

Towards a Criterion Based Understanding of Gossip

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Abstract

This paper presents a criterion-based approach to discuss the procedural elements of gossip and explore its normative implications. It highlights gossip's dual nature, showing how it can either promote social cohesion or result in moral disintegration, depending on intent and context. It is demonstrated that the moral weight of gossip is context-sensitive, shaped by both its structural process and ethical outcomes. By providing a nuanced, interdisciplinary perspective, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in theology, philosophy, and business ethics. Methodologically, it pays attention to dictionary definitions of gossip, crystallizes key criteria for identifying it, and distinguishes between its procedural and normative dimensions. The paper further emphasizes gossip's role in moral judgment, its influence on community cohesion, and its impact on individual reputations. Finally, the paper reveals the tension between procedural and normative understandings, suggesting that even the structural elements of gossip carry implicit moral significance. With practical implications for organizational settings, the paper demonstrates how the effects of gossip depend on intent, context, and consequences.

Key words: Gossip, Moral Judgment, Procedural criterion, Normative criterion

Frequently overlooked as mere triviality, gossip exerts profound influence on human social dynamics,¹ and is usually evaluative.² It functions as a subtle yet potent force in shaping moral judgment and collective behavior, with religious motivations and ethical frameworks playing a critical role in distinguishing between its harmful and constructive forms. As such, gossip has become a focal point of inquiry across moral-centered disciplines like philosophy, theology, and business ethics, each offering valuable insights into its impact on behavior, relationships, and ethical decision-making. Given the vast scope of these fields and the numerous studies published, we focus here solely on the aspect most relevant to our

discussion, guided by dictionary definitions. This, in fact, represents our methodological contribution to the interdisciplinary discourse on gossip.

Scholars have noted that gossip frequently centers around themes of love, wrongdoing, and personal gain, reflecting deeper questions about morality and human behavior.³ Judgment, a fundamental trait of the human person, shapes how actions – such as gossip – are evaluated through the distinct insights offered by, for instance, philosophy, theology, and business ethics. Concerning gossip, philosophy explores the nature of truth and ethical dilemmas.⁴ In theology, the focus is mainly on the communal

¹ Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., Vohs, K. D., “Gossip as cultural learning,” *Review of General Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2004): 111–121; Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., Wittek, R., “The co-evolution of gossip and friendship in workplace social networks,” *Social Networks* 34, no. 4 (2012): 623–633.

² Holland, M. G., “What’s wrong with telling the truth? An analysis of gossip,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1996): 197–209.

³ Auden, W. H., “In Defense of Gossip,” *The Living Age*, February 1, (1938): 534–538; Adkins, K., *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2017).

⁴ Kauffeld, F. J., Fields, J. E., *The presumption of veracity in testimony and gossip* (University of Windsor, 2003); Epstein, J., *Gossip: The untrivial pursuit* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Wu, J., Számádo, S., Barclay, P., Beersma, B., Dores Cruz, T. D., Lo Iacono, S.,

aspects and consequences of gossip,⁵ whereas business ethics and organizational literature studies the effects of gossip on organizational culture and power dynamics.⁶ Integrating these perspectives into a criterion-based approach offers a nuanced understanding of gossip as both a social mechanism and a moral issue. Furthermore, these interdisciplinary insights reveal how individuals form moral judgments that transcend professional settings, drawing on ethical, social, and spiritual frameworks.

Although gossip is often understood intuitively, efforts to define it reveal significant inconsistencies across scholarly literature and everyday usage. To address these discrepancies, this paper brings together theoretical interdisciplinary perspectives with how gossip is framed in dictionaries and lexicons. These sources not only capture linguistic and cultural attitudes and moral assumptions but also offer insights into how gossip is perceived across various contexts. Analyzing language use is essential for establishing the criteria of gossip, as it uncovers implicit power dynamics and social intentions embedded in communication, helping to differentiate between casual conversation and morally significant discourse. Additionally, examining dictionary definitions provides a baseline for assessing the procedural and normative aspects of gossip, laying the groundwork for a criterion-based discussion

to clarify conceptual ambiguities. Our focus is on English language dictionaries, as they capture the common understanding and usage of terms. Furthermore, relevant insights from theology, philosophy, and business ethics are incorporated to enrich the discussion. Given the variability in definitions, this paper adopts a criterion-based approach to refine the concept of gossip. Analyzing these definitions helps trace shifts in moral judgments and social roles, enhancing our conceptual framework and situating gossip's function as social capital across theological, philosophical, and business ethics contexts. This approach aims to identify the procedural criteria for gossip and address the dilemmas that arise from these criteria.

Some approaches to gossip

Gossip has been recognized as a fundamentally social process, reflecting the shared group identities and connections between the sender and receiver.⁷ It serves as discreet indiscretion,⁸ a potent form of social capital,⁹ and a form of social behavior.¹⁰ Gossip also operates as informal currency that shapes relationships¹¹ and impacts power structures and community cohesion. For instance, gossip can affect an individual's faith and ministry within a church, functioning as both prophecy and profanity.¹²

Nieper, A. S., Peters, K., Przepiorka, W., Tiokhin, L., Van Lange, P. A. M., "Honesty and dishonesty in gossip strategies: a fitness interdependence analysis." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 376.1838. (2021): 20200300.

⁵ Botha, P. J. J., "Paul and gossip: a social mechanism in early Christian communities," *Neotestamentica* 32, no. 2 (1998): 267-288; Renner, S. S., *Godly gossip: The positive power to connect and encourage God's people*. PhD thesis. (United Theological Seminary, 2004); Daniels, J. W., "Gossip in John's Gospel and the social processing of Jesus' identity," *Journal of Early Christian History* 1, no. 2 (2011): 9-29; Campbell, R. *Church gossip: prophecy or profanity: how is one's faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?* (MDiv thesis [Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity \(smu.ca\)](#), 2014).

⁶ Kurland, N. B. & Pelled, L. H., "Passing the Word: Toward a Model of Gossip & Power in the Workplace," *The Academy of Management Review* 25, no. 2 (2000): 428-438; Ernst, S. From Blame Gossip to Praise Gossip? Gender, Leadership and Organizational Change, *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 10, no. 3 (2003): 277-299; Houmanfar, R. Johnson, R., "Organizational implications of gossip and rumor," *Journal of organizational behavior management* 23, no. 2-3 (2004): 117-138; Farley, S., "Is gossip power? The inverse relationship between gossip, power, and likability," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 41, no. 5 (2011): 574-579; Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., Nijstad, B. A., "Gossip as a resource: How and why power relationships shape gossip behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 153 (2019): 89-102; Ribarsky, E., Hammonds, J., "Gossiping for the Good of It? Examining the Ling between Gossip and Organizational Socialization," *Kentucky Journal of Communication* 38, no. 1 (2019): 28; Tan, N., Yam, K.C., Zhang, P., (2021). Are You Gossiping About Me? The Costs and Benefits of High Workplace Gossip Prevalence. *J. Bus. Psychol.* 36 (2021): 417-434; Waddington, K., "Theorising Organisational Compassion: Could Gossip Help?" in Wu, J., Számádo, S., Barclay, P., Beersma, B., Dores Cruz, T.D., Lo Iacono, S., Nieper, A.S., Peters, K., Przepiorka, W., Tiokhin, L., Van Lange, P. A. M., Honesty and dishonesty in gossip strategies: a fitness interdependence analysis. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 376.1838 (2021), 20200300.

⁷ Rysman, A.R., "Gossip and Occupational Ideology," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 3 (1976): 64-68.

⁸ Bergmann, J.R., *Discreet indiscretions: The social organization of gossip*. (Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1993).

⁹ Hafen, S., "Organizational Gossip: A Revolving Door of Regulation & Resistance," *Southern Communication Journal* 69, no. 3 (2004): 223-240

¹⁰ Feinberg, M., Willer, R., Stellar, J., Keltner, D., "The virtues of gossip: reputational information sharing as prosocial behavior," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 102, no. 5 (2012): 1015.

¹¹ Shallcross, L., Ramsay, S., Barker, M., "The power of malicious gossip," *Australian Journal of Communication* 38, no. 1 (2011): 45-68.

¹² Campbell, R., *Church gossip: prophecy or profanity: how is one's faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?* (MDiv thesis, 2014) [Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity \(smu.ca\)](#)

Its presence extends across informal gatherings inside and outside formal organizational frameworks. Broadly defined as informal evaluative talk about absent others,¹³ gossip is viewed as a burdened virtue¹⁴ and has implications for workplace friendships.¹⁵ It has been discussed within moral philosophy¹⁶ and analyzed in relation to moral foundations¹⁷ and epistemology.¹⁸ As social capital, gossip can uphold the moral order or serve as an agent of moral disintegration, depending on whether it aligns with the common good.

A theological point of view

From a theological perspective, gossip raises fundamental questions about community, trust, and morality.¹⁹ The Bible warns against evil speech,²⁰ and theological analyses emphasize gossip's potential to disrupt or inform communal life. For instance, Rohrbaugh²¹ identifies three types of New Testament texts related to gossip: those addressing the concept of gossip itself, those reporting instances of gossip, and those embodying gossip in their narrative.²² In theology, discussions about gossip intersect with the dynamics of moral responsibility and social cohesion.²³ Many religious traditions view gossip

with caution or outright condemnation, regarding it as a vice that can harm both individuals and the moral fabric of communities.²⁴ However, theology also acknowledges gossip's role in reinforcing communal bonds by transmitting shared values, norms, and beliefs.²⁵ The role of gossip and humor in the practice of becoming an intimate of Jesus has also received scholarly attention.²⁶ Although gossip is often associated with moral failure, it can serve as a form of collective moral judgment, raising questions about justice, grace, and human agency in a world governed by divine law.²⁷

A philosophical point of view

Philosophically speaking, gossip is part of discussions about ethical questions regarding human communication and its relation to the epistemological and metaphysical aspects.²⁸ It reflects debates about whether gossip signifies human fallibility, social skill, or an instrument of justice. In this sense, gossip is not merely a social act but an existential one, expressing humanity's search for meaning and belonging in a world where knowledge is both power and vulnerability. Gossip also challenges established concepts of knowledge, power, and ethics by blurring the line be-

¹³ Giardini, F., Wittek, R., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of gossip and reputation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Alfano, M., Robinson, B., "Gossip as a burdened virtue," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017): 473-487.

¹⁵ Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., Wittek, R., "The co-evolution of gossip and friendship in workplace social networks," *Social networks* 34, no. 4 (2012): 623-633.

¹⁶ Fabre, C., "The Morality of Gossip: A Kantian Account," *Ethics* 134, no. 1 (2023): 32-56.

¹⁷ Fernandes, S., Kappor, H., Karandikar, S., "Do We Gossip for Moral Reasons? The Intersection of Moral Foundations and Gossip," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 39 (2017): 218-238.

¹⁸ Bertolotti, T., Magnani, L., "An epistemological analysis of gossip and gossip-based knowledge," *Synthese* 191, no. 17 (2014): 4037-4067.

¹⁹ Meng, M., "Gossip: Killing Us Softly," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 109 (2008): 26-31.

²⁰ Morey, R. A., *A Bible Handbook on Slander and Gossip*, (Millerstown: Christian Scholars Press, 2009).

²¹ Rohrbaugh, R. L., "Gossip in the New Testament," in Pilch, J. J., ed., *Social scientific models for interpreting the Bible: Essays in the Context group in honor of Bruce J. Malina* (Brill, Leiden, 2001): 239-259.

²² Van Eck, E., "Invitations and excuses that are not invitations and excuses: Gossip in Luke 14:18-20," *Herv. Teol. Stud.* 68, no. 1 (2012): Online edition: [v68n1a82.pdf \(scielo.org.za\)](https://doi.org/10.1163/17445019-1234567890); Daniels, J. W., "Gossip in John's Gospel and the social processing of Jesus' identity," *Journal of Early Christian History* 1, no. 2 (2011): 9-29.

²³ Botha, P. J. J., "Paul and gossip: a social mechanism in early Christian communities," *Neotestamentica* 32, no. 2 (1998): 267-288.

²⁴ Hashmi, S. D., Khan, K., Ullah, I., Gulzar, S., Haider, A., "Religion can change intentions: Interactive effect of abusive supervision and Islamic work ethics on workplace gossip," *Journal of Islamic Business and Management* 9, no. 1 (2019): 160-175.
Cohen, Y., Enayat, H., (2023). "Communication in Judaism and Islam," in: Cohen, Y., Enayat, H., eds., *The Handbook on Religion and Communication* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2023): 83-98; Ibrahim, H. A., Alaw, B. M., "Backbiting, Gossip and Slander in Judaism and Islam – a comparative study," *Sorra Man Ra'a* 19, no. 78 (2023): 138-156.

²⁵ Esler, P. F., "All That You Have Done... Has Been Fully Told to Me : The Power of Gossip and the Story of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 3 (2018): 645-666.

²⁶ Capps, D., "Gossip, Humor, and the Art of Becoming an Intimate of Jesus" *Journal of Religion and Health* 51 (2011):99-117.

²⁷ Morey, R. A., *A Bible Handbook on Slander and Gossip*, (Millerstown: Christian Scholars Press, 2009).

²⁸ Bertolotti, T., Magnani, L., "An epistemological analysis of gossip and gossip-based knowledge," *Synthese* 191, no. 17 (2014): 4037-4067.

tween truth and interpretation,²⁹ and can sometimes be morally acceptable.³⁰ It operates in the grey area between factual knowledge and subjective meaning, complicating moral evaluations. The philosophy of religion extends these reflections by situating gossip within the discourse of theodicy – the justification of God’s goodness in the face of human suffering.³¹ Through this lens, gossip embodies the tension between truth and social cohesion: although it may spread unverified information, it helps individuals navigate their social worlds, providing a way to evaluate others and establish moral boundaries. Philosophy thus illuminates the epistemological challenges and moral ambiguities inherent in gossip, underscoring how informal communication shapes ethical judgments.

A business ethics point of view

Business ethics offers a practical lens for understanding gossip, particularly in the workplace.³² Namely, gossip serves as a tool for navigating power dynamics, influencing reputations, and fostering informal communication networks critical for collaboration.³³ However, gossip carries significant ethical risks. It can quickly become backbiting or defamation, undermining trust, damaging relationships, and creating toxic work environments.³⁴ On the other hand, research suggests that gossip can have positive effects, such as improving communication and helping employees grasp unwritten organizational rules.³⁵ Depending on its use, gossip may contribute to a transparent and cohesive workplace culture or act as a destructive force that erodes trust and collaboration. As a form of social capital, gossip offers individuals a way to navigate professional dynamics, shape reputations, and influence decision-making processes. However, these benefits raise ethical concerns. Is it moral to use gossip for personal gain or corporate

advancement? As evident from the literature, some ethical frameworks criticize workplace gossip as inherently divisive, while others recognize it as a pragmatic tool for managing relationships in complex organizations. With this groundwork in place, the discussion now turns to the criteria necessary for a better understanding of gossip.

Criteria for gossip

We see that gossip is intuitively relatively easy to grasp, but defining it precisely reveals major differences, making it hard to find agreement. Now, we outline some of these discrepancies, acknowledging that the proposed standards may not be universally accepted.

The allegedly procedural criterion of gossip

Allegedly procedural elements of gossip:

- (a) a talk (sometimes rumor if it includes facts and events, but also persons, or idle talk/small talk if it includes irrelevant matters about persons),
- (b) between at least two persons,
- (c) about a third person,
- (d) who is absent during the talk (and did not give the permission to talk about it in its absence),
- (e) about the third person’s personal or private affairs
- (f) for which participants in the conversation lack evidence

Normative element:

- (g) in a way that the talk is negative of a person, false, and includes lying, or inventing facts (humbug, bullshit) about the person (see Figure 1).

²⁹ Holland, M. G., “What’s wrong with telling the truth? An analysis of gossip,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1996): 197-209.

³⁰ Westacott, E., “The ethics of gossiping,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2000): 65-90.

³¹ Parker, A. N., “An the word became...gossip? Unhinging the Samaritan woman in the age of #MeToo,” *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 2 (2020): 259-271.

³² Grote, J., *Clever as serpents: Business ethics and office politics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997); Tassiello, V., Lombardi, S., Costabile, M., “Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work? The role of valence, interpersonal closeness and social awareness,” *Journal of Business Research* 84 (2018): 141-149.

³³ Tan, N., Yam, K. C., Zhang, P., “Are You Gossiping About Me? The Costs and Benefits of High Workplace Gossip Prevalence,” *J. Bus. Psychol.* 36 (2021): 417-434; Song, Y., *Gossiping About the Supervisors: Antecedents and Consequences of Workplace Gossip*, PhD thesis (School of Management, College of Business and Law, RMIT University, 2022); De Clercq, D., “Exposure to workplace bullying and negative gossip behaviors: Buffering roles of personal and contextual resources,” *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility* 31, no. 3 (2022): 859-874.

³⁴ Waddington, K., “Theorising Organisational Compassion: Could Gossip Help?,” in: Wu, J., Számádo, S., Barclay, P., Beersma, B., Dores Cruz, T. D., Lo Iacono, S., Nieper, A. S., Peters, K., Przepiorcka, W., Tiokhin, L., Van Lange, P. A. M., “Honesty and dishonesty in gossip strategies: a fitness interdependence analysis,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 376. 1838 (2024): 20200300.

³⁵ Dai, Y., Zhuo, X., Hou, J., Lyu, B., “Is not workplace gossip bad? The effective of positive workplace gossip on employee innovative behavior,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 1-12.

Conditions (a) to (g) are implicit or explicitly mentioned in the majority of the dictionary definitions given hereafter, and in length discussed in scholarship.³⁶ However, this particular analysis is of our own device. Condition (a) is important because other types of communication can, though not always, fall under the criterion of gossip. For example, imagine one person silently shows another a manipulated photo of a third (absent) person, with no evidence to confirm whether the photo is manipulated or not. This act involves some form of communication, but it is not gossip. Condition (b) is also important because no one can gossip alone – it takes at least two people, or more. Condition (c) matters because if two people are talking, for example, about an event rather than a person, without evidence, it is not gossip

but rather a rumor. Condition (d) is crucial because if the person being discussed is present, it becomes a discussion rather than gossip. Condition (e) or condition of privacy, is important because if the topic concerns something public about an absent person, it isn't gossip but a form of public discourse, even if two people are discussing an absent third person. Finally, condition (f) is also significant because if evidence is available to the people engaging in gossip, the issue shifts to matters of belief, truth, or the justification of a statement or proposition. In short, it seems that each of the conditions (a – f) is necessary but insufficient on its own. When all the conditions are met together (i.e., when they are satisfied in conjunction), they become sufficient. However, they are not universally accepted and the variety of definitions exists:

Various dictionary definitions of gossip:

Concerning the criterion (a–f) dictionary definitions aren't clear about it. Let us give few examples.

(CAM) “Conversation or reports about other people’s private lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or not true” (Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gossip>),

(OXF) “informal talk or stories about other people’s private lives, which may be unkind or not true” (Oxford Dictionary, URL: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/gossip_1),

(MWEB) “A person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others, a rumor or report of an intimate nature” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gossip>),

(COLL) “Informal conversation, often about other people’s private affairs” (...) “casual and idle chat a conversation involving malicious chatter or rumors about other people” (Collins Dictionary, URL: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gossip>),

(LONG) “information that is passed from one person to another about other people’s behaviour and private lives, often including unkind or untrue remarks” (Longman Dictionary, URL: <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/gossip>),

(BRIT) “Information about the behavior and personal lives of other people” (...) “to talk about the personal lives of other people” (Britannica, URL: <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/gossip>),

(FREE) “Rumor or talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature. A person who habitually spreads intimate or private rumors or facts. Trivial, chatty talk or writing.” (Free Dictionary, URL: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/gossip>),

These seven definitions seem to be sufficient in order to show the problem with the definition of gossip. We will present it in the following table.

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	
(CAM)	+	+	+	implied	+	+	+	Dictionaries do not agree on the definition of gossip. They agree on conditions from (a) to (e), but they disagree on conditions (f) and (g), while (g) being morally negative property of a gossip. The lack of evidence (f) is mentioned or implied in 3 definitions, but not in 4 of them. Immorality of gossip (g) is mentioned in 4, but not in 3 definitions.
(OXF)	+	+	+	implied	+	+	+	
(MWEB)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	–	
(COLL)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	+	
(LONG)	+	+	+	implied	+	+	+	
(BRIT)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	–	
(FREE)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	–	

Therefore, one could say that even on the level of dictionary definitions of gossip there is at least a hint of potential problem, namely, the problem of talking without any evidence whatsoever (condition f), and the problem of immoral nature of gossip (condition g). Hereafter we will suggest that similar problem reappears in the scientific literature on gossip.

³⁶ Foster, E. K., “Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions,” *Review of General Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2004): 78–99.

The problem of dictionary definitions of gossip can be presented in the following diagram (as shown in Figure 1).

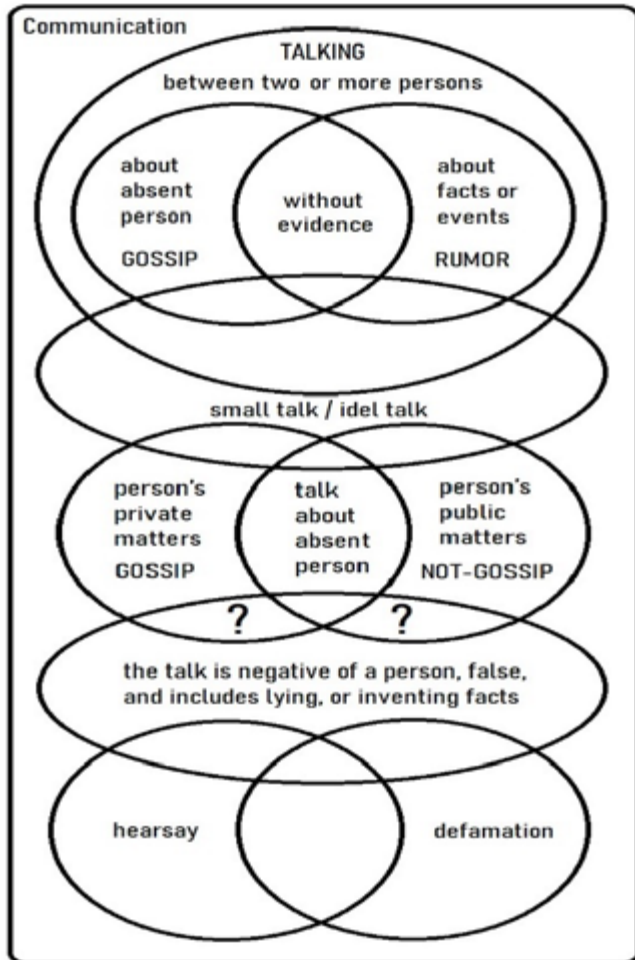


Figure 1: The problem of dictionary definitions of gossip

Even if one says that the condition (f) can be taken as implied as well as condition (d), what remains is perhaps the most important difference between definitions which concerns moral nature. Concerning moral nature, three possibilities are mentioned: gossip is morally neutral, gossip is morally positive (e.g., funny), and gossip is morally negative (e.g., malicious). The strongest difference is between morally neutral and morally negative definitions, so, their relation creates the most important problem – is it possible to create a unified definition of gossip or we have a deep divide between, if we may say at the moment, descriptive (or procedural) and normative (or morally negative) definitions. For sure there is a difference in words which aren't complete synonyms, as suggested in Figure 1, namely between words gossip, rumor, idle talk, small talk, backbite, hearsay, defamation and similar. While idle and small talk, but also gossip and rumor don't imply the element of immorality, backbite, hearsay, and defamation imply the element of immorality. Among these, the closest to gossip is backbite, so hereafter we will shortly consider its problem.

The problem of backbite condition (condition g)

Some gossip criteria include an additional condition. The condition of negativity of the content of a talk is sometimes included in the criterion of gossip, and it says: (g) in a way that the talk is negative of a person, false, and includes lying, or inventing facts (e.g., bullshitting) about the person. There is even a special word for this element, namely *backbite* or *backbiting*, commonly understood as making spiteful slanderous or defamatory statements about someone, (attacking from behind with spiteful or defamatory remarks, or speaking badly of an absent individual). However, this element is not consensually accepted since for different reasons it is thought that gossip isn't necessarily morally negative, but that it can be morally positive as well, i.e. the criterion doesn't necessarily include (g) condition which in fact falls under not a criterion of a gossip, but under a division of gossips under a moral aspect.

- The problem lies in the distinction between gossip and backbiting – specifically, do they differ in kind or degree? If they differ in kind, the two types might be *procedural gossip* (or simply gossip) and *normatively negative gossip* (or immoral gossip), which would imply the existence of moral gossip as well. On the other hand, if they differ in degree, the degrees must be justified. One possibility is to say that conditions (a – c) are mildly immoral, conditions (d – f) medium immoral, and the condition (g) is extremely immoral (procedural feature of condition would go other way around, i.e. from extremely procedural from (a) to minimally procedural in (g). This condition (g) is important because of a specific reason. Regardless of where one draws a line between procedural and normative condition even if normative (even if they are immoral) conditions are only minimally, implicitly, or instrumentally normative, and are dominantly procedural, one still has the following problem: is it possible to define a gossip completely procedurally without implying at least some elements of immorality, and further on, make a distinction between morally right and morally wrong gossips (e.g., backbite), or is this impossible, and every definition of gossip includes if not both morally right and wrong gossips, then at least morally wrong gossips?

It can be argued that perhaps conditions (d) + (f) already imply immorality of gossip, even without condition (g). They imply it if it is possible to argue that (d) talking about an absent person (without the permission to talk in its absence) about (e) the person's personal or private affairs for which they (f) lack evidence is already immoral in certain sense even if all things said during a

conversation are true. Furthermore, the border between descriptive and normative conditions of gossip may be drawn between different conditions. Namely, the line can be drawn between conditions (a) – (c) as descriptive, and (d) – (f) as normative, between (a) – (d) as descriptive, and (e) – (f) as normative, and between (a) – (f) as descriptive, and (g) as normative. The point is that even if one excludes the condition (g) of morally negative gossips (backbite) in order to preserve the possibility of (h) morally positive gossips, one still has the problem of differing between descriptive (i.e., procedural) and normative (i.e., moral) conditions. It is also possible to suggest that all conditions have procedural and normative aspects and to differ between them.

The problem with the procedural criterion starts with the condition (d) given that conditions (a–c) are satisfied. Namely, is the condition (d) only procedural, or is it also at least in some sense normative, in particular morally negative? If it is immoral to talk about absent person, then the suggested procedural criterion already has at least some morally negative aspect. However, if it is not immoral, or moral for that matter, then the problem moves to conditions (e) and (f) which seem to at imply immorality in much stronger sense than the condition (d). Even if one takes the condition (e), i.e., that of privacy as procedural, and not moral (in fact immoral), the condition (f) show at least some aspects of immorality. Namely, it seems common thing to believe that it is at least irresponsible to talk about something for which one does not have evidence, or for which there is no available evidence, as having evidence (for sure this is a kind of epistemic vice).

- Here, one should not exclude the possibility that gossip is differently described in different cultures, their customs and habits, especially their religions (which often include some version of the condition (g) in the criterion), but also their different dominant ethical ideals, and sometimes even ethical theories. Even if all mentioned problems are settled, these additional problems may create a significant not only theoretical, but also practical obstacles (just imagine that one has a concept of a gossip which is formal and procedural in terms of conditions (a – f) in one culture, and is informally or formally accused of a wrongdoing which includes gossiping as understood as necessary immoral, i.e. including the condition (g) in another culture).

On the other hand, and contrary to all previously said, there are studies³⁷ that argue that gossips can be morally good, especially at workplace. However, as it seems, many

of these accounts do not discuss the morality of gossip itself, rather the morality of consequences of gossiping which further on can be morally good and morally bad. In this sense we discuss gossip in the present research.

Discussion

We have seen that gossip is a nuanced phenomenon whose meaning shifts across various frameworks. Namely, religious teachings frequently warn against gossip, emphasizing its potential to disrupt community cohesion and moral order. However, gossip can also serve as a mechanism for reinforcing shared values and promoting solidarity within a group. This dual role – where gossip can either uphold or undermine moral frameworks – illustrates its complexity as a form of social capital. Theological discussions further raise intriguing questions about the relationship between gossip and divine justice. Specifically, gossip highlights the tension between human fallibility in knowledge-sharing and the ideal of divine omniscience, prompting reflection on whether gossip reflects human shortcomings or serves as a tool for moral discernment. In philosophy, gossip is often analyzed through an epistemological lens, focusing on how it relates to truth, knowledge, and the social consequences of informal information exchange. Central to our discourse is the *lack of evidence* (condition f), which raises questions about the reliability and epistemic value of gossip. Condition (f) actually engages with the question whether gossip is morally neutral or morally charged, challenging the assumption that gossip is inherently harmful. Instead, the moral weight of gossip depends on factors such as intent, context, and outcomes, reflecting its dual capacity to harm or help social relationships. We have also seen that, in theological contexts, gossip is framed within moral and communal dimensions. Furthermore, in the realm of business ethics, gossip takes on additional layers of complexity. It functions as a strategic tool for navigating organizational hierarchies, influencing reputations, and fostering collaboration. At the same time, gossip can become a destructive force that undermines trust, damages relationships, and fosters hostility. The ethical ambiguity of workplace gossip prompts important questions about whether it can ever be virtuous. This is where the distinction between gossip's *procedural* and *normative* dimensions (conditions a – g) becomes crucial for determining its ethical status. The procedural elements define gossip structurally, but normative elements – particularly personal motivations such as envy, malice, or self-interest – determine its moral impact.

³⁷ Grosser et al., 2010; Dijkstra et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2022.

Gossip as a Mechanism of Moral Judgment and Moral Motivation

At its core, gossip involves evaluative speech, often leading to informal judgments about the moral behavior of absent individuals. As outlined in conditions (a) – (g), gossip possesses a structural framework, but its moral implications are far less clear-cut. The question is: *When does gossip transition from a neutral exchange of information to an act of moral harm?*

The procedural elements of gossip (a – f) help us understand how it operates as a social mechanism, but moral motivation – the intent behind the gossip – determines its ethical significance. When gossip aligns with social norms and reinforces communal values, it functions as a form of social capital that fosters moral cohesion. In contrast, gossip motivated by personal gain, envy, or malice (conditions f and g) can become a vehicle for moral disintegration. This duality emphasizes the role of context in evaluating gossip's ethical implications. Gossip allows individuals to assert moral authority, align themselves with social norms, or ostracize those who deviate from acceptable behavior. In this sense, gossip acts as a form of collective moral judgment. However, the tension between gossip's procedural neutrality and its potential moral consequences complicates the assumption that it is inherently unethical. Gossip's moral weight depends not only on the intentions of the participants but also on the broader social and cultural contexts within which it occurs.

Antecedents and Outcomes of Moral Judgment in Gossip as Social Capital

The criterion-based framework sheds light on the antecedents and outcomes of gossip, particularly in relation to its function as social capital. Gossip often emerges in informal settings where trust, reputational concerns, and power dynamics intersect. If no other people are involved, gossip is not gossip but simply a negative or ill-intentioned thought. The antecedents indicate that gossip also represents a strategic form of communication that influences social hierarchies and community cohesion. One of the key outcomes of gossip is its impact on moral judgment. Through the informal exchange of information about absent individuals, gossip shapes perceptions of moral character and behavior, with both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, gossip serves as a tool for social regulation, encouraging conformity to communal norms. It reinforces collective values by sanctioning individuals who deviate from group expectations. On the negative side, gossip can spread false narratives, fuel unjust social exclusion, or escalate conflicts. In busi-

ness settings, gossip plays a particularly significant role as social capital. It facilitates the formation of alliances, aids in navigating organizational politics, and influences reputations. However, it also carries ethical risks: gossip can devolve into slander, defamation, or backbiting (condition g), undermining trust and collaborative efforts. This moral ambiguity highlights the need for ethical guidelines that distinguish between constructive and destructive gossip within professional environments.

Normative and Procedural Definitions of Gossip

Another central theme in this analysis is the tension between the procedural and normative definitions of gossip. While a purely procedural definition focuses on the structural elements (a–f), the inclusion of condition (g) introduces a moral dimension, complicating the framework. Even if condition (g) is excluded, certain procedural elements – such as discussing an absent person (condition d) or sharing unverified information (condition f) – carry implicit moral implications. These features suggest that even the procedural aspects of gossip cannot be entirely separated from normative concerns. The challenge, then, lies in determining whether gossip can ever be morally neutral or if it inherently carries moral weight. Even when gossip does not meet the criteria for malicious intent (condition g), it still operates within a moral framework that evaluates trustworthiness, loyalty, and social responsibility. Thus, the procedural criteria of gossip implicitly contain normative elements, blurring the line between descriptive and evaluative judgments. Moreover, cultural and religious contexts further complicate this distinction. In some cultures, gossip may be understood purely as a procedural act, while in others, it carries normative implications tied to moral or religious codes. For example, religious traditions often incorporate elements similar to condition (g), framing gossip as inherently sinful. This variability underscores the importance of context in shaping both the procedural and normative dimensions of gossip.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that gossip mainly operates at the intersection of procedural structure and normative judgment, making it difficult to reach a unified definition. Procedurally, gossip involves specific conditions: a conversation among two or more individuals about an absent person's private matters, often shared without evidence (conditions a–f). However, the moral implications of gossip are far more contentious. While some frameworks emphasize gossip's inherent risks – such as reputa-

tional harm, falsehoods, and malicious intent (condition g) – others highlight its potential to be morally neutral or even beneficial, depending on intent and context. This tension between descriptive and normative interpretations becomes even more pronounced when viewed through cultural, religious, and situational lenses. Different societies and ethical traditions either condemn gossip for its capacity to disrupt social harmony or regard it as a mechanism for reinforcing communal values and transmitting social norms. In religious contexts, gossip is often framed as morally destructive, yet it can also foster solidarity and shared moral understanding. Similarly, in professional environments, gossip serves as a double-edged sword: it can facilitate navigation of power dynamics and build informal networks, but it also risks undermining trust and collaboration. Ultimately, the morality of gossip hinges on its intent, context, and outcomes. When gossip is motivated by a desire to uphold social norms, foster co-

hesion, or facilitate moral accountability, it functions as a form of social capital, contributing to the moral judgment within a group. However, gossip driven by malice, envy, or misinformation becomes a force of moral disintegration, spreading division and harming relationships.

This duality highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of gossip – one that accounts for both its procedural elements and ethical ramifications. Rather than treating gossip as inherently good or bad, we must recognize its moral weight as context-dependent. By examining both the conditions under which gossip occurs and the motivations behind it, we can better assess its role in shaping social interactions, trust, and moral outcomes. Moreover, the interplay between procedural and normative dimensions of gossip can be further explored through experimental research methods, providing deeper insights into its role in shaping social dynamics and ethical behavior.

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