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## Gossip at Work: Unsanctioned Evaluative Talk in Formal School Meetings

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## **Abstract**

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## **Keywords**

gossip, work, organizations, micro-politics, power

## **Disciplines**

Politics and Social Change | Work, Economy and Organizations

## **Gossip at Work: Unsanctioned Evaluative Talk in Formal School Meetings**

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Article featured in *The New York Times*, "Can You Believe How Mean Office Gossip Can Be?" November 3, 2009: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/03/science/03tier.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/03/science/03tier.html?_r=1)

Article featured in *The New York Times*, "Studies Find That Gossip Isn't Just Loose Talk." June 15, 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/16/your-money/studies-find-gossip-isnt-just-loose-talk.html?pagewanted=all>

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### **Abstract**

This article uses a form of linguistic ethnography to analyze videotaped recordings of gossip that took place during formal school meetings. By comparing this gossip data against existing models of gossip based on data collected in informal settings, we identify eleven new response classes, including four forms of indirectness that operate to cloak gossip under ambiguity, and seven forms of avoidance that change the trajectory of gossip. In doing so, this article makes three larger contributions. First, it opens a new front in research on organizational politics by providing an empirically grounded, conceptually rich vocabulary for analyzing gossip in formal contexts. Second, it contributes to knowledge about social interactions in organizations. By examining gossip talk embedded within a work context, this project highlights the nexus between structure, agency, and interaction. Third, it contributes to understandings of gossip in general. By examining gossip in a context previously unexamined, this project provides analytical leverage for theorizing conditions under which gossip is likely and when it will take various forms.

The Babylonian Talmud refers to gossip as a “three-pronged tongue” because it can harm “the person who says it, the person who listens to it, and the person about whom it is told” (Jaeger et al. 1998, 103). Whether at a coffee-klatch or work, the reputational stakes of gossip can be high, because it is a means through which people are both praised and stigmatized (Tebbutt 1995; Tittle et al. 2003). Since the content of gossip is often negative, organizational scholars label it a “poisonous” part of the information grapevine (Baker & Jones 1996; Kurland & Pelled 2000). These problematic aspects of gossip are a part of the dark, under-life of organizations frequently neglected by research (Vaughan 1999).

To reveal this under-life, we examine how gossip operates in a context where we might not expect it: formal meetings. While gossip is often viewed as an idle practice (Rosnow & Fine 1976), the tasks of formal meetings involve work. Nonetheless, talk in meetings can drift from official business to gossip—unsanctioned evaluative talk about people not present. To analyze how this happens, how it compares to gossip in informal settings, and possible implications for organizations, we “zoom in” (Duneier & Molotch 1999, 1264) on several gossip interactions captured on video-recordings of workplace meetings and embedded within a larger ethnography of an urban elementary school. By providing a detailed analysis of these episodes, we offer an expanded framework for studying gossip across a wider spectrum of interactions.

Specifically, we identify four forms of indirectness that operate to hide gossip by creating ambiguity, and seven forms of avoidance that change the trajectory of gossip. In so doing, we make three larger contributions. First, we open a new front in research on organizational politics by providing an empirically grounded, conceptually rich vocabulary for analyzing gossip in formal contexts. There has long been interest in the micro-politics of organizations, but such research presents an empirical challenge because politicking is often covert (Morrill et al. 2003).

Our analysis of indirectness and avoidance in workplace gossip reveals these dynamics, shining light into dark corners hidden by the formal outer-life of organizations (Vaughan 1999). Second, we contribute to knowledge about social interactions in organizations. By examining gossip talk embedded within a formal context, this project highlights the nexus between structure, agency, and interaction. Third, we contribute to understandings of gossip in general. By examining video-recordings of naturally occurring gossip from a previously unexamined setting, we add contextual flesh to models of gossip identified by research in informal settings (Eder & Enke 1991; Bergmann 1993) and gain leverage for theorizing conditions under which gossip is likely and when it will take various forms.

We start by reviewing how gossip has been defined and studied and by discussing our method. Next, we start our analysis by comparing the data we collected against existing models of informal gossip. To unpack how the gossip we recorded is different, we use a form of linguistic ethnography to describe modes of indirectness and avoidance that teachers employed while gossiping about absent others. Then we compare gossip about other teachers to gossip about administrators. We find the indirectness and avoidance were more prevalent in gossip about administrative superiors, suggesting that formal authority relations affect gossip. Likewise, gossip was less frequent when administrators were present. Finally, we discuss implications for understanding organizations, and conclude with some propositions for new research on gossip across multiple settings.

### **Gossip in the Literature**

As a part of everyday life, gossip is a folk concept that has different meanings depending on the people and settings involved (Bergmann 1993; Arno 1980). How, then, can we specify gossip for research? To resolve this problem, scholars focus on what people in the setting

themselves identify as “gossip,” revealing three overlapping types (Rosnow 1977): (1) informal sharing of news or information, factual or otherwise (Rosnow & Fine 1976; Harrington & Bielby 1995), (2) talk about people (Paine 1967; Tebutt & Marchington 1997), and (3) talk of an evaluative (typically critical) nature (Balikci 1968; Percival 2000).

The most common definition focuses on the overlap between the second and third types. Here, gossip is defined as “evaluative talk about people who are not present” (Eder & Enke 1991; Van Vleet 2003; Fine 1977; Besnier 1989). In the context of formal organizations, however, this definition must be modified to fit the “folk” criteria: tenure committees engage in evaluative talk about non-present candidates, but few describe this as “gossip,” and teachers solicit opinions from colleagues while evaluating students, but teachers in our study did not consider this gossip. In these examples, such talk is an explicit, sanctioned task. As such, Wittek and Wielers (1998, 189) define organizational gossip as “*non-obligatory* talk about absent third persons.” For the purposes of this paper, we define gossip as *unsanctioned evaluative talk about people not present*. This captures what teachers in our study meant by gossip while separating the “gossip talk” we recorded from explicit school business.

Gossip has been studied from multiple perspectives. Drawing from anthropology (Colsen 1953; Frankenberg 1957), the functionalist perspective views gossip as a form of criticism based on normative rules that strengthens group solidarity (Gluckman 1963) and communicates social values (Szwed 1966) while creating order out of complicated events (Van Vleet 2003). This perspective has penetrated organizational research, which suggests that gossip functions to spread important information (Noon & Delbridge 1993), but can be a “dysfunctional” activity that competes with workplace goals (Baker & Jones 1996).



The functionalist view has been challenged by scholars who argue that gossip is a form of covert but hostile conflict (Balicki 1968; Scott 1990). In this view, the critical nature of gossip alienates people from interaction and decreases solidarity (Percival 2000; Tebutt & Marchington 1997). Since the critical evaluations typical in gossip serve the interests of particular groups by putting (and keeping) others “in their place” (Awwad 2001), gossip can be a form of punishment and control (Black 1993). It is also part of power struggles. Gossip has been cited, though not empirically studied, as part of the micro-politics of schools and other organizations (Ball 1987; Blasé 1987; Burns 1961). Participating in gossip can signify “insider” status (Ernst 2003; Fuchs 1995), and can also be a means of resistance for subordinates (Hodson 1991; Tucker 1993).

Other research avoids the functionalist/conflict debate and views gossip as a form of information management (Paine 1967). Gossip can be a means through which information is created (Adkins 2002) and disseminated (Handelman 1973; Watkins & Danzi 1995). It is also a form of impression management (Goffman 1959) through which images of group, self, and other are constructed (Hannerz 1967; Cox 1970; Haviland 1977).

Despite this large interdisciplinary literature, few studies analyze recordings of *actual gossip episodes* as they occur in situ. Although most research focuses on why people gossip, micro analyses of naturally occurring gossip temporarily brackets questions about “why” to first examine *how* people gossip (Eder & Enke 1991; Bergman 1993). We discuss these studies at length because we draw considerably from their findings. We argue that to understand the often problematic implications of workplace gossip, we must first understand how gossip works by identifying its mechanics as a form of everyday social interaction.

-----Insert Figure 1 Here-----

Eder and Enke (1991) collected audio recordings of adolescent gossip that took place during informal school lunch breaks, and conducted a fine-grained, turn-by-turn analysis. This enabled them to model the basic structure of gossip. Eder and Enke establish that gossip begins with someone identifying an absent other as a target of conversation. This is followed by an expansion of the identification, an evaluation of the target (positive or negative), or a request for clarification (followed by a response) (Figure 1. “Beginning of episode”). Next, the evaluation of the target can be followed by a request for clarification, an explanation of the evaluation, support for the evaluation, an expansion of the evaluation, exaggerated affect (laughing, etc.), or a challenge of the evaluation. If the evaluation is followed by an explanation, the explanation is followed by a summary or expansion of the evaluation (Figure 1. “Possible ‘acts’ in response”).

Importantly, by modeling how gossip is structured and generated in social interactions, Eder and Enke (1991) could explain one of its problematic consequences—why gossip tends to become increasingly negative. Drawing on Pomerantz’s (1984) work on preferred and dispreferred responses to conversational assessments, Eder and Enke demonstrate that the structure of gossip provides many chances to support negative evaluations, but limits challenges. In their data, challenges only appeared immediately after the initial evaluation. Once a negative evaluation had been supported, challenges were never made. Hence, negative evaluations tend to expand in that direction: the structural *form* of gossip affects its evaluative content.

Bergmann (1993) conducted a turn-by-turn analysis of recordings of adult gossip in a German housing project and found a similar structure. Taken together, these two studies suggest that the basic structure of gossip is consistent across age groups, and they lend credence to the model presented in Figure One. However, this model is based on gossip from informal settings. Though numerous scholars have discussed the presence of gossip in organizations (Baker &

Jones 1996; Ernst 2003; Fuchs 1995; Kurland & Pelled 2002; Noon 2001; Noon & Delbridge 1993), no study has analyzed recordings of gossip as it occurs in formal contexts.

### **Methods, Data, and Analysis**

In light of this gap, we examine gossip that occurred within the context of formal school meetings. In theory, schools are good places to study gossip. The notion that teachers are “gossips” is popular, and gossip has been identified (though not empirically studied) as part of school politics (Ball 1987; Blasé 1987). However, studying gossip was not the impetus behind the original ethnography. Instead, the first author (Hallett) sought data for an empirical synthesis of Goffman’s studies of interaction and Bourdieu’s work on symbolic power (Hallett 2007). “Costen Elementary”<sup>1</sup> was a good site for this because it was undergoing a managerial transition. “Mrs. Kox” was starting her first full year as principal, providing a special opportunity to observe how she interacted with faculty and the role of interaction in the creation and deployment of symbolic power. Our interest in gossip emerged because school personnel described what happened at meetings as “gossip,” and because it was important to them. For example, when Hallett asked a teacher why he was not vocal during meetings, he responded: “I’m not a big person on gossip which is what—a lot of what we’re doing so—but you know, I’ll sit and I’ll listen” (Interview transcript). In describing a meeting, another teacher lamented, “Ya know, we could’ve ended in like 10 minutes, but we spend all this time gossiping” (Fieldnotes). The assistant principal said people “fuel the gossip mill” during meetings, and described the gossip as a “sickness.” He said they all needed to “leave it alone” and “try to come here and focus on what we’re supposed to do” by discussing issues and not people (Fieldnotes). Another teacher had a more positive view, saying meetings were vibrant because “everybody seems to be ready to gossip” (Fieldnotes).

Hallett observed everyday life at Costen and interviewed personnel for two school-years, and began videotaping meetings during year two. Most data for this paper centers on meeting videos because this was the formal setting in which gossip occurred. Video offers several advantages. First, it limits data loss, capturing interactions in greater detail than fieldnotes alone (Maynard 2003). Second, it creates an “external memory” that allows for repeated viewings and second-by-second analyses (Corsaro 1982; Mehan 1979), facilitating an approach similar to Eder and Enke’s (1991) and Bergmann’s (1993) studies of informal gossip.

Collecting video can have drawbacks. People could have limited their gossip due to the camera. Alternatively, some could have increased their gossip in order to “perform.” These problems can be minimized when recording is preceded by extended fieldwork during which rapport is built (Corsaro 1982), and Hallett was in the field for a year before introducing the camera. The camera was small, quiet, and largely unnoticed until *after* meetings. When it was being put away, people would comment (without alarm) that they forgot they were being recorded. To check for reactivity in response to the camera, Hallett observed several meetings without the camera, but did not see dramatic differences. Since Hallett was present during videotaping and collected all data himself, variations in observed data are likely due to other factors (to be discussed).<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, we believe the data strengths outweigh limitations.

Thirteen meetings were recorded. Each lasted approximately forty minutes, yielding over eight hours of video data.<sup>3</sup> All videotapes were transcribed, producing over 400 single-spaced pages of text. Since we operationalize gossip as a subset of evaluative talk about people not present, we first read the transcriptions to identify instances in which *any* evaluative talk occurred. Much of this talk involved students. Student evaluations are the sanctioned “business” of education, but evaluative talk about teachers and administrators who were not present was *not*

sanctioned. Guided by participants' own folk conceptualization, we coded the latter as "gossip," and identified 25 episodes in thirteen meetings. Such gossip was not part of the explicit goals for the meetings, and was never on the agenda. Nonetheless, all gossip took place in the surround of business that started after the "pre-play" of small talk ended (Goffman 1981, 125) and before the morning bell brought meetings to a close.

Once we identified the evaluations that signified gossip, we followed transcriptions backward to examine conversational antecedents, and forward to examine outcomes. Our approach has three parts. The first analytic step is comparative: We contrast our data to what we would expect based on Eder and Enke's model (Figure 1), with the difference revealing the distinctive nature of the gossip we observed. This approximates a quasi-experimental design that is otherwise difficult to establish ethnographically (Duneier & Molotch 1999).

The second analytic step uses a turn-by-turn analysis to elucidate the differences between our data and that recorded by Eder and Enke and by Bergmann. Our approach mirrors that of linguistic ethnography ("LE") (Creese 2008). A recent development out of the United Kingdom, LE builds on Gumperz (1982) and Hymes (1996) to combine "an interest in the forms of language and discourse with ethnography, Goffmanesque interaction analysis, and conversation analysis" (Rampton et al. 2006, 1). LE holds that "language and the social world are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity" (Rampton et al. 2004, 2). LE is suited for studying gossip in formal contexts because it "permits us to examine how particular practices shape more enduring social relations and are constrained by structures of power that are brought into being in the midst of conversation" (Goodwin 2006, 15). We used the following transcription conventions:

(( Nonverbal )) This includes nonverbal and paralinguistic information such as who is being addressed based on eye gaze, or possibly whispers, hesitant tones, etc.

(Unclear utterance or unclear speaker) Words that were unclear were put inside parentheses, or the parentheses were left blank.

[            ] Indicates overlap in talk

= Indicates an abrupt cut-off or self interruption

*Italics* Marks words that are louder or said with emphasis

Consistent with LE, we used an ethnographic understanding of the context to help make sense of the conversational data. Our analysis reveals a number of subtle moves that cloaked gossip in ambiguity (what we call “indirectness”) and took gossip off its expected path (“avoidance”).

Our third step examines differences in gossip across different targets (administrators compared to teachers), and in the presence or absence of administrators. This allows us to explore why and when teachers gossiped in various ways, and suggests that formal authority relations were a prominent contextual feature, shaping both the form and prevalence of gossip.

### **Context, Analysis, and Results**

As a starting point, it is important to place the video data in ethnographic context. At Costen the teachers were disgruntled with the new administration, and especially Mrs. Kox (Hallett 2007). During the first year of research they lodged so many complaints that the Central Office conducted a formal review, but Kox was vindicated of any formal wrongdoing, thereby strengthening her hand; teachers could no longer appeal to superiors for an official evaluation. Nonetheless, they continued to speak negatively about Kox, although they feared retaliation. Tenure made firing teachers difficult, but if Kox suspected resistance, she would place job advertisements in teachers’ mailboxes in an effort to “push them out.” Teachers also worried

about being moved to different classrooms, being assigned different grade levels, and being assigned “bad” students—all within Kox’s authority.

These circumstances were further complicated by Anastasia’s presence at meetings. A well-respected art teacher, Anastasia had close bonds with teachers and Kox, and meetings were held in her classroom. Given the contentious teacher-administrator relations, Kox often used Anastasia as a go-between. Teachers liked Anastasia, but at times referred to her as “the intermediary,” Kox’s “mouthpiece,” and “the ear.” Gossip often “gets back” to those being gossiped about (Goodwin 1990), and Anastasia’s position increased the stakes.<sup>4</sup>

The task of the meetings—in which teacher representatives from each grade would meet with each other and, at times, administrators—was to discuss procedures and share information. Since meetings were primarily information—and not decision—oriented, they did not necessitate a quorum. However, they had numerous formal traits (Boden 1994). They were regularly scheduled (weekly or bi-weekly depending on time of year), had pre-set time limits, usually had an agenda, and consisted of a regular group of nine teachers (seven female, two male). There was no chairperson, but Kox or the assistant principal, Mr. Carrol, made appearances at seven meetings. Importantly, conversational turns were not “preallocated” (Greatbatch 1992), creating many opportunities for participation. Nor did they keep minutes—a record that could have increased conversational restraint. Formality is best viewed as a continuum, and while the meetings were not formal in the extreme, they provide a marked contrast to informal contexts.

### **The First Analytic Step: Gossip Compared**

When we compare our gossip data to the standard model (Figure 1), we find important similarities and revealing differences. Eder and Enke and Bergmann found that the evaluations that comprise informal gossip tend to be negative, not positive. Likewise, 22 of the 25 gossip

episodes we recorded had negative evaluations (See Table 1). As we will see, these evaluations played an important role in the construction of workplace problems and relational politics.

-----Insert Table One Here-----

In addition, eight episodes fit the standard model (Table 1 and Figure 1). These episodes could be successfully analyzed using categories from Eder and Enke's model. For example, in the following episode the point of business involved grades. Teachers were discussing a parent who challenged a failing grade. According to the administration, the teacher lacked the paperwork to support the grade, and the administration claimed the teacher knew about the required documentation. In what follows, the business of grading shifted to unsanctioned gossip: personal and highly critical evaluations of the administration, particularly Kox (not present):<sup>5</sup>

1 Brenda: You've just gotta support yourself, and I say that to my team members. It's terrible but it's true. If you do not have paper backup and phone calls documented and say, "And here's where we are," they ((parents)) say, "Well, this is, here's the big quote, in your, in the LSC, and from the administration." It's the first I've heard about it =

2 Maggie: =Oh, they're such liars, you know what, I, yeah.

3 Brenda: This is March, it's the first I've heard about it.

((laughter by teacher off camera))

4 Maggie: They are s- ((cuts herself off))

5 Brenda: Well, I had an interesting situation, have all you guys gotten your ribbons for [quarterly honors]?

6 Maggie: [Yes]

7 John: [No]

((some shake their heads))



8 Brenda: Okay, we had, we, [I asked about that. I was in] the office and I said to Mrs. Kox, “On the schedule are, you know, it said, they were in our boxes,” I said “I don’t have mine.” She said, “Yes you do, I put ‘em in the boxes.” I said, “Mrs. Kox, I don’t have them.” She said, “You have them, go look for them.” ((Pointing finger at her imaginary self)). I thought, she’s standing here=

9 John: [And we said that Tuesday also]

10 John: =Did she really?

11 Brenda: ((nods)) calling me a liar.

The episode starts in turn one when Brenda identifies “the administration” as a target and contests their position that teachers’ knew about the required grading documentation, “it’s the first I’ve heard about it.” In turn two, Maggie makes an agreement upgrade (Pomerantz 1984, 65) through which Brenda’s statement is transformed into a personal and very negative evaluation of the administration, “liars.” In turn three this evaluation is supported by Brenda’s reiteration that she had “not heard” about the documentation and by another teacher’s laughter. Maggie almost repeats the evaluation but cuts herself off (turn four). In turns five through eleven Brenda expands on the “liar” evaluation and affixes it specifically to Kox.

While this example fits Eder and Enke’s model, approximately two thirds of our gossip *did not*. These seventeen episodes were similar to the standard model in that they had some of the same technical details, but they tended to be much longer than the episodes in Eder and Enke’s (1991) and Bergmann’s (1993) research. Data reported by Eder and Enke ranged from four speaking turns to sixteen. Bergmann’s reported episodes ranged from three to 25, and evaluations were made clearly, strongly, and quickly (1993, 72). In total, our episodes ranged from six to 77 turns. They averaged around 22 turns, and had many utterances that did not fit the standard model. Examining the unexplained turns in our data, we noticed two general things. First, people cloaked gossip in ambiguity by increasing the indirectness of their statements.

Second, they altered the trajectory of gossip by using forms of avoidance. Compared to the standard model, these 17 episodes are far more nuanced (Table 1). To unpack the complexities of indirectness and avoidance, we examine how they operate in detail.

### **The Second Analytic Step: Modes of Indirectness and Avoidance**

Conducting a turn-by-turn analysis, we can identify specific moves through which indirectness and avoidance were achieved in the gossip. Table 2 presents an overview of the analysis that follows. Rows indicate the episode being analyzed. Columns indicate the mode of indirectness or avoidance in that episode. Cells indicate the interactional move through which the specific mode was accomplished in that episode, and the conversational turn where it occurred. These episodes were selected for discussion because, together, they express all the observed ways that indirectness and avoidance occurred in our data.

-----Insert Table 2 Here-----

We start with an episode that is relatively simple but less direct than standard gossip. This excerpt follows from a conversation not captured on video.<sup>6</sup> Connie whispered to Brenda and Maggie that she was looking for a new job, which became a topic for the whole group and developed into gossip about the administration. In this excerpt and those that follow, key turns are marked with an →.

1 Brenda: Except do you know what Connie? As Lisa says, they come and go.

2 Maggie: (I,) correct, but, I-, how many have been here? I know, [but, but ]

3 Connie: [I know, I] know, but you know what, when I first started here, in 1989=

4 Brenda: =With Dr. Welch=

5 → Connie: =It was so *calm*, and you could teach, no one was constantly looking over your shoulder, they knew, exactly what was going on.

I mean, they ordered books, we, we weren't, we didn't have to do all this extra stuff. We were allowed to teach, and I don't know if this is, the, way of the future, but it's, it's, kinda stifling.

6 Maggie: I think, well, I think some it, I don't know the percentage, some does come from, the uh, from downtown, um, but some is purely made up here.

7 Connie: A lot of it [I think     ]

8 Brenda:                   [A lot (unclear)]

On the surface, it appears that the gossip starts in turn four, when Brenda identifies the former principal, Dr. Welch. However, Welch is a point of comparison. Viewed this way, the episode actually begins in turn one, when Brenda comments on “they.” “They” is ambiguous, but once we consider the juxtaposition in turn five and situate it in knowledge of the field setting where teachers were disgruntled with Kox, we see that the target is administrators in general. By praising the predecessor (Maynard 1998, 388-390), teachers juxtapose life under Kox's administration (“kinda stifling”) with life under Welch (“calm”). The implicit negative evaluation of Kox is expanded when Maggie makes the criticism that some of the pressure on teachers is “purely made up here” (turn six), which is supported when Connie and Brenda agree (turns seven and eight). Kox remains unnamed, but is covertly blamed (Maynard 1998). We call this type of indirectness an *implied evaluation via juxtaposition*. This subtle move has important implications: what appears to be about Welch is also about Kox. While this evaluation is implicit, it is salient nonetheless. To quote Bergmann (1992, 154), sometimes “the delicate and notorious character of an event is constituted by the very act of talking about it cautiously.”

The next episode is more complex and involves avoidance. In this meeting teachers were discussing their opposition to a proposed reading program that emphasized reading by having all teachers instruct reading in all classrooms first thing in the morning. Most 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (and their representatives in this meeting) disliked the proposal because they were not accustomed to teaching reading. Rather, they taught discrete subject areas and students rotated

among them during class periods. The teachers' discussion of the proposal (official business) soon morphed into personal evaluations of Mr. Carrol (assistant principal) and Mrs. Kox.

1 Dora: Like (unclear) said she will not do it again ever, [she hates reading ] she's, she said she cannot, [she doesn't do it (its) justice]=

2 John: [This is coming pretty much from Mr. Carrol]

3 Connie: [Yeah, he wants reading at ] [9:05 ]

4 Maggie: =[Well,] see this is the other thing I was thinking of, when some of our teachers are not themselves readers, how do you, uh, uh, show any kind of true=

5 Connie: =Love for reading =

6 Maggie: = and f-, yeah. You know, [I don't know again, how many are really not readers?]

7 → John: [You know what I sense? I sense with,] with Mr. Carrol, uh, and I get a chance to talk to him a few times, and, he, he thinks that there's just way too much going on in the school, and he says, the other day, uh, Chris and I, were (both uh), he says Chris, you do basketball, John, you do guitar, and that's it, you know, you do this, and let's not have one guy do 37 things =

8 Maggie: = uh-huh ((nodding)) =

9 → John: =And we don't need the ribbon ceremony and we don't need the international, we don't need all this stuff. If we're gonna concentrate on reading, let's, let's all, do-, uh, that's coming right from him, by the way, that first and second grade ((meaning period)) reading, everybody gets on board and teaches reading, and everybody teaches reading so we have smaller classes, and he's, he's really, um, he thinks there's just too much confusion (with) this school, too much pe-, too [much things going on, and he's right on target]

10 → Brenda: [And you know what that's true, but whe- ] but when he left last week, he said, after with Dorothy's letter, he said, "but I'm not curriculum," I said "What is your strength?" and he said "Organization," I think [(he's all into it) ]

11 John: [He's schedule, that's what he is] =

12 → Brenda: =What happened was, I think he mentioned it to Mrs. Kox because he's seen it work elsewhere, but that's with good strong leadership overseeing the whole thing and lots of teacher training. Um, so she took it, but I find very often she takes what she hears and becomes the gospel for that day =

13 John: = [Yeah, you're right ]

14 Maggie: [Um hmm. Right ]

The drift from meeting business (reading program) to the personal virtues and shortcomings of administrators starts in turn two when John names Mr. Carrol and associates the reading program with him, an identification Connie supports and expands in turn three. Looking at turn four, it is tempting to think there is a negative evaluation “when some of our teachers are not themselves readers.” However, based on conversations leading into this excerpt and knowledge of the setting, we interpret this as an expression of sympathy for colleagues who specialized in math and science. In turns four through six they continue to talk negatively about the reading program. Based on the standard gossip model, and because the program was linked to Mr. Carrol, we would expect teachers to evaluate him negatively in subsequent turns, since talk that starts negative tends to stay negative (Eder and Enke 1991). Interestingly, this negativity is avoided in turns seven through nine through what we call a *preemptive positive evaluation*. Before anyone can give a specific negative evaluation of Carrol, John begins an account of his interactions with Carrol in turn seven (and John starts before the previous turn closes), and Maggie supports this account in turn eight. John continues in turn nine and ends with a praise assessment (Pomerantz 1984), “and he's (Carrol) right on target.”

This kind of evaluation creates pressure for people to agree (Pomerantz 1984), but in turn ten the positive evaluation is challenged, although in a way that further avoids a negative evaluation (what we call a *partial challenge*). Brenda's “but” avoids support of the positive evaluation, but does not replace it with a negative one. The challenge has more subtlety, and

operates to shift focus from Carrol’s questionable “strength” in curriculum to a different virtue: “organization.” While there was some debate regarding Carrol’s strengths, through these two moves (“preemptive positive evaluation” and “partial challenge”), a negative evaluation is avoided. In subsequent turns the teachers avoid Carrol as a target for gossip. This happens through what we call a *switch to another target*. The switch starts in turn twelve when Brenda implicates Kox, provided a damning personal evaluation—“she (Kox) takes what she hears and becomes the gospel for that day”—that John and Maggie support in the remaining turns.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to Eder and Enke’s (1991) study of informal gossip where targets were only defended *after* they were evaluated and challenges were oppositional, our data involves subtle moves through which negative evaluations are avoided and gossip is steered elsewhere. Notably, while specific parts of gossip are avoided (the negative evaluation of Carrol), the gossip itself is not. These moves alter the path of gossip and affect its content—what starts as potentially damaging talk about Carrol shifts entirely to Kox—but they do not prevent gossip.

Similar processes are evident in the next excerpt, which begins with evaluative talk about a student. We do not consider this portion “gossip” because such evaluations are the business of teaching. However, talk soon morphs into unsanctioned evaluations of Carrol (gossip) and oscillates back to the student before landing on Kox:

1 Connie: There, there’s an eighth grade student walking around with horns coming out of his head.= [ Tell me], how is that part of the uniform dress code?

2 Brenda:  
=[Yeaah ]

3 Brenda: Well, I, yeah, what’s the deal Chris? ((Maggie laughs))

4 Chris: Mr. Carrol said it was okay =

5 Female: =*Why?*=

- 6 Anastasia: =[*Oh my gosh* ]
- 7 Connie: =[No, why is that okay?]
- 8 Brenda: =[He's allowed to stay ] with that hairdo?
- 9 Chris: ((Shrugging)) That's what Mr. Carrol said to him at lunch.
- 10 Connie: Why is that okay?
- 11 Chris: I don't know. I didn't say anything until I heard from either Mrs. Kox or Mis-, he's in my homeroom, um=
- 12 → John: = Who's the kid?
- 13 Connie: He's [frightening]
- 14 Chris: [Ihmran ]
- 15 Brenda: He's in special ed [ (unclear) ]
- 16 John: [Oh, Ihmran?]
- 17 Chris: [Ihmran, yeah]
- 18 Brenda: [So he's out,] so he's in special ed, so he's out in the hallway a lot, too, he's over with Cindy I think or Ann; I see him, he circulates a lot during the day, over on our side.
- 19 Connie: And not very quietly I may add. I mean, he's gotta frighten the little kids, I mean, he, he's frightening to look at.
- 20 → John: Kathy the other day brought up in our full faculty meeting on Tuesday, about, uh, the penalties for fighting, and, [and] Mrs. Kox cast that off and said well this happened while a sub was there, so in other words, when a sub's in the room=
- 21 Connie: [Oh yeah]
- 22 Connie: = Anything goes.
- 23 John: Pretty much, you can do anything you want. ((Continues after an aside)) So rather than having any punishment
- 24 Brenda: No [consequences]

25 John: [they are ] now gonna be taught how to drum and, you know, there's some good and bad to that, we, we're gonna see if we can work with them, I guess, and, but there was no penalty, at all, for the fight.

26 Brenda: Then maybe we have to get parents to press assault charges.

27 John: Yeah.

28 Brenda: Say to the parents, you know what, if it's not being handled here, because of (the sub), I suggest you call the police.

When the teachers ask Chris for clarification about the haircut, Chris responds with some bad news that establishes Carrol as a target: "Mr. Carrol said it was OK" (turn four). In doing so, Chris invites gossip about a person involved in the news (Maynard 1997, 105-106). In turns five through eight, teachers react strongly against Carrol's approval of the hair cut. The transcript does not adequately capture this response, but the exaggerated affect indicates shock and outrage with Carrol. This talk is negative, and based on Eder and Enke's model we would expect the negative evaluation to build. However, this structure is altered to create a different outcome. By turn eleven Carrol's action has aroused considerable negativity, but in turn twelve there is a sudden *switch to another target*. Interrupting Chris, John asks "Who's the kid?" thereby switching focus back to the student and avoiding more negative talk about Carrol.

In turn 20 John changes focus again by *switching to another topic*. John moves from the student to "penalties for fighting." He also identifies Kox as a new target, and criticizes her personally for "casting off" the penalties for fighting. This identification and evaluation is elaborated in subsequent turns, culminating when Brenda suggests that they may need to trump Kox by going to the police. These forms of avoidance alter both the path and content of gossip. The episode begins with sanctioned talk about a student, almost becomes a polemic against Carrol before returning to the student, and then shifts to unsanctioned gossip about Kox. We see



subtle, sophisticated, and consequential switches, none of which are evident in the existing model based on gossip in informal settings.

In previous excerpts indirectness and avoidance operate independently, but they can also interact in interesting ways, as seen in the next excerpt where talk about the meeting schedule (a formal agenda item) leads to gossip about Kox. As previously noted, relations between teachers and Kox were contentious. At the time of this meeting, Anastasia was increasingly aligned with Kox (she is called “the intermediary” in line nineteen). Given this dynamic, it is not surprising that teachers used indirectness to keep the negative evaluation of Kox implicit. However, the indirectness created space for Anastasia to employ avoidance to protect Kox, and as a result the evaluations moved from implicit towards explicit before being subverted:

1 Anastasia: Okay, this’ll be quick. Uh, item number one, we have new meeting dates=

2 Maggie: =Oh=

3 Anastasia: = it’s  
approximately every other week

4 Maggie: Okay, [that’s better than every week]

5 Anastasia: [That’s all I could negotiate ]((laughs))

6 Maggie: Okay, that’s a positive.

7 Anastasia: Um, but then she said, “Well, if you’re gonna be meeting less, we have to make sure that we correspond with each other,” so, if there’s any concerns, just put ‘em, I guess, in her box [or my box, I don’t know]

8 Brenda:  
[It says, team leaders ] submit concerns prior to meeting=

9 Anastasia: =Right.

10 Brenda: To whom?

11 Anastasia: I don't know, I guess that would be Mrs. Kox ((nods)), if you have concerns, or you could do, if- you could put it in my box, if you want. ((2 second pause)) I'll [have to (short pause) ] I have to *ask*!

12 Brenda: [Let's be definitive so we]=

13 Anastasia: =Um, let's just do Mrs. Kox then. Put it in Mrs. Kox's box.

14 John: She's not coming to these meetings anymore, or she=

15 Anastasia: =No.

16 Female: ((quietly)) Oh.

17 ((Maggie laughs and holds her hands apart as if shrugging, then claps her hands together, shrugs her shoulders and crosses her arms in front of herself, smiling))

18 → Anastasia: Um, the second item was supposed to be [anything]

19 John: [Why not?] wha-, what did she tell you. You're the [intermediary here. ] Tell us why.

20 → Brenda: [She doesn't like the way we behave] ((Spoken with a sarcastic joking tone))  
((female laughter))

21 Anastasia: No, it's not, that's not that, it's just that we're ((1.5 second pause)) leaders and that one meeting was kind of ((1 second pause)) ugly where she was getting ((Makes hand gestures)) [upset. ]

22 → John: [All hyper? ]

23 Maggie: [That's the one] I missed

24 Anastasia: And, um, so, since we are able to talk together, we're all professional adults, we can talk about issues and report back-and-forth ((Maggie is looking at Anastasia with her arms crossed, smiling and nodding))

25 → Brenda: ((Sarcastic tone)) Sure, why not.

26 → Anastasia: ((To Brenda)) Okay, well, that could be a concern, you can say "Where are you?" you can say "Come to the meeting."

27 → Brenda: I'm sorry, I think we do just fine.

28 Anastasia: Okay so do I.

The discussion of the schedule starts to evolve into gossip in turn seven, when Anastasia identifies “she” as Kox (identified by name in turn eleven). As an intermediary, Anastasia is put in the ironic position of identifying the person she represents as a target for evaluation. As teachers discuss procedures, John requests clarification about Kox’s role in the meetings (turn fourteen). Anastasia responds with news that Kox will no longer be attending (turn fifteen), leading to some surprise (quiet “Oh” by a female off-camera and Maggie’s exaggerated affect).

At this point, the model established by Eder and Enke suggests that an evaluation of Kox looms. However, in turn eighteen Anastasia attempts a *preemptive topic change* by moving to the next agenda item. If successful, this would have avoided an evaluation of Kox, but before Anastasia can finish, John overlaps with Anastasia’s turn to request clarification about Kox’s attendance (turn nineteen). Before Anastasia can respond, Brenda overlaps with John’s turn to say Kox “doesn’t like” how teachers behave (turn 20). Brenda’s tone is sarcastic (an interpretation supported by the laughter that follows), and provides an indirect negative evaluation: The problem is not teachers, but rather Kox’s inappropriate response to their legitimate behavior. We call this interactional move *sarcasm to implicitly evaluate*.

Anastasia’s response to Brenda (turn 21) actually expands the implicit evaluation even though the response takes the form of a challenge (starting with “No”). Anastasia talks about a meeting where Kox got “upset.”<sup>8</sup> This word is somewhat neutral, but in turn 22 John makes an upgrade (Pomerantz 1984) that is negative in a school context: “hyper”. This word is frequently used to describe out of control children, and makes the evaluation of Kox more explicit, negative, and personal. Interestingly, John expresses this as a question, which can indicate reticence to speak directly (Pomerantz 1988). This caution is salient given that John labeled

Anastasia Kox's "intermediary" in turn nineteen. We call this form of indirectness a *request for clarification that indirectly expands the evaluation*.

In turn 23, Maggie comments that she missed the meeting in question, giving Anastasia the opportunity to skip John's request for clarification. Instead, Anastasia argues that they do not need Kox at the meetings (turn 24). Brenda replies sarcastically: "Sure, why not" (turn 25). This fits the classic form of the "double positive," (as in "yeah, right"). As Goffman (1981, 150) notes, people use sarcasm to say things "as if they were not entirely their own." Brenda's sarcasm distances her from the negative implications of her comment and provides safe footing to challenge Anastasia: Literally, Brenda's response means "yes, we can meet without Kox," but figuratively it means "no." We call this form of indirectness *sarcasm to implicitly challenge*.

In turn 26 Anastasia threatens Brenda's safe footing: "Okay, well, that could be a concern, you can say 'Where are you?'" By directing her response specifically to Brenda, and by responding to the figurative as opposed to literal substance of Brenda's challenge, Anastasia is *forcing directness*. This ironic form of avoidance works by denying the distance Brenda created (via sarcasm) between herself and her negative statement. Essentially, Anastasia dares Brenda to make her concerns explicit. This tactic succeeds; Brenda *withdraws* her challenge (turn 27), ending the gossip and avoiding further negativity.

The micro analysis of these four episodes illustrates how teachers gossiped during meetings and identifies the observed moves through which indirectness and avoidance were accomplished in our data, as summarized in Table Three. These modes of interaction altered the standard structure of gossip and redirected conversational outcomes in consequential ways.

-----Insert Table Three Here-----

### **The Third Analytic Step: Gossip across Targets and in the Presence of Superiors**

Comparing gossip about administrators to gossip about teachers reveals a number of interesting differences (Table 1). Administrator gossip was more common than teacher gossip, but the most interesting difference is found in the frequency of standard gossip episodes compared to those involving indirectness and/or avoidance. When teachers were targets, the majority (five of nine) of the episodes fit Eder and Enke's standard model. In contrast, thirteen of the sixteen episodes about administrators exhibited indirectness and/or avoidance. This suggests that formal hierarchies do *not prevent* gossip, but may affect the *form* it takes.

This comparison is limited, but the nuance evident in gossip about administrative superiors makes sense if viewed as means of caution. It is plausible that indirectness and avoidance in gossip provided means through which teachers could safely express their frustrations with administrators. This interpretation fits the broader ethnography (Hallett 2007). Kox was a tough, no-nonsense principal. Her personality fit the authority of her position, but ruffled many feathers. When teachers complained to the Central Office, Kox was vindicated and teachers were put back in their place. Gossip remained as a venue in which teachers could put the administration on trial, but it was not without peril. As mentioned earlier, if Kox sensed teachers did not support her vision, she could (and at times did) move them to different grade levels, change their classrooms, or place their teaching under special scrutiny.

Though gossip about administrators happened publicly during meetings, it was hidden by the guise of work, veiled by indirectness and avoidance, and not surprisingly, occurred behind the backs of administrators: With the exception of one episode in which Mr. Carrol was positively evaluated, all administrator gossip happened in the absence of the principal and assistant principal. In all these ways, the teachers' political machinations remained covert

(Morrill et al. 2003). While criticizing administrators required care, gossiping about colleagues did not necessitate as much subtlety, because there were fewer repercussions.

Thus, as a general feature of the context, there is some indication that formal authority relations may explain aspects of the gossip. Authority became even more salient during the seven meetings in which administrators were physically present. During these meetings there were seven episodes of gossip, and except for the aforementioned positive gossip about Carrol, this gossip was about teachers.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, in the six meetings not attended by administrators, there were eighteen episodes, and this is where the majority of administrator gossip appeared. Clearly, these numbers are small and must be interpreted with caution, but they suggest that formal authority relations affected how, why, and when participants gossiped.

### **Discussion**

Understanding how teachers gossiped in the context of formal meetings provides solid empirical footing for discussing the implications gossip can have for organizations. As Collins (1981, 1009) has noted, “Politics, as the struggle over reputation, rests upon control of the means of reputation management.” Through their gossip the teachers defined Kox as a problem (Emerson and Messinger 1977), and by looking closely at gossip we can see how reputations and organizational politics emerge and develop on a turn-by-turn basis. Of the sixteen gossip episodes about administrators, fifteen involved negative evaluations (Table 1), and fourteen of these episodes involved negative evaluations of Kox. Moreover, teachers used avoidance such that, when gossip began with a different target (i.e. Carrol), it was eventually directed towards Kox. In the episodes analyzed earlier, Kox was constructed as “a liar,” as “stifling,” as a poor leader who takes what she hears “as gospel for that day,” as incapable of handling discipline problems (parents ought to “call the police”), and “hyper.” In other gossip episodes Kox was

again constructed as a poor leader and criticized for having unrealistic expectations for student accountability, for not keeping promises, for being inconsistent, and for being mean in general.

Importantly, the problem image of Kox was not a given. It was contingent on the moves people made while gossiping, such as successful and failed efforts to switch targets or topics. It must also be noted that the Local School Council (LSC) viewed Kox differently. Space limits do not allow us to detail Kox's actions (many of which could be interpreted positively), but the LSC praised Kox both formally (during yearly reviews) and informally (Hallett 2007). However, her reputation with teachers created problems. As principal, she still had rational-legal authority, yet while defining Kox as a problem via gossip, teachers were according *no* deference (Goffman 1956) to their purported superior, creating an unenviable situation for someone in a position of governance.

In the broader ethnography, the meeting gossip was an important string in a larger chord of interactions through which Kox was constructed as disrespectful, authoritarian, cold, “unfriendly,” “condescending,” and “nasty” (Hallett 2007). The meeting gossip is especially interesting because the evaluations happened in a public, formal context, and were in a sense “certified” by teacher representatives from across grade-levels. Morrill, Zald, and Rao (2003) argue that gossip can be a symbolic trial in absentia, and Hodson (1991) and Roscigno and Hodson (2004) argue that gossip can be a form of sabotage through which workers undermine managers. This paper adds rich empirical and analytical substance to these evocative arguments. Gossip was a “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1990): During a time in which teachers were disenfranchised, gossip empowered them and served to stigmatize Kox.

Teachers feared Kox, but did not respect her, and the gossip affected Kox's capacity to lead. Burdened with a bad reputation, Kox's efforts were met with increasing resistance, even in

simple matters (Hallett 2007). In the ensuing turmoil, all parties suffered. Kox felt, justifiably, that teachers were “out to get” her. Over a quarter of the faculty left Costen, including a main participant in the gossip: Brenda. Brenda was a highly respected language arts teacher, and teachers saw her as a leader. Brenda never confronted Kox directly, but Kox sensed (correctly) that Brenda was a critic. A year after Hallett left the field, Kox reviewed Brenda’s teaching, and the official report was negative. Brenda was offended and took a job elsewhere. This may have been the outcome Kox wanted, but this type of action further diminished her reputation. When the teachers’ union surveyed teachers from over 500 schools city-wide to create a “Principal’s Report Card,” Kox scored in the bottom ten percent.

### **Conclusion and Propositions for Future Research**

As a feature of everyday life, gossip is “diligently cultivated at all times and places” (Bergmann 1993, 23), but it has not been made the primary focus of study in all these times and places. By using videos of naturally occurring gossip from a previously unexamined setting, this paper makes three contributions. First, as evident in the discussion section, research on gossip opens a new front in the study of organizational politics. There has long been interest in the micro-politics of organizations, but the covert nature of these politics presents an empirical challenge for scholars, especially when politics involve symbolic acts like gossip as opposed to struggles over concrete, material objects (Morrill et al. 2003). Nonetheless, gossip is *observable* and can be captured and analyzed via linguistic ethnography, facilitating fine-grained examinations that reveal hidden details about the under-life of organizations (Vaughan 1999).

Second, this project advances our knowledge of social interaction in organizations. As organizational sociology has moved towards open systems approaches that focus on the impact of external environments on organizations (Thompson 1967; Meyer and Rowan 1977), it has



moved away from analyses of internal organizational processes. These macro approaches have been criticized for creating a “great wall of structure” that eclipses people and their interactions (Boden 1994, 8). Work by Boden (1994) and Drew and Heritage (1992), among others, take important steps in revealing interactions by providing turn-by-turn analyses of talk in organizations. These studies show how interactions are contingent and dynamic, but also socially organized, especially by opportunities and constraints created by the structure of talk (Rawls 2008). However, they tend to downplay structures exogenous to talk (Czarniawska 1997). Structure is often analyzed only to the extent that it is “accomplished in and through the moment-to-moment turn-taking procedures of everyday talk” (Boden & Zimmerman 1991, 17).

While our linguistic ethnography takes the structure of talk seriously, it involves a somewhat different approach. As we have seen, authority was an important part of the external context for gossip in two ways. First, as evident in gossip about administrators compared to teachers, authority was part of the structural context, but nothing in any *particular* strip of talk indicated its relevance. Formal authority was not “accomplished” in the talk. Rather, it became evident by comparing gossip across different targets. Second, the presence of an authority figure such as the principal or assistant principal at meetings affected the targets and frequency of gossip. In essence, the embodied presence of authority increased the formality of the immediate context but, again, this authority was not “endogenous” to the talk. It became apparent in examining the patterned forest for the trees.

This structural context created constraints, and the analysis suggests it promoted caution. However, the context also created unique opportunities, for example the chance to exit gossip by reverting to official agenda items, an exit which might be too abrupt in a more informal setting. It also generated tremendous creativity, a proliferation of consequential moves people used to get

around these constraints: the four modes of indirectness and seven modes of avoidance (Table 3). In contrast to previous sociolinguistic studies of gossip, these teachers were able to diffuse the inclination toward negative evaluations by switching to new targets as well as to new topics. Doing so created more alternatives for participation than simply expanding on or agreeing with the negative evaluation of the initial target. Also, we found some cases of preemptive topic changes which, while not always successfully, showed that some teachers were trying to ward off potentially negative evaluations ahead of time. The gossip was alive with “practical-evaluative agency” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) in which teachers made judgments among possible trajectories of action while responding to present demands. These contextual pressures and dynamic responses combined to create gossip that mattered to teachers, Kox, and the school, highlighting the nexus between structure, agency, and social interaction.

Third, this project adds contextual flesh to the basic model of gossip established in research in informal settings (Eder and Enke 1991), and provides comparative leverage for theorizing conditions under which gossip may occur and when it will take various forms. In her review of the anthropological literature, Merry (1984, 275) suggests that “gossip thrives when facts are uncertain,” and is often precipitated by violations of group norms. Although our data were collected in a different type of setting, they support these propositions. At Costen there was great uncertainty about the administration (Hallett 2009). Kox was a new principal hired as an outsider, and, in general, teachers did not know what to expect from her. Moreover, as evident in the content of the talk analyzed earlier, they appeared to be responding to perceived violations of group expectations. Kox deviated from teacher expectations from the past (“stifling” compared to the old principal), from their expectations about the handling of student discipline, and from expectations that she would attend meetings.

At the same time, the formality of the setting and observed variation in the gossip suggest a number of new propositions for future research. First, we propose *the greater the formality of the context, the lower the likelihood of gossip in general*. As discussed earlier, formality is best conceived as a continuum and, in our data, when a formal authority member was physically present, gossip declined. As such, we expect that as formality increases based on indicators such as the recording of official minutes, gossip will decrease. A related issue involves group size. Size is often related to formality, because as groups get larger, turn-taking is often restricted to assure decorum (Boden 1994, 86), and we expect that as groups get larger and devices such as Robert's Rules of Order are enforced, gossip will decline if not disappear.

Second, we propose, *in general, the lower the formality of the context, the higher the likelihood that gossip will fit the standard model* identified by Eder and Enke. This proposition follows from our juxtaposition of existing research on gossip in informal settings against our data, and sets up a third proposition for future research: *up to a point, the greater the formality of the context, the higher the likelihood of indirectness and avoidance in gossip*. Although our data suggest that formal contexts promote indirectness and avoidance, as it relates to the first proposition, extreme formality might become prohibitive for any gossip.

Perhaps the most important contextual feature we identified involves the nature of the gossip target: In our data, indirectness and avoidance were utilized primarily in gossip about administrative superiors. However, "superiors" can be formal or informal in nature, and while we suspect, in general, that indirectness and avoidance will be more common in formal contexts, we do not presume that this kind of nuanced gossip only happens in organizations. Towards this end, we make a fourth proposition: *The higher that status (formal or otherwise) of the gossip target, the higher the likelihood of indirectness and avoidance*.

These propositions begin to trace the outlines for a contextual theory of gossip. Future research can revise, add detail, and elaborate, perhaps teasing out how specific contextual features affect gossip, while identifying additional modes of indirectness and avoidance and conditions under which they are likely. A host of additional questions can also be explored. How might the gender of participants and targets affect the use of indirectness and avoidance? While most scholars reject the notion that gossip is merely the domain of women (Bergmann 1993, 60), the gendered dynamics of gossip are subject to ongoing debate (Tebbutt 1995; Leaper & Holliday 1995). A sufficient answer is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that “John” was one of the main gossipers in our data. Another point of interest concerns age. The similarities between Eder and Enke’s (1991) research on adolescent gossip and Bergmann’s (1993) study of adult gossip suggest that, in informal settings, the basic model holds across age groups. However, would adolescents gossiping in a formal context (for example a student council meeting) exhibit similar nuance compared to adults? Research has found that young people have incredibly sophisticated interactions and are capable of making sophisticated adjustments that parallel those of adult interactions (Corsaro 2003; Eder et al. 1995). For these reasons, we suspect that indirectness and avoidance have more to do with context than age, but this too remains an open question.

Answering such questions will contribute to our understanding of how different people gossip in different venues, and the import of this talk for understanding the micro-politics of organizations and everyday life. By increasing our knowledge of the mechanics of gossip, its contextual contours, and modes of indirectness and avoidance, this article provides an expanded framework for exploring a wide range of consequential dynamics through which people are constructed as problems during social interactions that take place in multiple settings.

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Figure 1. The Standard Structure of Gossip Episodes (Eder and Enke 1991: 499)

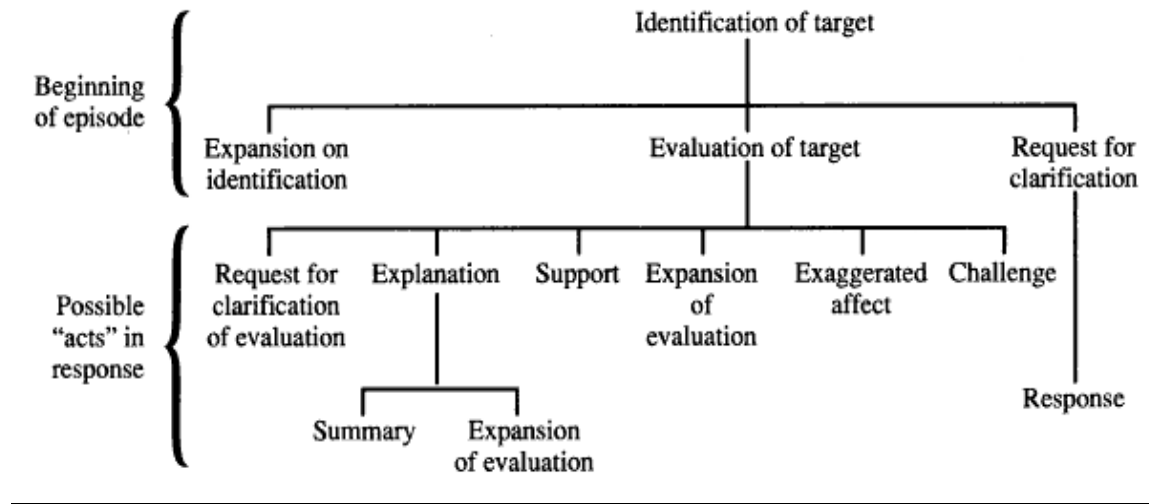


Table 1. Overview of Gossip in the Meetings

	Gossip about Administrators	Gossip about Teachers	Totals
Gossip episodes	16	9	25
Positive evaluations	1	2	3
Negative evaluations	15	7	22
Standard episodes	3	5	8
Nuanced episodes (exhibit indirectness and/or avoidance)	13	4	17

Table 2. Analysis of Indirectness and Avoidance by Gossip Episode

<u>Gossip Episode</u>	<u>Mode of Indirectness</u>	<u>Mode of Avoidance</u>
Episode 1	Implied evaluation via juxtaposition (Turn 5)	
Episode 2		Preemptive positive evaluation (Turns 7-9) Partial challenge (Turn 10) Switch to another target (Turn 12)
Episode 3		Switch to another target (Turn 12) Switch to another topic (and target) (Turn 20)
Episode 4	Sarcasm to implicitly evaluate (Turn 20) Request for clarification indirectly expands evaluation (Turn 22) Sarcasm to implicitly challenge (Turn 25)	Preemptive topic change (Turn 18)  Forcing directness (Turn 26) Withdrawal (Turn 27)

Table 3. Observed Modes of Indirectness and Avoidance

<u>Indirectness</u>	<u>Avoidance</u>
-Implied evaluation via juxtaposition	-Preemptive positive evaluation
-Sarcasm to implicitly evaluate	-Partial challenge
-Request for clarification indirectly expands evaluation	-Switch to another target
	-Switch to another topic
-Sarcasm to implicitly challenge	-Preemptive topic change
	-Forcing directness
	-Withdrawal of challenge

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<sup>1</sup> “Costen” (grades K-8) is located in a large city. All names and identifying references have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that meeting participants did not hesitate to make critical comments about others during taped interviews. We do not include these in our examination of gossip because they were not naturally occurring and were not between the school personnel. However, teachers’ willingness to make such statements in Hallett’s presence supports our contention that his presence did not inhibit evaluative talk.

<sup>3</sup> Because the turn-by-turn analysis we provide is dependent on video data, we are unable to analyze gossip interactions that took place outside of videotaped meetings.

<sup>4</sup> Such circumstances may not be typical, but they are not unusual in workplace settings. Since teachers often made direct and strongly negative evaluations of administrators during interviews, we believe that the indirectness and avoidance prevalent in the gossip had more to do with Anastasia’s presence than Hallett’s.

<sup>5</sup> Teachers are indicated by first names, administrators by last.

<sup>6</sup> The microphone was too far away, but Hallett observed it and participants confirmed it later that day.

<sup>7</sup> This and other switches that we examine are part of a larger conversational phenomenon that Jefferson (1984) calls “pivots” in which a turn connects to another turn but makes talk about other things relevant.

<sup>8</sup> Not only is Anastasia put in the ironic position of identifying the person she represents as a target for gossip, she is also put in a position where she contributes to the evaluation. This quandary reflects the agreement preference of conversational turn shapes (Pomerantz 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Kox was present for six episodes of teacher gossip and participated in four. Carrol was present for one but did not participate.