's morality. Indeed, Brambilla et al.'s (2011) finding that people did have a preference for competence related information when performing a task in the competence domain, suggests that it should. Using Schweder, Much, Mahapatra and Park's (1997) trichotomy of moral actions, we suggest that gossipers who share gossip that concerns incompetence may be judged positively if the target's incompetence has implications for another's autonomy or wellbeing, leads them to violate community norms around roles and structures or to degrade another's spiritual purity. These possibilities are just a few that await investigation in this rich and burgeoning field of research into the social dynamics and consequences of gossip.

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Table 1. Peters, Kashima, Cann and Everett (2012) Gossip Items

Target	Gossip Item
Honest Student	My friend Nicholas recently got a distinction in his final year university marks, he later realised that this was a mistake. He had done badly and didn't work hard over the three years, even failing a big assignment. But he contacted the admin of the department to let them know their error.
Dishonest Seller	My friend Katherine recently sold her polo car to a family friend. But the meter that shows the mileage was broken and so read less miles than had actually been driven. It read almost half the mileage that the car had done. The car looked in good condition so she didn't tell the family friend this.
Academic Achiever	A girl on my course Helena is leaving next year to study in New York because she won a Rhodes scholarship for graduate study. She's doing theoretical physics and then wants to finish her doctoral dissertation in renomalon calculus at MIT
Scam Victim	My housemate's friend Phil got an email supposedly from Nigerian royalty which asked for help moving money out of the country. Phil was told he would get 10 grand for doing this so sent his bank details. However he was scammed and had 3 grand stolen from his bank.
Dating	Someone called Jack on my course has never had a long-term relationship,

Failure   apparently it's because he can't have sex.

Table 2. Peters, Kashima, Muir and Tavenor (2012) Gossip Items.

| Dimension	Valence	Gossip Item
Morality	Positive	When Alice received her end of year University marks, she realized that they had made a mistake, as she was awarded a distinction for a subject that she had performed very poorly in – failing the major assignment. She contacted the administration to let them know their error.
	Negative	One of Alice's colleagues was fired because her boss believed that she was leaking organizational secrets to a member of a rival organization. It turns out that Alice had invented this gossip entirely.
Competence	Positive	Alice has just finished building a computer. She ordered all of the components from a catalogue and assembled it herself. Because she couldn't find a fast processer, she also had to build that herself.
	Negative	Alice decided to follow a well-known walk on the moor. She managed to get herself lost very quickly; the police say that no-one has ever managed to get lost on that walk before, as it is very well sign posted.

Figure 1. *Ratings of Gossiper Morality and Competence*
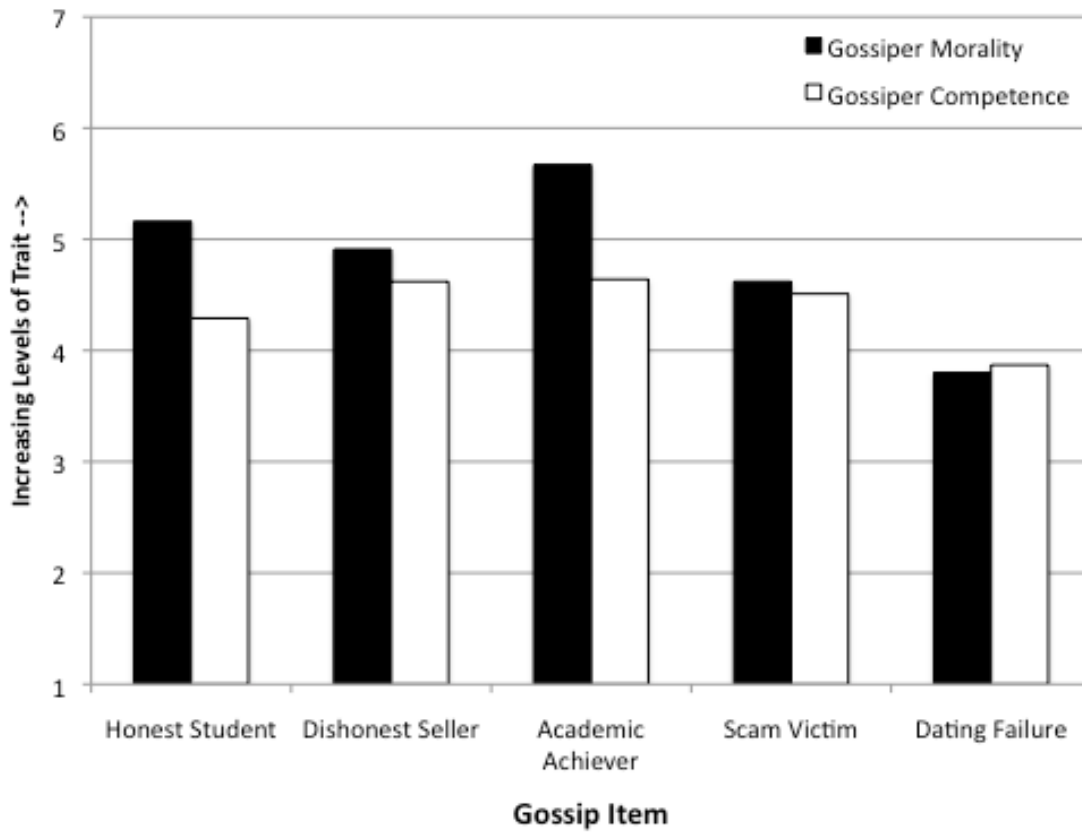
Figure 2. *Relationship between target ratings and gossiper ratings*