

Gossip in the workplace: A weapon or gift

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Tim Hallett works at Indiana University. Credit: Indiana University

Gossip in the workplace can be a weapon in reputational warfare or a gift and can offer clues to power and influence not found on organizational charts. New research from Indiana University details how the weapon is wielded -- and its influence muted -- in a rare study that catches this national pastime on video.

The study, published in the October issue of the *"Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,"* identifies subtle ways that people who are targets of [gossip](#) are negatively evaluated during formal work meetings, including veiling criticism with sarcasm or talking up another colleague for comparison. It also discusses how efforts to embark on negative gossip can be effectively -- and again, subtly -- derailed, by changing the

subject, targeting someone else for criticism or by pre-emptive comments that are positive.

"When you're sitting in that business meeting, be attentive to when the talk drifts away from the official task at hand to people who aren't present," said Tim Hallett, assistant professor in IU Bloomington's Department of Sociology. "Be aware that what is going on is a form of politics and it's a form of politics that can be a weapon to undermine people who aren't present. But it also can be a gift. If people are talking positively it can be a way to enhance someone's reputation."

Hallett's study, which is co-authored by IU sociologist Donna Eder, a leading authority in gossip research, and Brent Harger, now a sociologist at Albright College, is based on a two-year ethnographic study of workplace politics at an urban elementary school. The school was undergoing an uncomfortable managerial transition as a new principal began her first full year. Relations with teachers had soured, and when the teachers were unsuccessful in their efforts to lodge complaints through official channels, they resorted to gossip.

The study initially was not intended to study gossip, but researchers soon saw that gossip was considered important to school staff and that teachers described what happened at meetings as "gossip."

Hallett observed meetings and classrooms, shadowed administrators and hung out in the teachers' lounge. In addition to interviewing teachers and administrators, he also videotaped 13 teacher-led meetings. The meetings all were considered formal, with the level of formality varying depending on whether administrators were present.

In these 13 meetings, which usually lasted 40 minutes, Hallett recorded 25 episodes of gossip that occurred during the business part of the meeting -- not in the chit-chat leading up to the meeting or after the

meeting adjourned. With the video, researchers were able to watch the power dynamics involved as the gossip unfolded, often with nuances that would be hard to record in mere field notes. Hallett said this record is important because scholars discuss the importance of understanding covert organizational politics but the research is hard to conduct empirically because of its covert nature.

The researchers found that gossip in a formal setting was both similar to and different from informal gossip. Both were almost always negative yet informal gossip was more direct than formal gossip. Once informal gossip begins, the negative evaluations typically continue with a negative tone but for a shorter duration than the formal gossip.

Gossip in a formal setting is more likely to involve veiled criticism and can be redirected from its negative path by nuanced efforts to change the subject or choose another target for criticism. Hallett says the nuances can be insightful to others in the room.

"If you're interested in learning how an organization works, you can look at the organizational chart, which can be useful," Hallett said. "But often people say, 'I still can't tell how things get done, who the prime movers are.' If you're attentive, you can see who has the informal status, which isn't on the formal charts. It can help you understand how work actually gets done."

More information: "Gossip at Work: Unsanctioned Evaluative Talk in Formal School Meetings," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(5) 584-618.

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