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# Evolutionary Perspectives on Workplace Gossip: Why and How Gossip Can Serve Groups

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Kevin M. Kniffin<sup>1</sup> and  
David Sloan Wilson<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Gossip in the workplace has generally been ignored by researchers and often criticized by practitioners. The authors apply a transdisciplinary evolutionary approach to argue that gossip is a natural part of social organizations and that certain conditions can encourage socially-redeeming gossip. They draw on case studies involving cattle ranchers, members of a competitive rowing team, and airline company employees to juxtapose the nature and functions of gossip across a wide set of communities. They find that workplace gossip can serve positive functions when organizational rewards—measured in context-specific currencies—are fairly allocated at the level of small-scale groups rather than the level of individuals within groups. Given the diversity of their case studies, the authors are able to identify financial and nonfinancial rewards that facilitate group-serving gossip in different environments. Their findings make sense in light of an evolutionary perspective that recognizes similarities between the range of environments in which humans have primarily evolved and the workplace conditions that invite socially-redeeming gossip.

## Keywords

gossip, multilevel, evolution, transdisciplinary

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<sup>1</sup>University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI, USA

<sup>2</sup>Binghamton University (SUNY), Binghamton, NY, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Kevin M. Kniffin, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin–Madison,  
1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706, USA  
Email: [kkniffin@wisc.edu](mailto:kkniffin@wisc.edu)

Gossip in organizations can serve a variety of functions. In some cases, people gossip for the sake of personal gain without regard to organizational impact. In other cases, people gossip for the sake of organizational development without regard to individual risk. In any case, however, it is valuable for the management of contemporary organizations to understand the multiple reasons that account for gossip as well as its varied effects.

This article explores the relationship between workplace gossip and organizational reward structures—measured in context-specific currencies—by integrating three perspectives. First, it is clear that multilevel analyses are necessary because people can serve individual- and group-level interests when they gossip. Multilevel analyses have become commonplace for management researchers studying a range of topics relating to individuals and groups (e.g., Han & Williams, 2008); however, gossip has not traditionally been a topic of management research for reasons that are discussed below.

Second, the pervasiveness of gossip across different types of organizations demands a cross-disciplinary perspective for understanding the nature and impact of gossip. For example, research from fields such as management needs to be considered alongside findings from other fields including anthropology. One implication of this juxtaposition is that although financial rewards (e.g., money) commonly serve as the primary incentive in contemporary workplaces, we can recognize that nonfinancial rewards (e.g., neighborliness) are often the primary reward for contributions to life in other social organizations. Indeed, this kind of cross-disciplinary integration of contemporary workplaces with other social organizations yields a reference set whose breadth is powerful.

Finally, it is clear that an evolutionary analysis is important for understanding why gossip emerges, exists, and disappears. Although evolutionary analyses are assumed to be necessary for assessing the relevance of fossils and other artifacts from the distant past, a growing number of management researchers have incorporated the principles of evolutionary theory into their studies of behavior in organizations (e.g., Nicholson & White, 2006). When matched with the cross-disciplinary approach identified above, the depth of an evolutionary analysis for studying gossip in organizations offers additional explanatory power.

In the sections that follow, we begin with a short review of workplace gossip research and an elaboration of our multilevel evolutionary framework before considering previous research that has viewed gossip through an evolutionary lens. In this context, we apply our perspective to three case studies, each of which is drawn from across multiple disciplines. Our findings demonstrate that organizations that structure their rewards—in locally important currencies—at the level of groups can facilitate positive, group-serving aspects

of gossip while maintaining a reasonable and responsible guard against harmful, self-serving aspects of gossip. Our findings also demonstrate the value that a transdisciplinary evolutionary approach can provide for the study of gossip in contemporary organizations.

## Discipline-Specific Treatments of Gossip

Across disciplines, researchers have treated gossip very differently. Anthropologists, for example, have often featured descriptive studies of gossip in their ethnographic accounts of traditional societies. Indeed, Gluckman (1963) reflects the centrality of this approach when he famously describes gossip as a “duty” and “hallmark” for members of a community (p. 313). Consistent with this description, it is generally interpreted as a sign of successful participant–observation research if an anthropologist is able to report gossip from the communities they are studying. Conversely, if a field researcher is not privy to a community’s gossip, it is likely to be interpreted as a failed attempt at participation–observation research. In this perspective, gossip is assumed to be an inextricable part of any given community’s activity, and it is incumbent on outside researchers to get inside the organization if they are to gain a full understanding of how things work.

From other social sciences, the tradition among sociologists to conduct field studies of informal communication such as gossip shares a great deal in common with anthropological approaches. For example, Elias and Scotson (1994) describe a wide range of ways in which old and new neighborhoods in a community in the United Kingdom relate to each other. With regard to gossip, their comparison yields an interesting result: that gossip is an integral part of the older, more cohesive neighborhood while “it had no integrating effect that one could notice in the less well-integrated neighbourhood” (p. 100). As discussed further by Soeters and van Iterson (2002), Elias and Scotson (1994) also find that members of the cohesive neighborhood use praise-gossip to enrich their own local pride and blame-gossip to derogate outsiders. Subsequent sociological studies of gossip tend to reinforce the notion that “gossip provides for a quick entrée into the structure and social relations of a community” (Fine, 1986, p. 407).

Social psychologists who have studied gossip have tended to rely on a broader range of research methods that tend to be less naturalistic and more experimental than anthropological or sociological studies. A common feature of the methods employed by social psychologists is that their unit of analysis tends to be the individual. For example, even in the relatively exceptional case where naturalistic conversations can be electronically and automatically

recorded, there are still significant limitations on what the researchers can know about the social context of their subjects' discussions.

Among management researchers, gossip in the workplace has historically not received much systematic or explicit attention from researchers (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). In fact, although there is a tradition of studying "informal communication" within formal organizations (e.g., Roberts & O'Reilly, 1978), Waddington (2005) reviews the work of organizational researchers and concludes that "the enduring theme is one of gossip as an almost co-incidental finding in the investigation of 'something else'" (p. 222). As a result of this pattern, management researchers have applied an inconsistent set of definitions when studying gossip and other kinds of informal communication.

Beyond acknowledging that gossip has been neglected as a research topic for management researchers, there would seem to be at least two primary reasons why researchers from across the social sciences and management treat gossip so differently. First, it can be challenging and risky to study gossip in the context within which it occurs because participant-observation research requires significant investments of a researcher's time and energy. Second, there is clearly a tradition among management researchers to assume that gossip lacks socially-redeeming purposes, and consequently, its analysis would not seem to contribute to an understanding of how to make improvements within an organization.

In addition to methodological challenges and the different connotations that are ascribed to gossip across the disciplines, the varied definitions that researchers apply to the behavior also likely explains why management researchers have not traditionally invested much analytical interest. Indeed, although there might be fewer common definitions for gossip than the hundreds of ways that anthropologists have attempted to define the foundational topic of culture (e.g., Gatewood, 2000, 2001), the fact remains that gossip is not a type of behavior whose existence we can recognize as neatly as rocks, trees, or automobiles. Among some of the more common definitions of gossip (e.g., Elias & Scotson, 1994), for example, the subjects of informal communication can include the activities of one's neighbors just as much as the affairs of celebrities such as film stars. If one were to commit to this definition of gossip, it becomes relatively easy to understand why most management researchers would find the topic to be relatively frivolous or irrelevant for workplace studies.

In this article, we build on Kniffin and Wilson's (2005) application of a modified version of Kurland and Pelled's (2000) definition of gossip as "informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization" (p. 429) who is or is not present. We offer our modification of Kurland and Pelled's definition

because gossip about Person X is sometimes accidentally communicated within earshot of Person X, and it is our experience as field researchers that it is not always possible to control for whether or not Person X is within earshot.

More conceptually, we offer our definition because much of the impact of gossip requires that Person X eventually learns about the gossip and it consequently seems less important whether or not Person X hears—or accidentally overhears—the gossip directly. Independent of our inclusion of covert and overt personal talk as part of the definition that we advance, it is worth highlighting that this definition (a) includes positive and negative personal talk and (b) does not include conversation about celebrities whose lives are outside of the personal networks of most people's organizations. This definition has the advantage of minimizing "noise" about strangers. The three case studies described below rely on the same definitional principles that have been outlined in this section.

## **Evolutionary Psychology and Management Research**

In the same way that traditional social scientists and management researchers tend to differ in their recognition of gossip, they also tend to study different groups of people. Anthropologists and sociologists, for example, tend to describe the happenings of life within given communities, whereas management researchers tend to consider prescriptions relating to the productivity and profitability of people in their roles as employers and employees. Among groups of people living today, a cross-disciplinary approach that incorporates the traditional social sciences and management research offers a broad reference set for comparing individual behavior within organizations. In fact, if one expands such a reference set further to include our understanding of groups of people who lived throughout human history and prehistory, then the challenge and power of an explanatory framework that makes sense of such a broad and deep reference set is greater still.

Evolutionary social science relies on the central assumption that humans are equipped through the processes of natural selection—over the course of hundreds of generations—with a set of preferences and needs that are not acknowledged by the notion that people individually learn all of their preferences and needs through learning and nurturing (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). In this vein, evolutionary social scientists accept the principles of evolutionary biology, which have traditionally been used for understanding the evolution of physical traits, to offer an explanatory framework for human psychology and behavior. Specifically, evolutionary social scientists have applied these principles to study behavioral topics as diverse as homicide (Daly & Wilson,

1988), mate choice (e.g., Miller, 2000), and the variable success of religious organizations (Wilson, 2002).

Among management researchers, a growing number of books and papers have developed and applied evolutionary perspectives to contemporary organizational behavior (e.g., Markóczy & Goldberg, 1998; Nicholson, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2008; Nicholson & White, 2006; Pierce & White, 1999). Specific managerial topics that have been considered through evolutionary perspectives have included leadership (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008), personnel selection (Luxen & Van De Vijver, 2006), and compensation systems (Kniffin, 2009). Nevertheless, as management researchers have developed greater interest in evolutionary social science, there has also been an increase in critical attention paid to the approach (e.g., Sewell, 2004a, 2004b; Usher, 1999).

Criticisms of evolutionary social science can be categorized in a number of ways. Most generally, we can identify a set of philosophy-driven criticisms through which authors have resisted systematic investigation of artificial categories such as leadership (e.g., Sewell, 2004a, 2004b). Although this set of criticisms can be applied to varying degrees to all scientific endeavors, some critics have charged evolutionists with ironically constructing their own non-blank “slates” while they simultaneously “profess to detest” (Hacking, 1999, p. 43) such social constructions. Likewise, there are challenges to evolutionary social science for offering naturalized justifications for the *status quo* that are deterministic and, consequently, not exposed to challenge. Writing about leadership, for example, Sewell (2004b) observes that if one were to presume a genetic basis for leadership then “It should come as no surprise that leaders are lionized as heroes; they have a genetic advantage over everyone else!” (p. 933). Additionally, there are criticisms that question the necessity of evolutionary analyses on the grounds that they offer merely plausible explanations that are not falsifiable. And, last, there are demands that evolutionary social science must demonstrate that its topics of study are “the outcomes of the same kinds of genetic processes that lead us to inherit eye colour or diseases like muscular dystrophy” (Sewell, 2004b, p. 932).

Although the scientific process relies on the exchange of criticisms for the development of accurate and useful insights and there are certainly cases in which evolutionary social science has been misapplied to subjects (e.g., Gould, 1981), our application of an evolutionary perspective to the topic of workplace gossip generates falsifiable hypotheses that carry the potential of integrating a uniquely broad and deep reference set. Furthermore, we do not presume that workplace gossip is universally good or bad; instead, our interest is to explore its relationship with organizational reward structures. Last, we do not presume

that there is a genetic or physiological basis for the evolution of workplace gossip *per se*; instead, we build on a robust tradition of evolutionary social scientists who have sought to understand the “dual inheritance” of biological and sociocultural traits over time (e.g., Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Durham, 1991). This acknowledgment that eye color, for example, has evolved according to different specific processes than, say, people’s belief in a monotheistic religion is not a failure of explanation; rather, it acknowledges that culture is a product of human evolution whose specifics (e.g., monotheistic religions) we should expect to be governed by the same principles. This tradition of applying evolutionary principles to biological and cultural traits has its origins with Campbell’s (1960) pithy recognition that “blind variation and selective retention” succinctly summarizes the process of evolution according to selective processes, independently of whether the processes apply to ants, bees, or human business organizations (Campbell, 1994).

## **A Multilevel Selectionist Framework**

One of the mistakes that critics of evolutionary psychology sometimes make is to assume that there is only one evolutionary explanation for any given trait. Part of this might be a result of the way that evolutionary social science is often pigeonholed as evolutionary psychology. Another reason, however, why critics sometimes assume that they are criticizing “the” evolutionary perspective is because they are unaware of the variety of views that are held among evolutionists.

In this article, we apply the evolutionary framework of multilevel selection theory (Sober & Wilson, 1998; Wilson, 2002) to the subject of workplace gossip. Most generally, multilevel selection theory incorporates the diverse views of selfish gene theory and group selection theory to permit the recognition of evolution by selective pressures on multiple levels, depending on relevant and specific environmental conditions. This framework avoids exclusive commitments to either the reductionist approach of selfish gene theory or the holistic lens of group selection theory and, instead, demands sensitivity to context. In particular, multilevel selection theory directs researchers to assess which levels of organization demonstrate phenotypic uniformity and shared fate before testing for the impact of selective pressures. In this framework, it is plausible to find groups of individuals who are not phenotypically uniform and do not share fates—in which case, we would expect selection at the level of individuals. It is equally plausible, however, to find groups of individuals who are phenotypically uniform and do share fates—in which case, we would expect selection at the level of groups. Finally,



it is just as plausible to find groups that share a mix of these characteristics—in which case, we would expect selective pressures at more than one level simultaneously.

The theoretical pluralism of multilevel selection theory is consistent with a prediction that multiple levels of selection will yield multiple kinds of phenotypes across different contexts. For example, in environments where selection occurs at the level of groups, we would expect to see people pursuing cooperative strategies with each other. Similarly, in environments where selection occurs at the level of individuals, we would expect to see people pursuing individualist strategies in competition with each other. Finally, in environments where selection occurs at both the individual and group levels, we would expect to see people pursuing a mix of individualist and cooperative strategies with each other.

The origins of multilevel selection theory date back to Darwin, who wrote that:

There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who . . . were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection (1871, p. 166, as cited in Sober & Wilson, 1998, p. 4).

Here, Darwin outlines a process through which group traditions can emerge that ratchet the level of selection upward from individuals to groups. More specifically, as it becomes a practice for individuals within Darwin's tribe to ready themselves for sacrifice for the common good, the group simultaneously approaches the conditions of within-group phenotypic uniformity and shared fate that multilevel selection theory identifies as key points of analysis.

Darwin's description of group-level selection can theoretically be applied to any number of specific traits. For example, one could similarly state that "a tribe including many members who can communicate most effectively with each other would be victorious over most other tribes." Although this might seem obvious, the facts are that people within groups do not necessarily communicate well with each other, and groups do not always comprise people committed to shared fates. For these reasons, empirical applications of multilevel selection theory—and any evolutionary framework for understanding contemporary behavior—are necessary.

In our three case studies, we intentionally chose a variety of examples that test the multilevel selectionist hypothesis that the existence of group-level organizational rewards—measured in local currencies that vary according to

context—can facilitate the emergence of group-beneficial gossip. Within the framework that we describe above, our hypothesis presumes that the presence of group-level rewards will effectively entail an alignment of individuals to perceive shared fates and to accept phenotypic uniformity within their groups. Furthermore, our hypothesis presumes that group-beneficial gossip will correlate with the presence of these environmental conditions as a mechanism through which individuals can contribute to their common goals.

## **Evolutionary Analyses of Gossip**

Returning to the specific topic of workplace gossip, we should recognize that we are focused on a kind of gossip that comprises a subset of language use. In his extensive studies of the evolution of language, Dunbar (1996) has compared gossip among humans with grooming among smaller communities of nonhuman primates. In fact, Dunbar (1993) credits gossip, which he broadly defines to be conversation about social relationships, as a central mechanism that permits human groups to expand beyond the limits that physical grooming among group members entail. Through his cross-species comparison with the nearest human relatives (i.e., nonhuman primates), Dunbar pinpoints language as the tool that allows people to “groom” groups of others in contrast with nonhuman primates whose finite number of hands constrains the number of people they can groom at any given moment. In Dunbar’s view, it is interesting to think of workplace gossip as a form of figurative grooming among coworkers. Indeed, it gives new meaning to the idea of senior workers at a firm “grooming” their protégés for eventual succession!

Evolutionary social scientists have studied the typical content of gossip, the relevance of social context, and the importance of individual- and group-serving interests (De Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, & McAndrew, 2007; Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2000). Although these studies have relied on a diversity of methods and specific evolutionary frameworks, they have shared a transdisciplinary assumption in which anthropological studies of gossip among people who live in small-scale, subsistence-based societies have relevance for people who work in contemporary business organizations. The studies have also shared an assumption that evolutionary selective pressures can influence contemporary behavior.

We now turn to present three case studies to illustrate different aspects of the utility of an evolutionary framework for understanding and managing gossip in contemporary workplaces. In the first example, we describe the

social function of gossip in a community that is far removed from the office and factory environments that are the subjects of traditional management research. In the second study, we review gossip among members of a competitive rowing team to demonstrate the ways in which self- and group-serving gossip are likely to work. Finally, in the third example of an airline company's airport operations, we build on our earlier reviews and break down discipline-specific jargon that is partly responsible for the disjointed ways in which gossip has been previously studied by management researchers. Our case studies focus on field studies of gossip rather than responses to fictional scenarios because *in situ* research appears to carry more direct implications for management researchers and practitioners. Notably, two of the case studies were not conducted by evolutionary social scientists; however, all three studies nonetheless illustrate ways that multilevel evolutionary pressures can impact gossip within groups.

## Gossip on the Frontier

One of the basic differences between the subjects of contemporary management research and anthropological fieldwork is that the modern workplace tends to be temporally, spatially, and socially segregated from employees' "personal" lives, whereas anthropologists traditionally have studied smaller scale communities where the difference between "work" and "life" is much more fuzzy (Sahlins, 1972). Another difference is that in most contemporary workplaces, rules are formalized in employee handbooks, codes of conduct, and contracts, whereas people who are part of more traditional and historical (e.g., outdoor) work environments tend to create and enforce informal norms to minimize conflict and enhance efficiency. Although we will discuss the relevance of formal workplace rules concerning gossip later, this section reviews a case of informal norms that use gossip.

As described by Ellickson (1991), cattle ranchers in rural Northwestern California (Shasta County) need to be careful that others' cattle stay away from their own herds. Implicitly, the same ranchers need to take similar care so that their cattle do not offend other ranchers' boundaries. Among the ill effects that can be created by trespassing cattle, ranchers fear damage to their land, properties, herds, and reputations. Although laws are intended to prevent and punish such offenses in other environments, Ellickson reports that "legal rules hardly ever influence the settlement of cattle-trespass disputes" in the community he studied (p. 40). In fact, Ellickson is clear that the ranchers were generally ignorant of the formal laws that governed the disputes that they periodically encountered.

In this kind of environment, where “law enforcement” specialists are not likely to be nearby, ranchers typically seek direct resolution of disputes rather than appealing to third-party authorities. The simplest disputes arise when Rancher X’s herd trespasses on Rancher Y’s property, prompting a phone call from Rancher Y to Rancher X, and quick remedial action by Rancher X to avoid further offense. When that two-way communication is not effective, the first step of retaliation against a negligent rancher is truthful negative gossip, which usually results in remedial action such as retrieving cattle that strayed and repairing any damage that they caused as part of a resolved dispute. As an illustration of the apparent pride that ranchers have in this system of informally resolving disputes, Friedman (2000) highlights Ellickson’s (1991) findings when he notes that “one of the strongest norms is that neighbors don’t sue neighbors” (p. 276). Friedman (2000) adds that “anyone who goes to court to enforce his rights automatically loses his case in the court that matters most, the court of local public opinion” (p. 276).

Of course, students of gossip in other environments know that this kind of talk about others does not necessarily function well. Ellickson’s (1991) findings, however, suggest that when offended parties resort to truthful negative gossip about a deviant other in an environment where “neighborliness” is commonly prized, the offended party typically gains prompt remedy, including an apology. In other words, if a person’s “work” and “personal” lives are intertwined as part of a relatively egalitarian community, then infractions against group norms are often avoided or minimized because people fear the prospect of being the subject of negative reporting. Consequently, gossip in these types of environments can be an important tool that can contribute to the social management of individual behavior.

Although Ellickson (1991) does not offer quantified measurements of gossip within the community of ranchers, he does report that one of the veteran residents who had previously lived near one of California’s big cities found that people in the ranching community “gossip all the time, much more than in the urban area” (p. 57). With his background in legal research, Ellickson attempted to gain an insider understanding of the ranching community through a review of court records and other government documents as well as 73 interviews that he initiated with local leaders and residents. Ellickson’s description of his methods suggests that he was able to gain insider knowledge of the community’s interactions partly by way of favorable introduction from respected and familiar leaders.

The limitations of Ellickson’s (1991) methods include the usual problem of ethnographic research in that there is only one person rating—or narrating—the subjects of the research. More critically, Conley (1994) argues that

Ellickson's (1991) analysis fails to recognize the role that formal legal processes provide as a "backstop" for misbehavior that is unchecked by informal means. Conley (1994) argues that it oversells the role of informal dispute resolution to neglect the underlying threat of formal resolution. Although Conley's argument is sensible, our analysis of gossip should recognize that the ranchers do have a number of backup means of informal resolution if truthful negative gossip does not suffice. Regardless of the importance of this criticism, Conley does not address the question of why the norms of informal dispute resolution (e.g., gossip) apparently exist among the cattle ranchers.

Through the lens of our hypothesis that group-level organizational rewards will correlate with the presence of group-serving gossip, we find supporting evidence that community members are rewarded for their efforts because the community needs to employ fewer third-party law enforcement officers, judges, and brokers. In fact, the main thesis of Ellickson's (1991) analysis is that the community's reliance on informal means of social control results in the maximization of their collective welfare through the minimization of transaction costs that are associated with the formal adjudication of disputes.

From the case, it is clear that if there were not group-level rewards created by their reliance on group-serving gossip, then we would expect that they would—like members of other communities—simply call third-party law enforcement officers at the first sight of any trespassing by their neighbors. Our hypothesis does not presume that the relationship between group-serving rewards and group-serving gossip is causal in either direction; instead, as illustrated by the cattle ranchers, our hypothesis predicts what appears to be a significant correlation between the way in which the community benefits from their self-reliance and the way in which they use gossip toward that common end.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Ellickson's (1991) description of gossip as a means of informal social control is succinct, it has nonetheless become a touchstone for legal scholars arguing a wide range of positions with regard to the relationship between formal laws and informal norms. For example, Raskolnikov (2007) highlights the fact that informal means of resolving disputes (e.g., compensating someone with cattle) creates the consequence of avoiding taxes because the exchange of goods and services tends to be subject to tax by various levels of government. Although Raskolnikov presents his analysis as an example of the negative effects of informal business practices with regard to tax fairness, his analysis inadvertently highlights an additional reward that is gained by the Shasta County ranchers' reliance on informal dispute resolution.

In a similar kind of debate, Walton (1999) challenges Ellickson (1991) for failing to consider that the cattle ranchers of his study—like ranchers elsewhere—are arguably reaping short-term benefits at the long-term expense of broader communities of people because of the environmental degradation caused by intensive cattle grazing. As with Raskolnikov's (2007) charge about *de facto* tax avoidance, Walton's (1999) argument inadvertently highlights two additional aspects of our multilevel selectionist prediction that the presence of group-level organizational rewards will correlate with the presence of group-serving gossip. First, just as a multilevel selectionist perspective demands a recognition of different interests held by individuals and groups, an equal recognition needs to be made that meta-groups such as states and nations will tend to hold different interests than smaller-scale groups. In the case of the Shasta County cattle ranchers, it is clear the current state and national regulatory framework that supports the cattle grazing industry provides an environment in which the community of ranchers in Shasta County are able to cooperate toward goals that they share. This occurs with the assistance of group-serving gossip as a means of informal social control—independent of any long-term consequences that might emerge in their physical environment and independent of any public policy changes that might eventually restructure their working lives.

The second aspect of a multilevel selectionist perspective on gossip in organizations that is highlighted by Walton (1999) and Raskolnikov (2007) is that the public policy debates that they raise are certainly appropriate. Nevertheless, prescriptions for public policy are not necessarily relevant to descriptions of the patterns that we would expect according to evolutionary perspectives. For example, multilevel selection theory predicts that just as cooperation can be ratcheted upward from the level of the individual to various kinds of groups, the same can be predicted for competition.

## Rowing for the Good of the Crew

In a more recent study of a task-specific social network that is relatively segmented from the broader social communities upon which it draws, Kniffin and Wilson (2005) applied the methods of participant-observation research as part of a competitive university rowing team. The first author gained an insider understanding of the rowing team by participating in regular early-morning practices, physically intense workouts, and time-intensive traveling for events. Through these commitments, Kniffin and Wilson (2005) were able to contextualize their findings as part of a social community whose goals were clearly observable.

Kniffin and Wilson's (2005) rowing team study took place over the course of three semesters during which changes in the organization presented a natural experiment. Specifically, during one of the semesters, part of the team suffered from the participation of a social loafer whose relatively inferior commitment to the squad impeded the rest of the group's success. Although this kind of dynamic can exist in most work environments, the impact of a loafer is particularly problematic on a rowing team where literal coordination is heavily prized.

With this backdrop, Kniffin and Wilson (2005) report that rowers gossiped at a significantly higher rate when confronted with the problem of a loafer than during the other semesters when the talk centered on neutral subjects such as popular music and movies. Moreover, the increase in gossip included both negative gossip about the loafer and positive gossip about the hardworking members of the group. This finding about positive gossip is especially interesting because it refutes speculation that people only respond to norm violations by punishing offenders and ignoring those who behave properly. In light of these findings, it makes sense that members of an organization would spend time reinforcing positive group-serving norms when threatened by the behavior of someone violating those same norms. In this respect, team members used gossip to enforce and maintain group-serving norms simultaneously.

Examples of the negative gossip that team members used against the free-riding loafer included the charges that he was "not pulling his weight," that he "just doesn't have the crew mentality," and "I don't understand how he accomplishes anything in life" (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, p. 286). Examples of positive gossip generally acknowledged the sacrifices made for the crew by volunteer coaches and team leaders. Lest anyone wonder about the consequences of this gossip (Merry, 1984), the loafer left the squad after one semester of loafing, and Kniffin and Wilson (2004) report that team members who were familiar with the loafer rated him as significantly less physically attractive than strangers who were unfamiliar with his behavior. Indeed, Kniffin and Wilson (2004) specify that team members' ratings of physical attractiveness were based significantly on the degree of respect, liking, and appreciation for talent that they had for each of their teammates. This notion that one's contribution to group goals can affect one's attractiveness—and reproductive fitness—is outside of the scope of this article. However, it is clear that gossip has the potential to carry short- and long-term consequences for members of an organization.

The reason why rowing teams are especially interesting for an evolutionary study of gossip is that the group's goals are clearly paramount. Traditional

rowing competitions do not even offer the opportunity for individual members of a crew to distinguish themselves in comparison with fellow boatmates. Our study of rowing teams also presents us with a case in which the structure of the activity defines the primary set of rewards—as measured by successful participation by the crew in intercollegiate competitions—at the level of groups. Consequently, our hypothesis that group-level organizational rewards will correlate with group-serving gossip is supported in this case given that (a) the rewards for crew performance are exclusively allocated to the level of groups—as measured by performance in competitive races—and (b) the non-random patterns of gossip found among the rowers clearly serves group-level interests. Indeed, if we found that the rowers had engaged in gossip that was primarily self-serving, then we would have falsified our hypothesis.

In contrast with other evolutionary field studies of gossip, the context and methods of the rowing team study account for many of the apparent differences. For example, in studies of gossip about strangers (e.g., celebrities) who are not part of their subjects' personal networks, evolutionists (De Backer et al., 2007; McAndrew et al., 2007) find that people will tend to use stories about others to advance individual or self-serving interests. This observation is coherent in the context of a multilevel evolutionary framework that recognizes that environmental conditions can variably impact the function(s) of gossip. Indeed, the pluralism of a multilevel framework accepts that gossip can be used for self- and group-serving purposes.

In a different study of gossip in public places conducted by evolutionists, Dunbar et al. (1997) conclude that only a small percentage of informal conversation is focused on negative gossip. This finding is also coherent in light of the fact that the individuals on whom they eavesdropped in public places (e.g., trains, bars, and cafeterias) do not necessarily share fates in the same way as members of a rowing team or ranching community.

## **Gossip That Is Not Called Gossip**

In contrast with the pastoral environment of cattle ranchers and the highly structured environment of intercollegiate rowing teams, it is valuable to juxtapose a third, more common set of environments in which people actively manage contemporary workplaces. In this pursuit, the kind of transdisciplinary approach that evolutionary studies promote (see Wilson, 2007) helps us to recognize that there are management researchers who appear to study gossip without uttering the word. Although we discussed reasons for the relative neglect of gossip within the field of management earlier, it also appears to be true that the pervasiveness of gossip within organizations has



manifested itself through discipline-specific jargon among management researchers and practitioners. In this section, we highlight this pattern through a case study of airline employees in which gossip appears to be centrally important even if it is not acknowledged as such.

Drawing on their study of airport units for a major multinational airline, Knez and Simester (2001) find that the repartitioning of rewards (i.e., bonuses) to the level of ground units significantly improved on-time performance because coworkers took more responsibility for each other's actions when their salaries depended more heavily on teamwork. To compare this repartitioning of rewards to the rowing team study, one can recognize that the allocation of bonuses based on team-level performance helped to bind together the fate of people belonging to specific ground units. With this newly shared fate, employees reportedly engaged in "mutual monitoring" to help ensure that their collective performance improved.

Like Ellickson's (1991) review of the ranching community, Knez and Simester (2001) do not present a quantified review of conversation within various groups of airport employees. Instead, like Ellickson (1991), they base their findings about workplace gossip on a range of individual and group interviews, in this case with airport employees, supervisors, and corporate managers. This context-sensitive approach to studying gossip—even without quantitative measurements—would seem to have more relevance to understanding life and work inside organizations than quantitative studies of gossip that are drawn from eavesdropping on strangers talking in public places.

Through their research, Knez and Simester (2001) report that airport employees identified the group-level bonus structure as an important reason for newfound team activity that included stories of employee-driven meetings and employee-initiated phone calls to team members who reported illness. The purpose of such calls was to offer assistance and to validate that the person was ill. With regard to workplace gossip, Knez and Simester describe airport employees who engaged in "negative sanctioning" of those who impeded the group's on-time performance. For example, they describe employees pulling others out of break rooms and "employees being chastised [by coworkers] for leaving their stations" (p. 767) within the crew. In the case of airline pilots who were causing delays in on-time performance, Knez and Simester describe direct confrontations that airport employees initiated with the pilots as well as indirect withholding of cooperation (e.g., not providing recommendations for activities outside the airport).

Interestingly, Knez and Simester's (2001) original article mentions gossip only once, and in a footnote. The concept of mutual monitoring, however,

begs a closer comparison with the ways in which gossip has been studied by researchers trained in other disciplines such as those described in the previous two case studies. At face value, it is clear that mutual monitoring must entail more than simply passive observation because it would otherwise likely have no effect. This kind of exclusively passive mutual monitoring would be akin to watching a tree fall in the forest and not telling anyone about it even if your income depended on the tree's success.

Knez and Simester (2002) acknowledge that mutual monitoring entails more than passive observation. Instead, they define the practice as one where "employees check up on one another and prod one another along" (p. 17). They also recognize that mutual monitoring entails a commitment of team members to "keep their members in line" (p. 17). As part of a different management study focused on similar subjects, Stark, Shaw, and Duffy (2007) define mutual monitoring as a practice "when team members evaluate one another's behavior" (p. 704). Similarly, Welbourne and Ferrante (2008) discuss "peer monitoring" and "advisory monitoring," which they operationalize to include variables such as letting people know if they are doing a poor job and speaking positively in the workplace if someone is doing a good job. When one compares these definitions of mutual monitoring or advisory monitoring by workplace peers with the definition of gossip presented in this article, it is clear that gossip is a part of contemporary management research even if it tends to be obscured by discipline-specific jargon that we expect is a response to gossip's negative reputation.

In a welcome departure from the way in which gossip has traditionally been ignored as a mechanism of various kinds of monitoring among coworkers, Loughry and Tosi (2008) acknowledge that gossip can be an important dimension of worker performance in their study of the impact of peer monitoring on individual performance. Although they find that gossip does not improve the productivity of employees in their sample of employees at a large amusement park in the United States, that should not be surprising in light of a multilevel selectionist analysis because the compensation structure at the theme park is standardized across individuals—"just above minimum wage" (p. 879)—and not affected by any team- or group-level performance measures.

To paraphrase Darwin, we might say that "there can be no doubt that an airline company including many members who were working together with each other to win group-level bonuses would be victorious over most other airlines; and this would be natural selection." Through the perspective of multilevel selection theory, the group-level selective pressures that are created through the bonus structure help foster workplace gossip that serves group-level interests. If, on the other hand, there were no group-level bonuses and

the firm compensated individuals solely on the basis of some measure of individual performance, then individual-level selective pressures would dominate the employees, and we would expect to see competition within groups, which we further expect would be less productive given that the nature of their work requires cooperation.

More specifically, when one views the airline employees' case in the context of our hypothesis that group-level organizational rewards will correlate with group-serving gossip, it is clear that the introduction of group-level rewards through the bonus program entailed the emergence of group-serving gossip. In other words, this case study also supports our hypothesis; however, like the other two cases, it provides a unique set of lessons. Namely, this is the one case where the rules of the game are artificially changed in a way that the rewards structure within the employment environment is modified so that a nontrivial aspect of employees' compensation was repartitioned from the individual to the group level. Furthermore, although our review is not designed to consider causal relationships between reward structures and gossip, this case suggests that a modification in the structure of rewards can cause a modification in the relevance of gossip in the workplace.

## Implications for Management Practice

Although the case studies that we have described offer a view of gossip that can serve socially-redeeming functions, we also acknowledge that gossip could be an agent of workplace harassment and bullying. Similarly, we acknowledge that gossip can be an effective tool—especially for those with power—to unfairly ruin others' reputations. On a more mildly negative scale, we recognize that gossip can distract employees from important tasks and undermine firm performance (Campbell, 1994). We expect that it is partly for practical and important reasons such as these that management researchers have avoided discussions about gossip, whereas some practitioners have tended to advocate bans on the activity.

In contrast with the view held by some that gossip is anathema in the workplace, our review demonstrates that management researchers and practitioners can afford to take a more open and nuanced view of workplace gossip. Beyond simply encouraging a new view, however, our multilevel evolutionary analysis suggests that there are specific mechanisms through which organizations might successfully leverage the value of workplace gossip for collective benefit.

As a first step, gossip needs—and deserves—to be recognized as a practice that is a natural part of social organizations that can serve

socially-redeeming purposes. Second, there is evidence consistent with the case studies that we identified that shows that repartitioning some element of employee rewards to the level of workplace units or teams can draw on workplace gossip to create collectively positive outcomes. For example, in their review of the relevance of monitoring among coworkers, Welbourne and Ferrante (2008) report a positive correlation between active monitoring among coworkers and employee performance when a portion of employee compensation is tied to group-level performance. In their analysis, they conclude that one reason for this finding is that repartitioning compensation systems to reward group-level performance—known by phrases such as “gainsharing”—helps “align the interests and goals of workers with those of owners, and joint actions are needed to obtain a gainsharing bonus” (p. 145).

Although our multilevel evolutionary perspective predicts that mutual monitoring can produce positive functions, two complications warrant attention. First, as Welbourne and Ferrante (2008) observe, the effectiveness of repartitioning rewards on the basis of group-level performance is affected by whether the structure of group rewards is perceived as fair. Similarly, Knez and Simester (2002) emphasize that if the benefits of mutual monitoring are going to be gained, then it is vital that rewards are based on the performance of relatively small-scale face-to-face groups of coworkers. In fact, Knez and Simester credit this kind of detail for the success of the airline company they describe in the case study identified in this article.

To juxtapose these variables with the rowing team and ranching community, the complications help elucidate the reasons why gossip served positive group-level functions in each illustration. For example, it is clear that questions of fairness are built—by decades of development—into the rules and traditions that govern rewards and punishment for the rowers and ranchers. Rowers inherit the focus on group-level results as a part of the norms of their sport, and ranchers need to deal with the practical reality of maintaining their land, herds, and properties while balancing their respect for others’ boundaries. With regard to the size and nature of communities where mutual monitoring can be effective, rowing teams—with units of five or nine people in most boats—fit nicely with the kind of small-scale unit that Knez and Simester recommend. For the ranchers that Ellickson (1991) studied, it seems reasonable to speculate that mutual monitoring is effective because the stability of their community counterbalances the smaller but relatively more transient networks found among rowers and most workplace units.

In each of the cases described in the article, we find that gossip is adaptive for members of the group as well as the groups themselves given conditions that select for group-serving behavior. Likewise, our analysis of each case

recognizes the different outcomes that we would expect if the groups' conditions selected for self-serving behavior. To consider the case that included a systematic quantified study of gossip, Kniffin & Wilson (2005) do not find evidence of self-serving gossip and, in fact, it is clear from their review of the sport that behavior that did not serve group-level interests would be not be tolerated within the crew. In the cattle ranchers example, gossip is adaptive for resolving disputes informally and would have little or no social function if people were to gossip for purely individual interests. Finally, in Knez & Simester's (2001, 2002) review, they are clear that mutual monitoring, which we compare with workplace gossip, emerged in response to a bonus structure that allocated rewards on the basis of group-level performance. Although Knez and Simester do not investigate the nature of any workplace gossip that might have existed before the group-level bonus structure was implemented, it is clear that gossip emerged within the work groups as an adaptive response to group-level selective pressures.

## Implications for Future Research

The corollary of our call for practitioners to embrace the possibility that workplace gossip can serve socially-redeeming purposes is that management researchers should pay closer and explicit attention to the topic. In addition to obvious challenges such as developing consistent definitions so that various concepts of coworker monitoring are clearly specified to include or exclude gossip, the evolutionary perspectives that we advocate also offer directions for future research. Here, we briefly identify three such directions.

First, our review of workplace gossip and group-level compensation systems leads to a hypothesis that gossip might be more pronounced—and less group-serving—in organizations whose reward structure is more tournament-like (i.e., winner-take-all, with steep gradients). In contrast, our analysis leads to speculation that gossip might be less pronounced in firms where the salary and status gradients are more level. Among the companies that might be most accessible for this kind of study, professional sports teams would seem like good candidates because (a) they are the topic of close, intimate study on a regular basis by professional reporters, (b) their salary information tends to be public, and (c) their individual- and group-level performance data also tend to be readily available. The multilevel selectionist framework that we develop would predict that gossip is more competitive within teams when the compensation gradient is steep and more cooperative within teams when the compensation gradient is more level.

Second, although our review focuses mainly on the role of selective pressures on the evolution of norms and social structures, we acknowledge that there might be evidence of biological differences among individuals with regard to how people use gossip in the workplace. For example, White, Thornhill, and Hampson (2007) test the hypothesis that the presence of biological hormones such as testosterone might be related to a person's proclivity toward being an entrepreneur. In the case of workplace gossip, we expect that people use gossip depending on their conditions, and, consequently, we would not expect a single biological marker to explain much. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing gossip research with measures of biological stress, researchers would be able to test the extent to which workplace gossip might relieve or exacerbate physical stress.

Last, evolutionary studies of gossip and other forms of dispute resolution often explore the "second-order" problem in which cooperators within groups tend to incur individual costs without accruing individual gains when they enforce group-serving norms vis-à-vis group members who might be less than cooperative. Evolutionary researchers have considered this dynamic and identified the categories of "altruistic punishment" (O'Gorman, Wilson, & Miller, 2005) and "selfish punishment" (Eldakar & Wilson, 2008) to explain situations in which the enforcement of norms within a group might be done either by altruistic or by selfish individuals, respectively. In the case studies reviewed above, the punishers who enforce the group's norms are not cheaters, and there does not tend to be a cost associated with the punishment, because individual and group rewards are aligned with each other. Although this is a more theoretical question relating to the evolution of gossip, future research should explore the relationship between different notions of punishment within groups and different sets of empirical data.

## **Conclusion**

A basic finding of our analysis is that even if some people might wish for the disappearance of workplace gossip, there appear to be good reasons to expect that gossip in the workplace is a central, evolved part of how people in organizations communicate with each other. Our approach builds on previous research to offer explanations for why gossip is more likely to serve individual or group interests in certain sets of environments. In fact, our examination of three diversely-situated case studies yielded evidence that supports the multilevel selectionist hypothesis that the existence of group-level organizational rewards—measured in local currencies that vary according to context—can facilitate the emergence of group-beneficial gossip. The transdisciplinary

approach employed helps draw out these reasons through the breadth of our reference set, which includes myriad kinds of organizations, and our commitment to cut across disciplinary boundaries.

Each of the case studies discussed contributes a unique aspect to understanding gossip in organizations. The study of cattle ranchers shows the function of gossip in a relatively small and egalitarian community where membership is stable and there is little distinction between “work” and “life.” The rowing team research considers the impact of gossip in a highly transient community whose rules are defined clearly to allocate rewards at the level of groups. Finally, the example of an airline company illustrates the way in which a firm can artificially modify its reward structure in a way that leverages the kind of socially-redeeming gossip that we described among the ranchers and rowers.

It is noteworthy that a common feature of each of the groups—whether it is the product of tradition or design—is that members of the community share common fates when rewards and costs are allocated at the level of groups. In the case of the airline employees, their bonuses depended on the performance of their coworkers. For the rowers, their performance in competitions hinged wholly on their coordination with their teammates. And for the ranchers, the reward of a relatively peaceful community was maintained through their traditional routes of informally resolving conflict. The currencies that members commonly prize in each of these communities are different—neighborliness and collective welfare for the ranchers, victory and pride drawn from performance in intercollegiate competitions for the rowers, and monetary bonuses for the airline employees—but they share a recognition of the benefits that cooperation can yield. It is also true that the ranching and rowing studies provide important complements to the airline study because we are able to show that people can and do cooperate toward nonpecuniary common goals through means that are comparable in more common workplace environments (e.g., airports).

In light of the evolutionary approach, we recognize that individual and organizational interests are aligned for the ranchers, rowers, and airline employees in ways that approximate the kind of shared fate that human groups appear to have shared throughout most of our species’ evolution (e.g., Boehm, 1996). Although the structure of rewards and costs among the ranchers and rowers was not the product of organizational managers, our evolutionary approach suggests that firms are able to draw upon natural proclivities to engage in group-serving gossip by “recreating the kinds of social environments in which we work best” (Dunbar, 1996, p. 207). The analysis yields the recommendation that management practitioners and researchers should

embrace—or admit, at least—that gossip in the workplace can be good if there is a structure of material and symbolic rewards that values community success in a way that employees consider to be fair and on a scale through which coworkers are able to mutually strive.

The “balanced” view of workplace gossip that we present is a product of the transdisciplinary approach that evolutionary social science promotes (Wilson, 2007). By drawing on studies conducted by management researchers, anthropologists, legal scholars, and others, our article creates value by juxtaposing nontraditional subjects alongside each other while generating recommendations for researchers and practitioners. Although our approach is rooted in the study of traditional communities, our review builds on a growing body of research (e.g., Nicholson & White, 2006) that aims to apply evolutionary social science to questions that people who research and manage contemporary business organizations regularly face.

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## Bios

**Kevin M. Kniffin** is an honorary fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research interests include cooperation within and among organizations.

**David Sloan Wilson** is an evolutionary biologist interested in a broad range of issues relevant to human behavior. He is a distinguished professor at the State University of New York (SUNY) in the Department of Biological Sciences and director of the evolutionary studies program at Binghamton University (SUNY).