An Intercultural Analysis of Gossip

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Abstract: The range of studies that has been conducted on the role of gossip in organizations suggests that gossip in the workplace plays a variety of important roles in organisational processes. However, relatively few studies have explored its role in intercultural situations. This is surprising given how organisations are becoming increasingly diverse. This paper addresses this gap in the literature. It reports on an exploratory project that sought to determine how perceptions of organisational gossip vary between members of different cultural groups. Using a sensemaking, interpretative approach, we showed two gossip scenarios to 8 Chinese, 8 German and 8 Dutch first year students, and conducted semi structured interviews, asking them how they perceived the nature of the gossip, the gossiper and the object of gossip (i.e., the person being gossiped about). After analysing the data with ATLAS.ti, we observed certain patterns emerging. For example, while all students condemned a manager's bad behaviour, the Chinese students seemed to expect it more than did their Dutch or German counterparts. Moreover, we found that the relationship and amount of trust that exists between the gossiper, listener and object of gossip greatly influenced how the gossiper and object of gossip were perceived. After reflecting on our research methodology, this study sets the stage for the next phase of our research on the role of gossip in intercultural situations.

Keywords: Gossip, sensemaking, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Gossip in the workplace is generally frowned upon; psychologists in particular, have a negative view of gossip and consider it to be an indirect form of aggression (Baumeister, Vohs & Zhang, 2004). According to Peters and Kashima (2005), "societal attitudes towards gossipers are overwhelmingly negative" (p. 5). However, more and more researchers have been looking at gossip in a more positive light (e.g., Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois & Callan, 2004; Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Mills, 2010; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Waddington, 2012), recognizing that it plays a variety of important roles in organisational processes. For example, Van Iterson, Waddington and Michelson (2011) state that "organizational gossip is a source of power based on exchange of information and support" and enables "managers to anticipate resistance to change" or "access support for action and change" (p. 384).

However, according to Watson (2012), few studies have explored its role in intercultural situations. This is surprising given how organisations are becoming increasingly diverse and operating in various countries. This paper addresses this gap in the literature. It reports on an exploratory project that sought to determine how perceptions of organisational gossip vary

between members of different cultural groups and to establish the challenges of undertaking such a study.

2. Gossip Across Cultures

Most researchers from the English language tradition define gossip as "positive or negative information exchanged about an absent third party" (see Bertolotti & Magnati, 2014; Cole & Scrivener, 2013; Farley, 2011; Foster, 2004; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell & Labianca, 2010; Martinescu, Janssen & Nijstad, 2014; McAndrew, 2014; Yao, Scott, McAleer, O'Donnell & Sereno, 2014). According to Bertolotti and Magnati (2014), there is often confusion between 'gossip' and 'rumour.' While some scholars use the terms interchangeably (such as Michelson & Mouly, 2000), for others, rumour is "always speculative" (Foster, 2004); gossip, on the other hand, usually "carries with it the presumption of having some basis in factuality" (Noon & Delbridge, as cited in Michelson & Mouly, 2000, p. 339).

Many claim that gossip is universal and unavoidable across cultures (see Dunbar, 2004) and that it is central to the social life of humans (Mc Andrew, 2014). Historical records and cross cultural studies show that gossip has been shared by "people of all ages, times, and cultures" (McAndrew, 2014, p. 4): gossip goes as far back as our prehistoric past, and it became a part of our evolutionary adaptation. "People who were fascinated with the lives of others were simply more successful than those who were not, and it is the genes of those individuals that have come down to us through the ages" (McAndrew, 2014, p. 4). Baumeister et al. (2004) claim that gossip is an "observational learning of a cultural kind." Culture includes "shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles and values found among speakers of a particular language who live during the same historical period in a specific geographic region" (de Mooij, 2011, p. 33). Gossip, therefore, is a "potentially powerful and efficient means of transmitting information about the rules, norms, and other guidelines for living in a culture. Not only does it educate the listener about social norms, but it also affirms them." (Baumeister et al., 2004, p. 112).

However, while gossip is common in all cultures, few studies examine how attitudes to gossip differ from one culture to the next. Luna and Chou (2013), for example, studied the impact of attitude, subjective norms and perceived behaviour control on intention to gossip. However, they did not take culture into account. Others made correlations between culture and attitudes such as social desirability response bias (Bernardi, 2006), perceived ethical behaviour (Jeurissen & van Luijk, 1991, as cited in Bernardi, 2006), and corruption and dishonesty (Husted, 1999, as cited in Bernardi, 2006), but few examine the role that culture has on determining attitudes towards gossip. Consequently, one could expect to observe significant differences between gossip coming from people belonging to high context cultures, where "most of the information is either part of the context or internalized in the person" (de Mooij, 2011, p. 43) and that coming from people of low context cultures, who tend to communicate using "explicit verbal messages" that are "direct and unambiguous" (de Mooij, 2011, p. 44). While everyday communication between cultures can lead to its share of misunderstandings, with gossip, this would be even more the case, as it generally involves sensitive information. Moreover, members of a high power distance culture, where "the less powerful members of an organization accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1991, as cited in Nunez,

Mahdi & Popma, 2014, p. 60), may not gossip in the same way about their manager as someone from a low power distance culture where hierarchy plays a less important role. Similarly, a gossiper from a task-based culture where "work relationships are built and dropped easily" (Meyer, 2014, p. 171) may lose the trust of a listener from a relationship based culture, where "work relationships build up slowly over the long term" (Meyer, 2014, p. 171) by saying too much, too quickly.

3. Sensemaking

Taking a sensemaking approach, this study intends to contribute to the gossip and intercultural communication literature by revealing how people of different cultures make sense of gossip and gossipers.

Sensemaking is the process of making experience sensible (Weick, 1995). It is founded on "the idea that the reality of everyday life … takes particular shape and form as individuals attempt to create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves" (Weick, 1995, p. 11). According to Maitlis and Christianson (2014), this sensemaking process is nearly always triggered when individuals "confront events, issues and actions that are somewhat surprising or confusing" (p. 66). They then seek to extract and interpret cues from their environment, "using these as the basis for a plausible account that provides order and 'makes sense' of what has occurred" (p. 58). While gossip itself can be considered as a form of sensemaking within an organization, how certain gossip scenarios are perceived and interpreted by outsiders, can also be defined as sensemaking. Indeed, the authors claim that while sensemaking was traditionally applied to an organizational context, it has broadened to explore other things such as culture (Gephart, 1993, as cited in Maitlis and Christianson).

Therefore, by using a sensemaking approach we attempted to uncover the hidden rules of engagement that people from different cultures use when making sense of gossiping. How are gossipers and objects of gossip perceived by people of various cultures? Which types of behaviour are acceptable to some and unacceptable to others? How do people of different cultures make sense of one same gossip scenario?

4. Methodology

An interpretive approach such as sensemaking, was judged appropriate (Mills, 2010), because it "frees the researcher from the quest for an objective, generalizable knowledge of a phenomenon by redirecting attention to people's socially situated, constantly evolving, retrospective sense of a phenomenon" (Mills, 2010, p. 217). Interpretivism is founded on the ontological assumption that meaning is subjective, that there is not an absolute truth waiting for the researcher to discover.

This exploratory study constitutes a first building block on which several further studies will be based in the future. The goal is not only to uncover patterns in people's attitudes towards gossip and gossipers, and the role culture plays in shaping these attitudes, but more importantly, to reflect on the research method itself and refine the methodology for the next phases of our research project.

5. Sample

According to the Dutch educational platform Eurogates, out of all of the international students coming to The Netherlands, the majority are German and Chinese. That is why we decided to begin this first phase of our study by showing two gossip scenarios to 8 German, 8 Chinese and 8 Dutch first year students. We asked various teachers at our university to provide the names of potential participants, and the student researchers also used their networks at school and on social media to find our interviewees. First year German and Chinese students were chosen (instead of second or third year students), as they are less likely to have been too influenced by the Dutch culture at this stage than second or third year students, and so, we assumed that they would perceive the gossip scenarios in ways strongly influenced by their home culture. First year Dutch students were also less likely to be too influenced by the culture of the university.

Moreover, since researchers are very divided in terms of how gender influences the gossip process, and we could only secure small samples, we chose to interview women only in this first, exploratory phase of our research. While some studies have found very little empirical evidence that women gossip more frequently than men (see Dunbar, 1993; Foster, 2004; Luna & Chou, 2013; Michelson & Mouly, 2000), others state that gender plays an important role in the spreading of gossip (Gholipour, Kozekanan & Zehtabi, 2011; McAndrew, 2014; Watson, 2012). Therefore, to have mixed gender samples when we were working with very small samples would have made gender effects difficult to identify.

5.1.   Ethical Considerations

Before starting the interviews, we guaranteed our subjects confidentiality and told them that they could stop the interview at any moment and withdraw from the research if they wished to do so. We then informed our subjects that our research was about intercultural communication and that we wanted to see the influence culture had on people's perception of various scenarios. We avoided the word 'gossip' in order to avoid social desirability effects, as most people have a rather pejorative view of gossip (Epstein, 2011). Therefore, similarly to other researchers (such as Cole & Scrivener, 2013; Darmon, 2018; Farley, Timme & Hart, 2010; Martinescu et al., 2014) we first spoke about 'informal communication' and debriefed our subjects at the end.

5.2.   Data Collection

We showed two gossip scenarios to our subjects, and conducted semi structured interviews (see Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012), asking them how they perceived the gossiper and the object of gossip (i.e., the person being gossiped about). These scenarios are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Two Gossip Scenarios

Scenario 1:   During an office party, Jane (the secretary) tells Fran that Jack (Fran's boyfriend) is married.

Fran is the fourth person he is having an affair with. Jane tells Fran that she also slept with Jack last year.

Scenario 2:
Peter walks into Bob's office, which is a mess. Bob tells him that he deleted that confidential file Peter has been working on for the last 5 months… Peter walks out of the office, upset, and runs into a colleague. Peter says: "Can you imagine! Bob, that stupid idiot, he lost five months' worth of my work! I want to kill the guy!"

We used semi-structured interviews, as, according to Saunders et al. (2012), such protocols are ideal when questions are complex and follow-up explanations may be required (see Appendix A). By presenting not too detailed gossip scenarios to our interviewees, we observed how they made sense of these scenarios, how they interpreted them, and whether culture played a role in their sensemaking process. In both scenarios, we asked our interviewees what they thought of the gossiper and the object of gossip: Jane and Jack in Scenario 1, and Peter and Bob in Scenario 2. Our interviewees were then asked how they would have reacted if they had been in the place of the listener (Fran in Scenario 1, and Peter's colleague in Scenario 2), or if they had been in the shoes of the gossiper. We also explored whether the status of the gossiper or the object of gossip influenced our interviewees' perceptions: did the situation change if the gossiper was a distant colleague, a friend or the manager? What if the object of gossip was a distant colleague, a friend or a manager?

In order to control for the power distance between the interviewer and interviewees, two trained students followed the same interview process. We decided that only these two students would conduct the interviews, as the interviewees may not speak as freely to a teacher as they would to another student. Therefore, the two students conducted their interviews in a quiet spot on campus, recording the interviews on their mobile phones, trying to create a setting as relaxed and informal as possible. The student researchers then showed the scenarios to their interviewees as shown in Table 1. They let their interviewees read the text, and then explained it again to make sure that everything was clear (since the interviews were conducted in English, the second or third language for all of our subjects). Regular debriefing sessions were held to carefully monitor the interview process and ensure both student researchers were following the same interview process. They then transcribed their interviews, and the 48 transcripts were then analysed by the author only, using ATLAS.ti software.

6. Analysis

Our scenarios and questionnaires were based on the existing gossip literature. Since Martinescu et al. (2014), for example, broke down topics of gossip into several categories: personality, peculiarities, appearance and competence, we created scenarios about gossiping on personality (Philandering Jack in Scenario 1) and about incompetence (Bob in Scenario 2). Moreover, since who we gossip with (Wittek & Wielers, 1998), and why we gossip (Martinescu et al., 2014; McAndrew, 2014) are factors that are considered to be particularly relevant, we explored these in our semi-structured interviews. In both scenarios, we examined whether the relationship

one has with the gossiper and the object of gossip would make a difference: if the gossiper is a manager, a distant colleague or a close friend? Or if the person being gossiped about is a manager or a distant colleague? Taking into account the category of why people gossip, in Scenario 1, for example, we examined what our interviewees thought were the gossipers' intentions when gossiping: how did our interviewees make sense of these scenarios? We wanted to see whether they thought gossipers wanted to protect the group from a norm violation (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2008), to gather information (Foster, 2004; Giardini, 2012), to influence (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2008) or to entertain (Foster, 2004; Yao et al., 2014). Would certain cultures attach more importance to some of these categories than others? Does the sensemaking process of such scenarios differ from one culture to the next?

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, basing ourselves on these categories, we started off with a fixed set of codes when creating our coding scheme. The main codes drawn up for Scenario 1 (see Table 2) and Scenario 2 (see Table 3) describe the relationship between gossiper, listener and third party (the object of gossip). In a first instance, we determined what the relationship to the gossiper and third party was: Gossiper is a Distant Colleague, Gossiper is a Friend, Third Party is the Manager, and Third Party is a Colleague. Then, we examined the valence of the perception of the gossiper and third party: Perception of Gossiper (positive +, negative -, or neutral +/-), and Perception of Third Party (positive +, negative -, or neutral +/). Then, whilst coding in ATLAS.ti, we continued using a more inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2012), and created codes while analysing the interviews. For example, codes describing the interviewees' sensemaking process started to emerge, such as what the interviewees believed to be the intentions of the gossiper: Gossiper is jealous, Gossiper wants revenge, etc. The main sensemaking codes appear in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2. Codes Scenario 1

Relationship to Gossiper	Perception of Gossiper (Jane)	Sensemaking
-Gossiper is a distant colleague	-Positive (+) -Negative (-) -Neutral (+/-)	-Gossiper is jealous -Gossiper wants revenge -Gossiper is not trustworthy -Gossiper is trustworthy -Gossiper shouldn't meddle in someone's private life -Gossiper wants to get ahead -Gossiper wants to warn listener -Gossiper is still interested in Jack -Gossiper wants to spread dirt -Gossiper is a slut -Gossiper wants to make Fran (the listener) jealous
-Gossiper is a friend		-Gossiper is trustworthy -Gossiper is kind -Gossiper wants to protect / warn listener -Friends are more sincere and trustworthy -Friends should share intimate information

Relationship to Third Party	Perception of Third Party (Jack)	Sensemaking
-Third Party is manager	-Positive (+) -Negative (-) -Neutral (+/-)	-Bosses often sleep with colleagues -Bosses have money and power and attract girls -Bosses can get away with more -Lying /cheating is bad -Abuse of power -Can't be trusted professionally -Jack doesn't respect women -If you cheat on your wife, you will also cheat on your employees -Having affairs at work is bad -Jack is narcissistic
-Third Party is a colleague		-Lying / cheating is bad -Two colleagues can fall in love -Work and private life should be separate -Having affairs at work is a bad idea. -Third party is married -It's better to have an affair with a colleague than with the boss -Your personal life is your own business -Jack must be charming and attractive

As the scenarios were not very detailed, interviewees were often quick to make sense of these situations and ascribe their own meanings, interpretations and moral judgements: for example, codes that came up were: "women are mean," "women like to gossip," "friends are more sincere than colleagues," "having an affair at work will create jealousy," etc. After coding all 48 interviews, we further analysed our data to look for patterns (according to Saunders et al, 2012).

Table 3. Codes Scenario 2

Relationship to Gossiper	Perception of Gossiper (Peter)	Sensemaking
-Gossiper is a distant colleague	-Positive (+) -Negative (-) -Neutral (+/-)	-Gossiper should not complain to others -Gossiper should stay calm. -Gossiper uses harsh words -Gossiper is also responsible for mistake -Gossiper should not complain but fix problem -Gossiper is angry -Has sympathy for gossiper -Mistakes can happen -Gossiper is unprofessional -It's bad to speak behind peoples' backs -Colleagues should respect each other -Everyone talks and gossips in an office
-Gossiper is a friend		-It's OK to complain with close colleagues -It's OK to complain to friends and family -Has sympathy for gossiper -Mistakes can happen to anybody -You are more comfortable with people your own age -You can say whatever you like to a friend -Would try and help gossiper solve the problem -Would try and comfort gossiper
-Gossiper is a manager		-Gossiper is unprofessional -Managers are supposed to fix things -Managers shouldn't talk about their employees -Managers should stay above their employees -Managers shouldn't be emotional -Has sympathy for gossiper -Would feel intimidated by gossiper -Gossiper is inappropriate -Gossiper is also responsible for lost work -Managers should take more responsibility -Gossiper uses harsh words -It's bad to speak behind peoples' backs -Talking about problems can help employees bond -Maybe the manager is trying to tell me something about me. -Bosses need to be patient -Managers gossiping is about power -Everyone talks and gossips in an office -Boss complaining to you will strengthen bond with him

Relationship to Third Party	Perception of Third Party (Bob)	Sensemaking
-Third Party is a colleague	-Positive (+) -Negative (-) -Neutral (+/-)	-3rd Party is careless -3rd Party is unprofessional -3rd Party is incompetent -People can make mistakes -Gossiper also has responsibility in mistake -First impressions are important (even if made via gossip) -3rd party is not trustworthy -Has sympathy for Bob -3rd Party is not very smart -3rd Party is an idiot -3rd Party probably feels bad
-Third Party is a friend		-3rd Party is careless -3rd Party is incompetent -3rd Party should be forgiven -Friends should stick together -You can still love your friend even if he's an idiot -Would warn 3rd Party about gossip -Would defend 3rd Party to some extent -Would try and help 3rd Party
-Third Party is a manager		-3rd Party is careless -3rd Party is incompetent -Should try and help solve the problem -If you help your boss, he will owe you. -Would not want to get involved in situation -The boss won't apologize for his mistakes -Would not want to gossip: someone else could repeat what you said to the manager -Managers shouldn't make such mistakes -Employees cannot be openly angry at a manager

    For each scenario, we grouped the quotes from the Chinese, Dutch and German students under the code: 'Gossiper is a Distant Colleague', and then under 'Gossiper is a Friend', and then compared the quotes that came up between the three cultures. Other codes were attached to these quotes such as 'Perception of Gossiper', as well as the various sensemaking codes. This allowed us to find interesting patterns.

7. Findings

7.1. First Scenario

7.1.1. Perception of Jane (the Gossiper)

Generally, all Dutch, German and Chinese students perceived Jane (the gossiper) rather badly

if she was a distant colleague – the Chinese and the Dutch were quite adamant about their opinions. Most thought she was overstepping her boundaries and that it was inappropriate to tell such delicate things to Fran. The following interview excerpts illustrate this finding:

> F (Chinese student): Well, this is such an inappropriate conversation… because this is a private talk.

> N (Dutch student): At first I would be kind of shocked. Like why are you telling me this? It's like, I don't even know you and you're gonna step into my comfort zone and be like, oh yeah, wait, your guy is married and also slept with four other people. I would be like, what the fuck?

They also doubted whether Jane was trustworthy: did she have ulterior motives, they wondered?

> A (Chinese student): I think maybe she's a little jealous.

> C (Chinese student): Jane may be jealous, because last year she slept with the boss [Jack], and she also wants more money, and she wants me to break up with the boss, so she could still be the mistress of the boss.

> L (Dutch student): If she [Jane] was just a co-worker and I don't know her, than I might think she wants my job.

> R (Dutch student): If she [Jane] wasn't close to me I would question why she would tell me.

The German students, however, were less vehemently against the gossiper. While they did wonder about Jane's motives, they tended to be a lot more trusting.

> C (German student): I would believe her I think because I would not think of another reason why she would tell me about that.

> R (German student): I would have believed Jane. I didn't even consider that she was lying.

Contrarily to the Dutch and Chinese students, the Germans found it more normal (and even a duty), for the gossiper to warn Fran about her philandering boyfriend:

> E (German student): You think that there wouldn't be any mean intentions behind it … She [Jane] found out herself that he [Jack] was married and everything, so maybe she is just trying to save her [Fran] from having the same struggles and just be frank with her and tell her what is going on so she doesn't have to find out in a few months.

However, when the gossiper was a friend, all interviewees were generally positive. They assumed that the gossiper spoke the truth, wanted to protect them, and were quite certain that she did not have ulterior motives. Friends can basically say anything they like, and they will be forgiven. The following interview excerpts illustrate this finding:

> X (Chinese student): I think a close friend won't cheat me, I choose to believe her.

> L (Dutch student): If she is a really good friend, probably her intentions are going to be better than if I didn't know her… She wants to protect me.

> M (German student): I would believe her, because if she was a friend, I mean, I trust my friends, so in that situation, I would trust her.

7.1.2. Perception of Jack (Third Party/Object of Gossip)

When asked to give their perceptions of the Third Party (i.e., Jack, the object of gossip), all interviewees were unanimous that Jack was bad, especially because he is married. While most thought it was generally a bad idea to have affairs at work, the greatest sin Jack committed was to cheat and lie to his wife.

> X (Chinese student): He is bad man… because he's married.

> E (Dutch student): He cares about himself. He doesn't really care about the consequences of the choices he makes… He probably likes to stand in front of a mirror also (laughs).

> F (German student): Of course, a boss can date someone working at the office or like a secretary or something. I don't think that's a problem. But yeah, I would say the only problem is that he is married.

For many of the Dutch interviewees, Jack's behavior was plain bad, and they said it didn't matter so much whether he was a manager or a colleague.

> S (Dutch student): [Jack] is still a dick. …Still an ass.

7.1.3. Role Related Expectations

Both the German and Chinese students agreed that Jack's behavior was particularly bad, especially because he was a manager. Where they differed significantly, was in the expectations they had of managers. The Chinese students didn't seem surprised by the manager's bad behavior, and even seemed to expect it. For example:

> A (Chinese student): If you are the boss, you have money, you have power, you will attract the girls a lot more than a normal person.

Some even justified this bad behavior (such as having affairs with their employees) by invoking the power relation. For example:

> S (Chinese student): If [the boss'] employees don't obey his power, his rules, maybe they will be fired.

The German students, contrarily, expected a manager to step up to his responsibilities because he is a position of power, and therefore has certain responsibilities to his employees.

> F (German student): Because he is kinda like a role model, people look up to him. He is the boss and they respect him, and then he is doing stuff like that…

7.2. Second Scenario

In Scenario 2, we analysed the relationship between the role of the gossiper to the way he was perceived. We asked our interviewees what they thought of Peter (the gossiper) if he were a distant colleague, a friend or the manager. We then examined whether their perception of Bob (the third party/object of gossip) changed if he were a distant colleague, a friend or the manager.

7.2.1. Perception of Peter (the Gossiper)

All interviewees were rather sympathetic towards Peter, and could understand that he was angry after having lost 5 months of work. However, there were some differences in how the gossiper's tone was perceived. The Dutch students tended to understand Peter completely, and found it normal that he would need to blow off steam:

> H (Dutch student): I understand his frustration (laughs). I mean five months of work is a lot! So I'd also be angry. I probably would have the same reaction.

> E (Dutch student): We all know he doesn't mean it… He doesn't really think he [Bob]'s an idiot and he doesn't want to kill him… Dutch people tend to [say things] ten times louder and harsher than we mean.

The German students were more critical about the gossiper's tone. Several mentioned that Peter used "harsh words":

> A (German student): I understand because it's directly after the situation, you can be really aggressive… but at the same time, it's kind of hard to say 'I want to kill the guy.' It's a bit too much and it's not very professional.

> C (German student): I understand that he is angry in the moment, but like, he should probably walk away, calm down, and not talk in front of other people about it.

Similarly, the Chinese students found Peter's behavior rather rude and unprofessional:

> S (Chinese student): I can understand Peter, but I think this behavior is bad, is rude…
> I think he can't say things like stupid idiot or bad words.

> A (Chinese student): I would think this is a little bit weird, you know. We are not good
> friends, these things is personal things actually.

However, if Peter (the gossiper) was a friend, all students perceived the situation differently. They all found it normal that a friend would express their true thoughts and feelings. As a matter of fact, most students from all three cultures felt affected by the situation personally, and all said they would try and help Peter solve the problem.

> R (German student): I would get.. I might also get angry at him [Bob].

> T (Dutch student): If I wasn't very close, I might just say 'sorry, I hope you're able to
> solve this,' and if I were closer [to Peter], I might offer help and see if we can solve it
> together.

> F (Chinese student): If I'm a close friend [of Peter's], I want him to be happy, so if I
> say something he wants to listen, like some sweet, warm words, I think Peter won't be
> too angry anymore then.

When the gossiper was the manager, the Dutch and German students had similar reactions: they all thought the gossiper was unprofessional, and that managers shouldn't talk behind the backs of their employees. Moreover, they were quick to point out that the manager also had a role in Bob's mistake and was also responsible. The following interview excerpts illustrate this finding:

> E (German student): If Peter reacts that way, then it's like he doesn't have that big of
> a respect for his employees.

> M (German student): Well that's not really professional because Bob is probably on a
> level under him or is one of his workers. He is not supposed to say that to his employees
> … and not rant about other people.

> S (Dutch student): If you're the manager, you're above your employees and you should
> sort of form an image of professionalism.

> L (Dutch student): Because a manager is above his colleagues, and if a manager can
> say of one employee that he is an idiot, than he can also say it of someone else. And
> he's supposed to be above that… His next sentence should be "how am I going to fix
> this?"

While several of the Chinese students also found that Peter behaved inappropriately as a manager, their expectations of how managers can act differed significantly from their European counterparts (similarly to Scenario 1). For example:

> X (Chinese student): I think it's OK. It's normal because many, many bosses say anything to their employees because [they are the boss]. … If I'm rude, they cannot mind, because I am the boss.

Also, Peter's words and actions were interpreted very differently by some of the Chinese students:

> A (Chinese student): I would think that if he wants to say something to me actually, sometimes the manager, they want to…this is a kind of way they manage the group. Like I won't say that directly to you, I just warn you, like Bob did these things, you should be careful. … So I would wonder why the manager says this to me. Maybe I did something wrong, or I am going to check myself if I did everything good.

This illustrates how certain messages can take a very different meanings for members of high and low context cultures.

7.2.2. Perception of Bob (the Third Party/Object of Gossip)

After listening to Peter gossiping about Bob, the Chinese students seemed to trust the gossiper and were quick to form a negative impression of Bob. For example:

> C (Chinese student): I will think Bob is a careless person.

> Y (Chinese student): Stupid, careless and incapable. That's my first reaction. … My first impression is that he didn't fulfill his job and he is not a competent employee.

> J (Chinese student): I wouldn't trust him. I wouldn't want to work with him.

The Dutch and German students tended to be more forgiving towards Bob, and defended him. Mistakes can happen to anyone, after all.

> N (Dutch student): It's so sad for Bob, because he is being yelled at. No, I think it can happen, right? That's how you can think of him, just clumsy and not cautious enough.

> S (Dutch student): People make mistakes. Even if this is a huge one, he didn't do it on purpose.

> E (German student): I kind of imagine him being more the quiet guy in the office. Like, kind of does his thing and he only really appears when something bad happens.

M (German student): Bob? He seems a little… clumsy. I think he feels really bad about it.

Especially, if Bob were a friend, the Dutch and German students all said they would try and defend him, even if the gossiper is the manager.

H (Dutch student): If you're close to someone, I think you have a tendency to feel a little bit… I don't know if protective is the right word, but if someone is a close friend of yours, and someone says that he's a stupid idiot, you kind of have the tendency to say "oh wait!"

C (German student): I would say, maybe you shouldn't talk like this about my friend. He didn't do it on purpose. It was an accident. Everyone makes mistakes.

While the Chinese students also said they would defend their friend, they seemed to look for less confrontational ways of doing so. Rather than confronting the gossiper immediately, they would first look for more information as to Bob's role, and then seek ways to provide comfort and advice. For example:

Y (Chinese student): I would go ask him [Bob] to figure out what he was doing. Why did he do this? And try to give him some advice and help him minimize the damage, and get him out of that shit. Yeah, I would feel more worried about him.

However, if Bob were the manager, all of the students were more strict towards him, and perceived him poorly. However, most were reluctant to get involved in any form of gossip, as they feared that it could have repercussions on their jobs.

A (Chinese student): I don't want to get involved in this. … If you say something like that to someone else, someone else will tell the manager, and will add something maybe, and it's not really good for you.

N (Dutch student): If Bob was Peter's manager, … Peter could lose his job because of me telling Bob…

R (German student): You can be angry but you can't tell everyone because eventually he is going to know and confront you: why did you tell everyone or why did you…?

8. Discussion

Firstly, this section discusses the emerging trends and disjunctions identified in this exploratory study. Secondly, it discusses the conclusions we drew from our reflections on the research design we enacted.

8.1. Emerging Patterns and Disjunctions

With this study, we observed how the roles of the gossiper and third party influenced the way interviewees of different cultures perceived these. In the first scenario, the Dutch and Chinese students perceived the object of gossip differently when he was the boss. In the second scenario, where Peter (the gossiper) vents about Bob's incompetence, several Dutch students said that if Peter is the manager, he should not talk badly about other employees as he has to remain professional. Certain Chinese students, however, had different expectations about how bosses can act, and even justified bad boss behavior (such as having affairs with their employees or displaying anger and bad-mouthing their employees) by invoking the power relation. Since China is a higher power distance country than Holland or Germany, this may explain why there is an acceptance that the boss can misbehave.

In the second scenario, the German and Chinese students found the tone in which Peter (the gossiper) spoke, more offensive than the Dutch did. Even though Germany and The Netherlands are both low context cultures that are comfortable giving direct negative feedback to colleagues, Germany is less low context / explicit than The Netherlands (see Adler, 2008; Meyer, 2014). In China, where the communication is high context, implicit and indirect, we can see how Peter's comments are interpreted in a totally different way. Rather than taking the gossip against Bob at face value, Chinese listeners would wonder whether the manager is trying to give them negative feedback about their own performance, by "blurring the message," as Meyer (2014, p. 83) puts it.

Despite some of these differences, throughout both of the scenarios, the German, Dutch and Chinese students reacted in similar ways. Their perception of the gossiper was highly dependent on the relationship between gossiper, listener and third party. Our interviewees said that if they trust the gossiper, or s/he is a close friend, anything they say is excusable. If the gossiper is a distant colleague or manager, then our interviewees were a lot more critical. The relationship between the gossiper, listener and third party is therefore crucial in how the gossip will be perceived: maybe even more than the content of the message itself. While all interviewees spoke about 'friendship' and 'trust,' these notions certainly take on very different meanings from one culture to the next (Dietz, Gillespie & Chao, 2013; Usunier, 2005). For example, Meyer (2014) states that the Dutch are extremely task based, and trust "is built through business related activities." Many Dutch people tend to separate their work and private lives very well. At the other end of Meyer's culture map scale, the Chinese are a lot more relationship based, and invest a lot of time building friendships with their colleagues: "Trust is built through sharing meals, evening drinks and visits at the coffee machine" (p. 171). The Germans are closer to the Dutch on the scale, but more relationship-based. Therefore, even if all agree that a friend can say anything they like, what constitutes a friend will vary significantly from one culture to the next. Understanding these relationships well will shed much light on how to gossip in a way that enables us to gain the listener's trust rather than to lose it.

8.2. Reflections and Recommendations for Further Research

While conducting this exploratory study, we regularly reflected on our research methodology.

For example, the students conducting the interviews often wondered whether their subjects were being completely open and honest with them (especially, the Chinese students, who, they suspected, were telling them the things they thought they wanted to hear). Reflecting on this, we noted that the student-interviewers were putting their subjects in the position of gossipers, as they were asked to say what they thought about the characters from the scenarios. The fact that the interviewees did not know their interviewers beforehand, put them in the situation where they would be gossiping with unknown people with whom they had no friendship or trust relation. Therefore, future studies should take into account that interviewees in such situations will probably be a lot more guarded.

Moreover, our scenarios all depicted situations that are highly value-laden: gossipers talk about philandering boyfriends and incompetent colleagues, which can trigger moral judgements. These would certainly be culture bound – at least to a certain extent. We thought about also creating another scenario showing two people gossiping about unimportant, non-threatening things that happened to a third party. Most likely, everyone would deem this type of gossip acceptable. At which point would subjects consider the gossip problematic? These are extra questions and discussions that we plan to include in the second phase of our research.

9. Implications for Future Research

With this exploratory study, we strove to refine our research design in order to be able to conduct further research on this topic in the future. In the next phase, we will increase the sample size to see whether any patterns emerge when exploring the role of culture in influencing subjects' perception of gossip and gossipers. By also adding one more neutral (baseline) scenario, we hope to uncover more insights and patterns. Moreover, we will include more students coming from a greater number of cultures (such as the Middle East or Africa, for example), and also include the same number of Eastern student groups as Western student groups in order to create a better balance amongst our interviewees. A follow up study could even include employees and managers working in international organizations. We believe that this type of research will address a gap in the literature on gossip and intercultural communications, and will also be valuable to anyone working in an international organization, seeking to build strong relationships with colleagues from different cultures.

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Author Note

Appendix A – Questionnaire

Scenario 1
What do you think of Jane, the secretary?
What do you think her intentions were when she told Fran about her boyfriend?
Would your opinions change if Jane was a close colleague / friend? A distant colleague?
What do you think of Jack?
Would you think differently if Jack was Fran's boss? her colleague?
If you were Fran, would you be more inclined to believe Jane if she were a direct colleague? a close friend? Or if you had never met her before?
If you were Fran what would you say to Jane?

Scenario 2
What do you think of Peter? What if he is a close colleague? Your manager? You hardly know Peter?
What do you think of Bob? What if Bob is a close colleague? Your manager? You hardly know Bob?
If you were Peter, what would you have said differently?
If Peter came to you, what would you say to him?