

## ABSTRACT

J. Walt Granecki. "DID YOU HEAR?" GOSSIP AS A MANIFESTATION OF TRAIT AGGRESSION. (Under the direction of Dr. Mark C. Bowler) Department of Psychology, July 2014.

This study sought to ascertain how trait aggression relates to individuals' motives and tendencies to participate in various types of gossip; while empirically differentiating between the application of negative and positive gossip within organizations. Based on the association between both gossip and aggression with dominance and power, the current study proposed that individuals' tendency to gossip would be a function of trait aggression and their motive to gossip. In other words, aggressive individuals possess a strong desire to harm and gain power from others and they are likely to perceive gossip as a means to fulfill this need. Results (N = 353) indicated that there is a relationship between trait aggression and gossip. Specifically, the interaction between implicit and explicit aggression had a direct positive relationship with the tendency to gossip about others' achievements. Additionally, implicit aggression had a direct positive relationship with the motive to gossip for negative influence, information gathering/validation, and group protection as well as the tendency to gossip about social information and others' physical appearance. Moreover, explicit aggression had a direct positive relationship with both the motive to gossip for negative influence and the tendency to gossip about social information. Last, and most intriguing, only the motive to gossip for negative influence had a direct positive relationship with the tendency to gossip about social information, others' physical appearance, others' appearance, and sublimated gossip. Taken together, results imply that trait aggressive individuals gossip more than their non-aggressive counterparts and are motivated to do so in order to have a negative influence on others.



“DID YOU HEAR?” GOSSIP AS A MANIFESTATION OF TRAIT AGGRESSION

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J. Walt Granecki

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by

J. Walt Granecki

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF  
THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_

Mark C. Bowler, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

Jennifer L. Bowler, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

Alexander M. Schoemann, PhD

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT  
OF PSYCHOLOGY: \_\_\_\_\_

Susan L. McCammon, PhD, CIP

DEAN OF THE  
GRADUATE SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

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## **“Did you Hear?” Gossip as a Manifestation of Trait Aggression**

In contrast to the 70% of working individuals who are typically considered to be prosocial individuals, an estimated 8-12% of the working population is found to regularly demonstrate aggressive behavior (James & Mazerolle, 2002). While the remaining 18-22% reside in a gray area (James & McIntyre, 2000), those 8-12% who are trait aggressive are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs; Bing, Stewart, Davison, Green, McIntyre, & James, 2007; Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Glomb & Liao, 2003; Hershcovis et al., 2007). That is, they are more likely to intentionally engage in behaviors that are viewed by their organization as contrary to its legitimate interests (Gruys & Sackett, 2003). The estimated financial cost of these CWBs, despite the generally low base rate of aggressive individuals, runs into the billions and remains a growing concern for organizations (Green, 1997; Penney & Spector, 2005). Furthermore, verbal forms of CWB, such as incivility, take a toll on the well-being and quality of life of employees (Aubé, Rousseau, Mama, & Morin, 2009; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Lewis & Salem, 1986; Skogan, 1990). Gossip in particular, which has been shown to be related to negative performance evaluations (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010), low self-efficacy (Watson, 2011), poor reputations (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007), and power (Ogasawara, 1998), is typically categorized as a verbal form of CWB and has received a great deal of recent attention (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Grosser et al., 2010; Michelson, Interson, & Waddington, 2010; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001; Watson, 2011; Wert & Salovey, 2004). However, the direct relationship between trait aggression and gossip has yet to be empirically tested.

Gossip occurs in nearly every interpersonal interaction in one form or another (Emler, 1994) and is considered to be the sharing of any information about an absent third party that involves an evaluative component (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994; Foster, 2004). Researchers note that gossip can serve either a positive or negative function (Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Moreover, gossip may be either intended or unintended (Michelson & Mouly, 2004), critical or uncritical (Taylor, 1994), and judgmental or informational (Michelson et al., 2010). Thus, individual attitudes toward gossip, and the point of view from which one is examining gossip, make it difficult to definitively determine whether a particular instance of gossip should be considered negative or positive (Grosser et al., 2010; Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994). However, within an organizational setting, gossip typically has a more negative connotation in that it is typically viewed as a means to exploit others (Baker & Jones, 1996; Emler, 1994).

Within organizations, gossiping influences and maintains an assortment of organizational relationships (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008), including obtaining and losing power (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Ogasawara, 1998). Similarly, trait aggression has also been shown to be related to social power and dominance (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Bowler, Woehr, Bowler, Wuensch, & McIntyre, 2011; Bowler, Woehr, Rentsch, & Bowler, 2010; James, McIntyre, Glisson, Bowler, & Mitchell, 2004; James et al., 2005). Subsequently, as both gossip and aggression share an association with power and interpersonal relationships, examining the relationship between gossip behaviors and trait aggression may help clarify the differences in the use of gossip between aggressive and nonaggressive individuals. Aggressive individuals are motivated by the desire to cause harm to others (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Thus, trait aggressive individuals are more likely to be motivated to use gossip for malevolent purposes, such as sabotage or personal advancement

(Ogasawara, 1998). Subsequently, aggressive individuals should be more likely to gossip for the purposes of information gathering and negative influence, whereas non-aggressive individuals should be more likely to gossip for social enjoyment (entertainment) and group protection (friendship). To this end, the proposed study has two primary goals: first, to ascertain how trait aggression relates to an individual's tendencies and motives to participate in various types of gossip and second, to empirically differentiate between the application of negative and positive gossip. Based on the association between both gossip and aggression with dominance and power, the current study proposes that individuals' tendency and motivation to gossip will be a function of their level of trait aggression. In other words, aggressive individuals possess a strong desire to harm and gain power from others and they are likely to perceive gossip as a means to fulfill this need. Thus, aggressive individuals are likely to utilize gossip more frequently than nonaggressive individuals. Furthermore, aggressive individuals are likely to be motivated to use gossip for more malicious purposes, whereas nonaggressive individuals are likely to be motivated to gossip for self-enhancement and esteem.

## **Trait Aggression**

Trait aggression is characterized by an individual's predisposed inclination to inflict harm on others (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that trait aggression is generally stable and continuous across time; where an aggressive disposition in early childhood remains expressed in adulthood (Huesmann, Dubow, & Boxer, 2009; Huesmann, Eron, & Dubow, 2002). Individuals high in trait aggression are more likely to respond to frustration, dissatisfaction, and failure with anger, retaliation, or attempts to establish dominance throughout most social interactions (Berkowitz, 1993). Furthermore, this inclination is driven by both explicit and implicit aspects of personality. Explicit aggression consists of self-attributed, hostile thoughts, feelings, and behaviors available to both conscious thought and introspection (Bornstein, 2002; Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). In contrast, implicit aggression is held outside of conscious awareness and consists of cognitive processes that are generally unavailable to introspection (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; James, 1998; Winter, John, Stewart, Kohnen, & Duncan, 1998).

### **Explicit Aggression**

Explicit aggression is the component of trait aggression that is constructed by conscious thoughts and intentional behaviors to inflict pain or harm onto others (Grumm, Hein, & Fingerle, 2011). Thus, explicitly aggressive individuals are clearly aware of their malicious intent, and this self-awareness permits itself to be measured via self-reporting (James, 1998). However, in general, people have a strong desire to maintain a moderate to high sense of self-worth, which means, with respect to aggression, they consider themselves capable of self-control (Baumeister et al., 2003; Cramer, 2000). Furthermore, most job applicants are thought to have a strong desire to be viewed favorably (Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998). Combining these two desires

makes individuals more hesitant to expose negative traits such as aggression and encourages both impression management and response distortion (Bing, Stewart et al., 2007; Fazio & Olson, 2003). Consequently, as Bing, LeBreton et al. (2007) have noted, impression management and response distortion for job applicants on self-reported scales is a widespread dilemma for many organizations. Thus, valuable information obtained from self-reporting measures (Barrick & Mount, 1996; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998) is potentially distorted by these and other confounds, such as self-deception (Furnham, 1997; Rosse et al., 1998; Schneider & Goffin, 2012). Therefore, alternative methods using indirect means of assessment have been developed to measure implicit levels of aggression (James, 1998).

### **Implicit Aggression**

In contrast to explicit aggression, implicit aggression is the component of trait aggression that involves cognitive processes unavailable to introspection (James, 1998). More specifically, implicit aggression is an automatic and unconscious response to the social environment that triggers a multitude of aggressive reactions including hostile cognitions, inimical motivations, vexed emotions, and, ultimately, harmful behaviors (Todorov & Bargh, 2002). Furthermore, because of self-deception, implicitly aggressive individuals often lack the awareness of their powerful desire to inflict harm on others (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Westen, 1998). Yet, most implicitly aggressive individuals are similar to both their explicitly aggressive and nonaggressive colleagues in that they share a desire to view themselves as moral, prosocial individuals with the ability to display self-restraint (Bersoff, 1999; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). Thus, in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance associated with wanting to harm others while simultaneously wanting to be viewed

favorably, justification mechanisms (JMs) are utilized to rationalize acts of aggression (James et al., 2004). This rationalization allows the desired victim to appear more deserving of aggression, while also allowing the aggressor to sustain the perception that aggressive behavior is “normal behavior;” ultimately concealing from the aggressor his or her unconscious desire to cause harm (James & LeBreton, 2010). Therefore, when pushed, threatened, or tempted implicitly aggressive individuals maintain a different rational thought process than both explicitly aggressive and nonaggressive individuals (James et al., 2004). Through the use of JMs, implicitly aggressive individuals inductively reframe their role from an aggressor into the role of a victim who is acting in self-defense, resisting unjust rules, amending injustice, combatting oppression, and/or establishing bravery (James et al., 2005; LeBreton, Barksdale, Robin, & James, 2007). This restructured viewpoint enhances the appeal of the desire to harm others by replacing negative emotions normally associated with aggressive behavior (e.g., shame, guilt, or remorse; Cramer, 2006) with positive feelings (e.g., recognition, approval, and social worth; Baumeister et al., 1996; Westen & Gabbard, 1999). Moreover, JMs unconsciously influence aggressive individuals’ ability to offer accurate responses of their aggressive behavior through solely explicit measures (Bowler et al., 2011; James et al., 2004).

As implicit reasoning is not available to introspection, it cannot be assessed via traditional self-report measures that require individuals to label their own behavior (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; James & Mazerolle, 2002). Subsequently, in order to accurately measure these unconscious biases, indirect measures of personality that do not require the respondent to be aware of the purpose of the test are critical (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Winter et al., 1998). James (1998) developed such an indirect measurement of personality, termed Conditional Reasoning, to indirectly assess an individual’s proclivity to use the JMs of aggression.

James et al. (2005) identified six primary JMs utilized by aggressive individuals. First and foremost, the *hostile attribution bias* is centered on the implicit assumption that all people are motivated by the desire to harm others (James et al., 2005). Through the use of this cognitive bias, aggressive individuals automatically conclude that the behaviors of others are malicious, even to the extent that genuinely friendly acts may be interpreted as concealing hidden malicious behaviors. The *potency bias* is centered on the implicit assumption that all social platforms are contests in which individuals establish either supremacy or inferiority – win or lose (Bowler et al., 2011). Unconsciously, this bias allows aggressive individuals to display hostility based on the assumption that if they do not, then they will be taken advantage of due to their inferiority. Structuring work interactions this way promotes a hostile environment in which aggression is used to exert dominance, bravery, assertiveness, and ambition; and lack of aggression only supports fear, submission, and weakness. The *retribution bias* is centered on the implicit assumption that retaliation to establish retribution is more compelling than maintaining social relationships (James et al., 2004). Thus, when employees feel threatened, offended, or maltreated they may lash out aggressively in order to establish retribution. The *victimization by powerful others bias* consists of an implicit assumption that those in power cause harm to those not in power (James et al., 2004). As a victim of perceived inequity and oppression by those in power, an aggressive individual may justify aggressive acts by “restoring” equity. The *derogation of target bias* is based upon the implicit assumption that the targets of aggression are evil, unethical, and deserving of aggression (James et al., 2004). The *social discounting bias* centers on the implicit assumption that social norms handcuff rightful free will and the pursuit of happiness (James et al., 2004). This view posits that the world is a cynical, cruel place that does not want individuals to express their views.

## **Integrative Typology of Aggression**

Winter et al. (1998) note that varying levels of explicit and implicit aggression will manifest in fundamentally different types of aggressive behaviors. Therefore, self-report tests in combination with implicit measures provide the most complete representation of personality differences (Brunstein & Maier, 2005; Frost, Ko, & James, 2007). Specifically, Bing, Stewart, et al. (2007) identified a two-by-two typology to represent this interaction (*see* Figure 1). Individuals who score high on both implicit and explicit measures are identified as being *manifest aggressive*. These individuals are most likely to engage in active, overt acts of aggression (e.g. physical violence, explicitly verbal abuse, etc.), as they view themselves as aggressive and are also primed to use the JMs to implicitly rationalize aggressive behavior. However, it should be noted that manifest aggressive individuals will employ passive aggression, such as gossip, when a more active form of aggression is not feasible under given circumstances (Bing, LeBreton et al., 2007). Similarly, individuals who score high on implicit measures but low on explicit measures are identified as being *latent aggressive*. These individuals are most likely to employ more covert, passive forms of aggression (e.g. sabotage, loafing, ignoring requests, gossip, etc.). These individuals do not view themselves as aggressive, but possess the necessary thought processes to utilize JMs to implicitly rationalize aggressive behavior (Bing, Stewart et al., 2007). In contrast, individuals who score low on both implicit and explicit measure are indicated as *prosocial*. These individuals genuinely value relationships, structure, and communion. They do not view themselves as aggressive nor do they utilize JMs to rationalize aggressive behaviors (Bing, Stewart et al., 2007). Inversely, prosocial individuals may participate in more positive organizational citizenship behaviors (Bing, LeBreton et al., 2007). Finally, individuals who score low on implicit measures and high on explicit measures are indicated as



*overcompensating prosocial*. Although they view themselves as aggressive, they do not possess the irrational thought processes required to utilize the JMs (Bing, Stewart et al., 2007). Thus, these individuals are unlikely to act aggressively, but may self-report aggression.

## Gossip

There are three primary approaches to gossip research: (1) the sociological-anthropological model, (2) the social psychological model, and (3) the individual model (Nevo et al., 1994). The sociological-anthropological approach focuses on the group aspects of gossip, such as shared norms and group cohesion. Specifically, the sociological-anthropological perspective examines gossip as a social value used to teach and enforce group norms, cohesion, boundaries, and identification based solely on group effects (Cantzler, 2007; Gluckman, 1963; Hannerz, 1967); whereas the social psychological and individual models examine gossip as a social comparison process to determine an individual's status and power (Wert & Salovey, 2004). The social psychological approach examines the importance of what an individual or group can gain or lose from engaging in gossip (e.g., power, belongingness, entertainment, etc.); however, each individual brings to gossip their own specific desires. Specifically, the social psychological perspective examines gossip from the vantage point of what an individual, not a group, can obtain from gossip (Nevo et al., 1994). Finally, the individual approach emphasizes how gossip can represent an implicit view of an individual's concept of life (Foster, 2004; Litman & Pezzo, 2005; Nevo et al., 1994; Watson, 2011). Thus, the individual perspective examines gossip as an adaptive defense mechanism that allows individuals to handle situations of anxiety or express hidden fantasies (Nevo et al., 1994). Specifically, Rosnow and Fine (1976) noted that individuals who spread more gossip tend to score higher on anxiety tests.

Within organizations, both the social psychological and individual approaches to gossip are important. Specifically, the individual perspective of the gossiper is critical in that it is individuals who are engaging in the gossiping behavior. However, the targets of gossip also play an important role because they help to establish the motivations and consequences of the

gossiper (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010; Ogasawara, 1998; Soeters & van Iterson, 2002). Subsequently, gossip appears to operate through Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory which suggests that individuals have a drive to share information, opinions, and attitudes in order to evaluate themselves alongside others. These comparisons made through gossip may assist in the formation of both an individual's sense of self and one's social status and degree of power.

### **Gossip in the Workplace**

Although gossip is sometimes characterized as an activity that is self-promoting and attention-seeking via the discounting of others (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994), individuals are often motivated to use gossip as a self-enhancing mechanism (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). For example, gossip is associated with low self-efficacy, high self-monitoring, an unclear sense of self, and an external locus of control from powerful others (Watson, 2011). Thus, individuals with a poor sense of self and who are lacking self-efficacy may be inclined to use gossip in an attempt to discover themselves and increase their perceived self-worth. Furthermore, gossip is suggested to be ego-driven and motivated by individual social status needs (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Watson, 2011). Subsequently, Kurland and Pelled (2000) proposed that gossip may have an association with French and Raven's (1959) power typology. Thus, individuals may use gossip in order to compete and improve performance through the power derived from gossip.

Gossip has been regularly demonstrated and argued to be associated with various types of power, ranging from subversive (De Sousa, 1994) and coerced power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) to "voice" power by marginalized employees (Ogasawara, 1998). However, those in authority (e.g. management) generally dislike gossip as it can often undermine their own power (Grosser et

al., 2010). Specifically, gossip can leave managers fearing that they will lose their power and control by potentially ruining reputations or simply taking away their legitimate power, especially for those managers already timid in their position (Ayim, 1994; Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Moreover, managers who choose not to participate or who are left out of informal gossip have notably less power and control (Baumeister et al., 2004). Managers not included in gossip, either by individual choice or purposefully from others, find themselves on the outside looking in and may not be trusted. Moreover, these managers may be the subject of the negative gossip itself (Baumeister et al., 2004). Thus, whereas managers often attempt to use gossip to maintain control and exercise power, subordinates tend to use gossip to gain power for themselves and take it away from others (Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

Subordinates indirectly use gossip to avoid the fear of potential embarrassment by requesting information about their organization from more powerful employees (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Although this motive seems harmless, this information can be used to sabotage or ruin another's work or career. For example, Ogasawara (1998) noted how informational gossip can threaten managerial power by giving coerced power to an individual (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), which can itself be damaging to an organization (van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). However, if the gossiper spreads information positively, it could reward power to the gossiper (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and have a potentially positive effect on the organization (Watson, 2011). Thus, individuals can better compete and improve performance within their organization through the power derived from the various forms gossip (Grosser et al., 2010).

**Motives to gossip.** Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) defined four social motives of gossip to describe a person's reason or goals to engage in gossip. These four motives of gossip are to *gather and validate information*, to *influence others negatively*, to *enjoy*, and to *maintain group*

*norms*. Some individuals are motivated to gossip for the sole purpose of gathering information and validating one's opinions or actions (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Specifically, people may seek out gossip as a form of social comparison (Wert & Salovey, 2004) to validate whether or not others share their own beliefs or assumptions about a person (Rosnow, 1977). Additionally, spreading informational gossip may elevate one's social status, as listeners may surmise that the gossip is privy to special knowledge or understanding (Baumeister et al., 2004). Consequently, people have been observed going to astonishing lengths to use gossip as a form of information gathering about their peers (Goffman, 1959; Haviland, 1977). With regard to the workplace, gossip can be used to indirectly gather information about any number of topics (e.g., from information about an organization's culture to a fellow employee's love life). The potential power derived from this information gathering can motivate some individuals to use gossip negatively (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Foster, 2004).

Gossip is frequently viewed as self-serving, manipulative, and negative. Thus, some individuals may be motivated to use gossip to have a negative influence on others—sometimes as an indirect form of aggression by ruining the reputation of a target (Fox & Spector, 1999). Additionally, Kurland and Pelled (2000) found that individuals will utilize gossip to praise some employees and shame others; however, these individuals must make sure their actions fall within the organization's norms so they will actually be able to influence others (Foster, 2004). Specifically, Eckert (1990) found that individuals identified as “good people” had relatively more influential power than others. Thus, implicitly aggressive individuals may be more motivated to utilize influential gossip in more indirect ways to harm others than both explicitly aggressive and nonaggressive individuals, because implicitly aggressive people perceive themselves as “good people” who are using influence for good outcomes.

Individuals may also be motivated to gossip strictly to pass the time, with no purpose of exploitation or influence (Rosnow, 1977; Stirling, 1956), as a benign form of entertainment (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Foster, 2004). Thus, some individuals are motivated to gossip for only social enjoyment by breaking up the monotony of routine work activities—pleasure (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Rosnow, 1977; Stirling, 1956). Specifically, the growing popularity of gossip across various forms of mass media outlets is a sure sign that people are motivated to gossip for social enjoyment (Foster, 2004). The last motive to gossip returns us to the sociological-anthropological model, in which people are motivated to gossip for group protection (Gluckman, 1963). Dunbar (2004) argued that gossip is prolifically used by insiders while purposefully excluding outsiders. Thus, some individuals may be motivated to protect their intergroup by warning other group members about the behavior of others, inside or outside of their group, who violate their group norms. Last, aggressive individuals may be motivated to use gossip as a form of group protection in order to better control and manipulate their environment.

The fact that individuals are motivated to use gossip for negative influence most likely contributes to gossip's vitriolic reputation; however, as noted, gossip can also function as a benign form of entertainment, to cement relationships, and to reiterate norms. Gossip brings together just as surely as it divides. Thus, this study not only seeks to determine the relationship between aggression and gossip, but also to clarify the relationship between individuals' motives to gossip and their actual tendency to gossip. The current study will investigate whether or not one's reasons (i.e., motives) to gossip will lead to one's use (i.e., tendency) of gossip across four categories.

**Tendency to gossip.** As defined, simply talking to others does not constitute gossip—talking about an absent third party represents gossip (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994; Foster, 2004; Nevo et al., 1994). Additionally, having a motive to gossip does not determine that an individual will gossip and does not account for the specific tendency of an individual’s use of gossip. Thus, Nevo et al. (1994) termed four categories of individuals’ tendency to gossip as *physical appearance*, *achievements*, *social information*, and *sublimated gossip*. The first three categories represent the content about which their names imply: the tendency to discuss the physical appearance of others, the achievements of others, and the social lives of others. The fourth category, sublimated gossip, reflects discussions about others that are more disguised and socially acceptable (e.g., talking about famous people or discussing interesting details about others; Nevo et al., 1994). Specifically, gossip about “celebs” via the production of mass media would represent a form of sublimated gossip.

Combining these two components of gossip with the *theory of reasoned action* (TRA; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) we can hypothesize how beliefs and intentions about gossip may or may not result in the behavior of gossip. The TRA posits that beliefs (i.e., a person’s subjective judgment about a relationship between an object of belief and another object, value, or attribute) lead to an attitude about a particular object (i.e., valence toward that particular object derived from both social norms about that object and feelings about the act itself), which inevitably leads to an intention to act soon followed by the act itself. Furthermore, TRA is also based on the assumption that human beings are rational creatures who are not driven by unconscious motives or overpowering desires (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), such as the implicit desire to harm others. However, from examining aggressive individuals, we know that their motive to harm others is driven from implicit assumptions and JMs. Thus, an individual’s level of both explicit and

implicit trait aggression may affect the beliefs, intentions, and behaviors of gossip. Therefore, the proposed model (see Figures 2) will serve as a visualization for the current study's hypothesis regarding the connection between trait aggression, the beliefs and intentions (i.e., motives) of gossip, and the behaviors (i.e., tendency) of gossip.

**Hypothesis 1:** Trait aggression will have a direct association with the motive to gossip for negative influence, information gathering/validation, and group protection; but not social enjoyment.

**Hypothesis 2:** Trait aggression will have a direct positive relationship with the tendency to gossip about others' achievements, social information, and physical appearance; but not sublimated gossip.

**Hypothesis 3:** The motive to gossip for negative influence and information gathering/validation will lead to the tendency to gossip about others' achievements, social information, and physical appearance; but not sublimated gossip.

**Hypothesis 4:** The motive to gossip for social enjoyment and group protection will lead to the tendency to use sublimated gossip and social information.



## Trait Aggression and Gossip

Research demonstrates that aggressive individuals have the intention to harm others for power or dominance in all forms of interactions (Baron & Richardson, 1994; James et al, 2004; James et al., 2005; Bowler et al., 2011; Bowler et al., 2010). Additionally, Nevo et al. (1994) argued, and Watson (2011) subsequently found, that gossip is a behavioral defensive mechanism that one uses to cope and deal with various interpersonal difficulties. Aggressive individuals have also been found to utilize defense mechanisms (Cramer, 2000; James et al., 2004; James et al., 2005). Defense mechanisms are everyday unconscious thought processes used to reduce painful emotions such as anxiety from wanting to inflict pain on others (Paulhus, Fridhandler, & Hayes, 1997). James et al. (2005) identified and termed these defense mechanisms of aggressive individuals as the six JMs. Just as aggressive individuals may not be aware of their implicit use of JMs, aggressive employees may not be aware that they utilize gossip to self-serve, socially compare, and establish dominance. The literature suggests that these six JMs may be associated with the core motives and perceived outcomes of frequent gossipers.

First, implicitly utilizing the *hostile attribution bias*, aggressive individuals are likely to assume that others only gossip for malevolent purposes in order to justify their own use of frequent gossip. Second, via the *potency bias*, aggressive individuals may view gossip as contests of who can obtain the most information (Michelson et al, 2010), establish dominance (Rosnow, 1977), or become most popular (Grosser et al., 2010); and that not using gossip would imply that they are weak and behind the curve. Third, through the *retribution bias*, an aggressive individual may use gossip as a form of retaliation for perceived, or real, wrongdoings from superiors or fellow coworkers. Additionally, frequent gossipers have been shown to have low levels of self-efficacy and sense of self (Watson, 2011) and therefore, if aggressive individuals are frequent

gossipers they may use the retribution bias to increase their sense of the self. Fourth, employing the *victimization by powerful others bias*, as a victim of perceived inequity and oppression by those in power, aggressive individuals may utilize gossip as an indirect tool to restore power and equity for any oppression they may perceive. Fifth, implicitly using the *derogation of target bias*, aggressive individuals may view everyone as bad, immoral individuals who deserve to be the target of gossip. Sixth, via the *social discounting bias*, in order to combat perceived oppression, an aggressive individual may utilize gossiping to express what they consider free will (Watson, 2011). In conclusion, aggressive individuals may be frequent gossipers in comparison to nonaggressive individuals and they will justify gossip the same way they justify other aggressive acts.

## Methods

### Participants

After IRB review and approval (see Appendix A), data was collected from 353 undergraduate students at a large southeastern university. Of these 353 participants, 345 (97.7%) were under the age of 25, consisting of 243 (69%) women and 110 (31%) men. Additionally, 251 (71.1%) participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 61 (17.3%) as African American, and the remaining 41 (11.6%) as another race (American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, or not listed). Furthermore, roughly 25% (90) of the sample self-reported working at least 5 hours or more per week.

### Procedure

Participants completed a five page online survey. The first page measured explicit aggression via the anger hostility scale of the NEO Personality Inventory – Revised (AH-NEO PI-R). The second page measured implicit aggression via the Conditional Reasoning Test of Aggression (CRT-A; James & McIntyre, 2000). The third page measured individuals' tendency to gossip across various categories via the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ; Nevo et al., 1993, 1994). The fourth page measured individuals' motive to use particular aspects of gossip via the Motives to Gossip Questionnaire (MTG; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Last, on the fifth page participants were asked to report on relevant demographic information, including whether they were currently working 5 or more hours per week.

### Measures

**Explicit aggression.** The anger hostility scale from the NEO PI-R was utilized as an explicit measure of aggression. This measure consists of eight items measuring one's propensity

to self-report aggressive acts. The reported reliability coefficient alpha for the eight-item AH-NEO PI-R was .71.

**Implicit aggression.** The 25-item CRT-A was used to measure implicit aggression. The CRT-A has been demonstrated to relate to a variety of aggressive behaviors such as theft, lying, poor team performance, and favoring punitive over non-punitive courses of action (Bing et al., 2007; Bowler et al., 2011; Bowler et al., 2010; Frost et al., 2007; James & LeBreton, 2010; James et al., 2004; James et al., 2005). The measure utilizes inductive reasoning problems, ostensibly appearing to have only one true answer, to evaluate an individual's propensity to use JMs of aggression (James, 1998). Each item consists of a premise and four responses: one logical aggressive response, one logical nonaggressive response, and two illogical responses. Only one of the four responses is answered and then points are awarded towards the total aggression score and a total illogical score. Following the CRT-A instruction manual (James & McIntyre, 2000), based on numerous empirical studies, we assessed participants' level of implicit aggression. Consistent with previous research (James & Mazerolle, 2002), 10.5% (64) of the sample were considered high in implicit aggression. Additionally, no individuals were removed from the analysis due to recording five or more illogical responses. Last, the reliability coefficient alpha of the CRT-A was .87, indicating great internal consistency.

**Tendency to gossip.** The 20-item TGQ (Nevo et al., 1993, 1994) was used to measure one's self-reported tendency to gossip along four topics: physical appearance ( $\alpha = .91$ ), achievement-related ( $\alpha = .77$ ), social information ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and sublimated ( $\alpha = .75$ ). As the reported coefficient alphas indicate, internal consistency for the four individual scales were beyond acceptable. Responses were provided across a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly

Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The TGQ's overall reported coefficient alpha was .94, indicating excellent internal consistency.

**Motive to gossip.** In order to measure individuals' motive to gossip, the 22-item MTG (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012) was used to measure four motives of gossip: information gathering and validation ( $\alpha = .95$ ), social enjoyment ( $\alpha = .94$ ), negative influence ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and group protection ( $\alpha = .90$ ). As the reported coefficient alphas indicate, internal consistency for the four individual scales were exceptional. Responses were provided across a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (Always). The MTG's overall reported coefficient alpha was .94, indicating excellent internal consistency.

## Results

### Participant Variables

After screening the data for missing values and conducting listwise deletion, descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations), correlations, and covariances were computed for all study measures including the demographic variables (i.e., age, sex, race, and work status); which were controlled for in all analyses. Descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix for the aggression and gossip measures are provided in Table 1. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted and indicated that none of the demographic variables were significantly related to any of the measures, with one exception: individual work status was found to be positively related to the MTG information gathering and validation scale (MTG-IV),  $F(1, 350) = 6.86, p = .009$ . Individuals who reported not working ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.29$ ) scored higher on the MTG-IV than did individuals who reported working ( $M = 3.74, SD = 1.58$ ); however this effect size was trivial,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$  (Steiger, 2004).

### Test of Hypothesized Model

All variables were imputed into the statistical program Mplus to test the hypothesized path model in Figure 2 with fit of the data. The eight continuous, endogenous (i.e., dependent) variables included the tendency to gossip about physical appearances, achievements, social information, and sublimated gossip; and the motivation to gossip for information gathering/validation, social enjoyment, negative influence, and group protection. The three continuous, exogenous (i.e., independent) variables entered into the model were the measures of trait aggression, both implicit and explicit aggression as well as the interaction between the two. Mplus runs a multiple regressions for each step in the model to calculate path estimates, standard errors,  $t$ -values, and probability values for each separate path in the model. The paths for the

current study included the following: (1) the motive to gossip for information gathering/validation, social enjoyment, negative influence, and group protection predicting the tendency to gossip about physical appearances, achievements, social information, and sublimated gossip (2) implicit aggression, explicit aggression, and the interaction between both implicit and explicit aggression predicting the motive to gossip for information gathering/validation, social enjoyment, negative influence, and group protection, and (3) implicit aggression, explicit aggression, and the interaction between both implicit and explicit aggression predicting the tendency to gossip about physical appearances, achievements, social information, and sublimated gossip.

In addition to path coefficients, the corresponding probability values, explained variance and residual variance statistics were computed for each endogenous variable in the model. Furthermore, in order to test the fit of the model with the data, several fit indices were calculated within the Mplus program. In addition to the standard chi-square “goodness of fit” test, four additional model fit indices were used including the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Tucker Lewis Index (TLI). The RMSEA serves as an absolute measure of fit related to the residuals in the model. Acceptable model fit is demonstrated by a RMSEA value less than 0.06 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The next absolute measure of fit used was the SRMR, which measures the standardized difference between the observed and expected correlation. A value less than 0.08 is typically considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The CFI is an incremental measure of fit based on the chi-square-degrees of freedom ratio, adjusted for sample size as well as the number of parameters. A CFI value of 0.90 or greater indicates acceptable fit of the model (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The final fit index used to test the model fit was the TLI, which is another

incremental measure of fit that is highly correlated with the CFI (Hu & Bentler, 1998). Last, a .05 criterion of statistical significance was employed for all statistical procedures.

Results from the analysis of the hypothesized path model are provided in Table 2; including the standardized path coefficients, standard errors, *t* statistics for all effects, and the explained variance (i.e.,  $R^2$  values) for the eight endogenous variables in the model. The fully saturated model indicated that the interaction term between implicit and explicit aggression only significantly predicted one of the endogenous variables (i.e., the tendency to gossip about others' achievements). Thus, in order to test the main effects of implicit and explicit aggression and ensure that the interaction between them was not affecting the other path values the interaction term was removed from all other paths. The final path model was tested as follows: implicit aggression and explicit aggression would each directly influence the motive to gossip for information gathering/validation, social enjoyment, negative influence, and group protection; implicit aggression and explicit aggression would each directly influence the tendency to gossip about physical appearances, social information, and sublimated gossip; implicit aggression, explicit aggression, and the interaction between both implicit and explicit aggression would each directly influence the tendency to gossip about achievements; the motive to gossip for information gathering/validation, social enjoyment, negative influence, and group protection would each directly influence the tendency to gossip about physical appearances, achievements, social information, and sublimated gossip. The final model examined demonstrated a near perfect fit to the data across all relevant fit statistics,  $\chi^2(7, N = 353) = 8.66$ ,  $RMSEA = .026$ , 90%  $CI [.000, .074]$ ,  $CFI = .999$ ,  $TLI = .989$ ,  $SRMR = .014$ .

Hypothesis 1 proposed that trait aggression would have a direct association with the motive to gossip for negative influence, information gathering/validation, and group protection;



but not social enjoyment. As noted in Figure 3, the results of the path analysis indicated that the interaction between implicit and explicit aggression was not significantly related to any of the motives to gossip. Thus, examining the simple main effects, results indicated that implicit aggression had a significantly positive relationship with the motive to gossip for negative influence ( $\beta = .41, t = 9.00, p < .001$ ), information gathering/validation ( $\beta = .20, t = 3.75, p < .001$ ), and group protection ( $\beta = .19, t = 3.46, p < .001$ ); but, not social enjoyment. Furthermore, explicit aggression was found to have a significantly positive relationship with only the motive to gossip for negative influence ( $\beta = .18, t = 3.78, p < .001$ ), but not information gathering/validation, group protection, nor social enjoyment. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported—as individuals' levels of implicit aggression increased so did their motivation to gossip for negative influence, information gathering/validation, and group protection, but not social enjoyment. Similarly, as individuals' levels of explicit aggression increased only their motivation to gossip for negative influence significantly increased, while their levels of explicit aggression remained significantly unrelated to them being motivated to gossip for information gathering/validation, group protection, and social enjoyment. Thus, taken together, the combined main effects of implicit and explicit aggression accounted for roughly 25% of the variance in the motivation to gossip for negative influence.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that trait aggression would have a direct positive relationship with the tendency to gossip about others' achievements, social information, and physical appearance; but not sublimated gossip. The results of the path analysis found partial support for this hypothesis indicating that the interaction between implicit and explicit aggression was significantly related only the tendency to gossip about others' achievements ( $\beta = .11, t = 2.37, p = .018$ ). As seen in Figure 4, individuals high in both implicit and explicit aggression reported

significantly higher scores on the TGQ achievement scale than any other combination of implicit and explicit aggression.

Next, we examined the simple main effects of implicit and explicit aggression only on the tendency to gossip about social information, physical appearance, and sublimated gossip since an interaction between the two was already observed for the TGQ achievement scale. Implicit aggression was found to have a significantly direct and positive relationship with the tendency to gossip about social information ( $\beta = .30, t = 5.71, p < .001$ ) and physical appearance ( $\beta = .17, t = 3.02, p = .003$ ), but not sublimated gossip. Thus, partially supporting Hypothesis 2, as individuals' levels of implicit aggression increased so did their tendency to gossip about social information and the physical appearance of others. The proposed path that implicit aggression would be positively related to the tendency to gossip about the achievements of others was not supported; however, as noted, the interaction was. With regard to explicit aggression, results indicated that it had a significantly direct and positive relationship only with the tendency to gossip about social information ( $\beta = .14, t = 2.77, p = .006$ ), and was not significantly related to the tendency to gossip about the physical appearance of others. In keeping with implicit aggression, explicit aggression was not found to be significantly related to the tendency to gossip about achievements, but the interaction was. Thus, partially supporting this hypothesis, as individuals' levels of explicit aggression increased so did their tendency to gossip about social information. Further supporting Hypothesis 2, explicit aggression was not significantly related to the tendency to gossip about sublimated gossip.

Hypothesis 3 specifically proposed that the motive to gossip for negative influence and information gathering/validation would lead to the tendency to gossip about others' achievements, social information, and physical appearance; but not sublimated gossip. Results of

the path analysis found partial support for this hypothesis as well, indicating that individuals who were highly motivated to gossip for negative influence were significantly higher in their tendency to gossip about achievements ( $\beta = .19, t = 3.06, p = .002$ ), social information ( $\beta = .18, t = 3.18, p < .001$ ), physical appearance ( $\beta = .19, t = 3.12, p = .002$ ), and, unexpectedly, sublimated gossip ( $\beta = .21, t = 3.30, p < .001$ ). Conversely, the motive to gossip for information gathering/validation was not significantly related to any of the measures on the TGQ. Finally, the combined main effects of implicit and explicit aggression as well as the motive to gossip for negative influence accounted for roughly 25% of the variance in the tendency to gossip about social information, 14% of the variance in the tendency to gossip about the physical appearance of others, 10% of the variance in the tendency to gossip about others' achievements, and 9% of the variance in the tendency to engage in sublimated gossip.

Hypothesis 4 specifically proposed that the motive to gossip for social enjoyment and group protection would lead to the tendency to use sublimated gossip and social information. The path analysis provided no support for Hypothesis 4, in that there was no significant relationship with the motivation to gossip for either social enjoyment or group protection with any of the measures on the TGQ.

## Discussion

Gossip is frequently referred to as a verbal form of CWB as well as a type of passive aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Baron & Neuman, 1998; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Grosser et al., 2010; Michelson et al., 2010; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002; Tepper et al., 2001; Watson, 2011; Wert & Salovey, 2004); however, prior to the current study the direct relationship between trait aggression and gossip had not yet been empirically tested. This study sought to fill this gap in the literature by examining how individuals' level of trait aggression relates to individuals' motives and tendencies to participate in various types of gossip. Overall, the results partially support the proposal that trait aggression and gossip are empirically related.

In order to differentiate between the application of negative and positive gossip, the current study specifically hypothesized that trait aggressive individuals would be more motivated to gossip for information gathering/validation, negative influence, and group protection, whereas non-aggressive individuals would be more likely to gossip for social enjoyment (entertainment). Moreover, it was also hypothesized that trait aggressive individuals would be more likely to gossip about others' achievements, social information, and physical appearance, whereas non-aggressive individuals would be more likely to engage in sublimated gossip. Finally, combining Hypotheses 3 and 4, this study hypothesized that the motivation to gossip for negative influence, information gathering/validation, social enjoyment, and group protection would lead to the tendency to use a specific type of gossip across four categories (i.e., achievements, social information, physical appearance, and sublimated gossip). Overall, results found partial support for all four hypotheses. Specifically, an interaction between implicit and explicit aggression was observed for only individuals' tendency to gossip about achievements, where an individual's

elevated tendency to gossip about others' achievements is contingent on whether or not individuals are high in both implicit and explicit aggression. Additionally, as expected, implicit aggression was found to be positively related to the motivation to gossip for negative influence, information gathering/validation, and group protection as well as the tendency to gossip about social information and others' physical appearance. Furthermore, explicit aggression was also related to the motivation to gossip for negative influence and the tendency to gossip about social information. Finally, and somewhat unexpectedly, only the motivation to gossip for negative influence was related to all four tendency to gossip categories (i.e., achievements, social information, physical appearance, and sublimated gossip), while the remaining motives to gossip were unrelated to any tendency to gossip.

### **Implications**

The findings of the current study have quite a few implications regarding the relationship between trait aggression and gossip. Most notably, the current study is the first to establish an empirical relationship amongst trait aggression and gossip. Specifically, results suggest that aggressive individuals perceive some forms and types of gossip as a means to fulfill their desire to harm and gain power from others while other forms and types appear less attractive (Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister et al., 1996; De Sousa, 1994; James et al., 2005; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Ogasawara, 1998; Wert & Salovey, 2004; Westen, 1998). The finding that trait aggressive individuals are only motivated to use gossip for certain reasons and have the tendency to use only specific types of gossip leads to the next implication—aggressive individuals are more motivated to use gossip for more malicious purposes than their nonaggressive counterparts. Specifically, one path indicated that implicitly aggressive individuals are motivated to use gossip for negative influence, this alone suggests that aggressive individuals are likely to justify gossip

the same way they justify other aggressive acts (e.g., theft, lying, poor team performance, obstructionism, sabotage, and favoring punitive over non-punitive courses of action).

Interestingly, considering this previous result with the finding that implicitly aggressive individuals are also motivated to utilize gossip for group protection strongly supports previous research that implicitly aggressive individuals rationalize their behavior through the use of a set of JMs (Cramer, 2000; James et al., 2004; James et al., 2005). For example, combining the victimization by powerful others and social discounting biases, aggressive individuals may utilize gossip as an indirect tool to restore power and equity for any oppression they may perceive in order to express what they consider free will for both themselves and others (Watson, 2011). In other words, aggressive individuals may actually be vicariously living through others by convincing themselves that they are gossiping for the greater good in order to justify their malicious use of gossip. Moreover, as the potency bias suggests, aggressive individuals may view gossip as a challenge of who can obtain the most information (Michelson et al, 2010), establish dominance (Rosnow, 1977), or become the most popular (Grosser et al., 2010) in their group. This implies that aggressive individuals attempt to be the leader of a group through the perceived negative influence they obtain by gathering social information, such as others' achievements and physical appearance. Furthermore, aggressive individuals may perceive their use of sublimated gossip as a way to gain the trust of others (Baumeister et al., 2004; Burt & Knez, 1996; Chua et al., 2008; Sommerfeld et al., 2008) or to justify their own use of gossip by accusing others of the same behavior (i.e., hostile attribution and derogation of target biases).

Furthermore, the finding that the motivation to gossip for negative influence leads to an increase in the tendency to gossip across all four measured categories indicates that aggressive individuals may utilize gossip more frequently than nonaggressive individuals. Watson (2011)

found that frequent gossipers have low levels of self-efficacy and a poor sense of self, and this study found that aggressive individuals are frequent gossipers. Therefore, the combination of these two findings implies that aggressive individuals may use gossip via the retribution bias in order to increase their self-efficacy and raise their sense of the self. However, nonaggressive individuals may also be motivated to gossip for self-enhancement and esteem, but at this time research has yet to examine the relationship among aggression, gossip, and self-enhancing mechanisms. What can be concluded, however, is that because implicit aggression has a direct and positive relationship with the tendency to gossip about social information and the physical appearance of others, and that the interaction between implicit and explicit aggression is positively related to the tendency to gossip about the achievements of others, trait aggressive individuals are more likely than non-aggressive individuals to talk about absent third parties.

With regard to solely explicit aggression, results of the current study suggest that explicitly aggressive individuals are also motivated to gossip for negative influence and have the tendency to gossip about social information. These findings have roughly the same implications as the results for implicit aggression as well as the overall implication of the current study, that aggressive people believe gossip is used for chiefly one reason, negative influence, and this intentional use of gossip leads to the manifestation of elevated levels of self-reported gossip.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While the current study discovered several statistically significant relationships that may begin to help both practitioners and researchers delineate between the application of negative and positive gossip, it is not without limitations. The use of undergraduate students as participants creates the first potential limitation. As only 25% of the participants were currently working and with minimal experience at that, results of this study may possibly have limited generalizability.

Although this may be the case, researchers have found that in spite of gossip's negative reputation, across numerous samples and specific experimental circumstances participants do not appear to withhold information regarding their motivation to and participation in gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; 2012). With regard to aggression, Anderson and Bushman (1997) note that based on the results of their meta-analysis, laboratory studies of aggression demonstrate substantial external validity for a variety of samples. Thus, taken together, while the current study is no substitute for a field study, the results are nevertheless meaningful and certainly deserving of further examination. In answer to this limitation, future research should seek to utilize face-to-face interactions, role plays, and confederates in order to provide additional insight and mitigate these concerns.

A second potential limitation also concerns the sample. Only 64 of the 345 participants were found to be implicitly aggressive; however, relevant but rather simple test statistics were found to support the general findings of the current study by indicating consistent correlations and parallel levels of significance with that of the obtained results. For example, correlating implicit aggression with the motive to gossip for negative influence and social enjoyment, produced correlations of .466 ( $p < .001$ ) and .074 ( $p = .17$ ), respectively. Moreover, the standard errors for the path analysis remained low, further indicating stable parameters and path estimates (Streiner, 2005). While sample size could be argued to have affected some of the results, the fact still remains that only 8 to 12% of the population is aggressive (James et al., 2005).

Third, all measures, except that of implicit aggression, were measured via self-report. Information derived from self-report measures may be distorted from the social desirability bias and potential self-deception (Furnham, 1997; Rosse et al., 1998; Schneider & Goffin, 2012). Typically, this would be of particular concern; however, participants were informed that all



identifying information would remain anonymous. Furthermore, this data was collected from a non-affiliated organization external to working participants' job locations and, therefore, should not have pressured participants to respond in a socially desirable way. Again, with regard to self-reporting gossip, researchers have consistently found that despite gossip's negative reputation, across numerous samples and specific experimental circumstances, participants do not appear to withhold information regarding their gossip beliefs and behavior (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; 2012). Additionally, Nevo et al. (1993) noted high interrater reliability ( $r = .92, p < .001$ ) and a substantially strong relationship ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ) between TGQ self-reporting and peer ratings, suggesting participants' perception of their gossip behavior is congruent with their peers' views of them. With that note, responding to this limitation, future research using self-report measures of gossip should utilize this same peer-reporting method. Furthermore, future researchers should collaborate to develop an implicit association test of gossip, similar to that of the CRT-A, to eliminate the issue of potentially inaccurate self-reporting. This call for the development of an improved measure of gossip is not the first (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Grosser et al., 2010; Michelson et al., 2010; Watson, 2011; Wert & Salovey, 2004), but we feel that the results and implications of the current study contribute to the developing awareness of the phenomenon of gossip.

A fourth and final limitation of potential interest is that of making causal attributions surrounding the premise of the TRA made from the data of the present study. The cross-sectional design of the study should caution anyone drawing conclusions from this data set; however, we provide two sound arguments that while caution is warranted it is not necessary. First, conceptually following previous research and suggestions (e.g., James, 1998; James et al., 2005), this study measured aggression as an innate personality trait that influences a broad range of

cognitive processes. Thus, other information processes (i.e., motivations and beliefs about gossip) are found to develop as a response to the hostile tendencies that aggressive individuals acquire as a result of rationalizing their aggressive behavior. Second, empirically speaking, the utilization of multiple regression as the nature of the path analysis employed, combined with analytic confirmation for the causal order of the study variables, lends some support for drawing causal attributions. In totality, the proposed causal model, drawn from TRA, theoretical concepts of trait aggression, and empirically tested via path analysis, may serve as an explanation regarding the influence that trait aggression has on both the beliefs and intentions (i.e., motives) of gossip as well as the behaviors (i.e., tendency) of gossip - that is, at least until future research can longitudinally test this connection as well as other personality variables amongst aggression and gossip.

## **Conclusions**

Gossip is frequently frowned upon, historically has a vitriolic reputation, and its association with a plethora of negative organizational outcomes is well documented (Baker & Jones, 1996; Grosser et al., 2010; Michelson et al., 2010; Wittek & Wielers, 1998), yet it still occurs. While recent research has identified a need to revise the purely negative connotation of gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Foster, 2004), results of this study support previous research (Ayim, 1994; Baumeister et al., 2004; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson & Mouly, 2004; Michelson et al., 2010; Ogasawara, 1998; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; van Iterson & Clegg, 2008; Watson, 2011) suggesting that this shift in organizational support of gossip should be heavily cautioned and most likely paused. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) found that the motivation to gossip for negative influence and manipulation were rated as the least important motive and claimed that “in specific situations people can use gossip for noble

goals; that is, to maintain the norms of a group” (p. 2667). We do not refute this; however, the current study found that trait aggressive individuals are motivated to use gossip for both negative influence and group protection. Upon further examination, it was the motivation to use gossip for negative influence that led to an increase in the tendency to gossip across various topics, not the motivation to gossip for group protection. Thus, determining the motivation for gossip alone may not be sufficient when making claims with respect to pro or con gossip behavior.

We do not seek to have a nuanced view of gossip, but by examining the relationship of aggression and gossip through an adaptation of TRA it allows us the ability to draw conclusions about trait aggression as an antecedent to the motivation to gossip as well as the resulting gossip behavior. Specifically, results of our study suggest that people have a tendency to gossip as both a direct result of being trait aggressive and as an indirect result of being trait aggressive exclusively through the motivation to gossip for negative influence, despite implicitly aggressive individuals’ motivation to gossip for group protection. Therefore, in conclusion, we suggest that until further delineation is established between positive and negative gossip, researchers and practitioners may want to consider what type of individuals are utilizing gossip, the motivation behind it, how often they are participating in it, and how they are doing it before openly supporting gossip as a form of group protection and innocent act of entertainment.

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*Figure 1.* Two-by-two aggression typology.

	High Explicit Aggression	Low Explicit Aggression
High Implicit Aggression	Manifest Aggressive	Latent Aggressive
Low Implicit Aggression	Overcompensating Prosocial	Prosocial

Figure 2. Hypothesized path model.

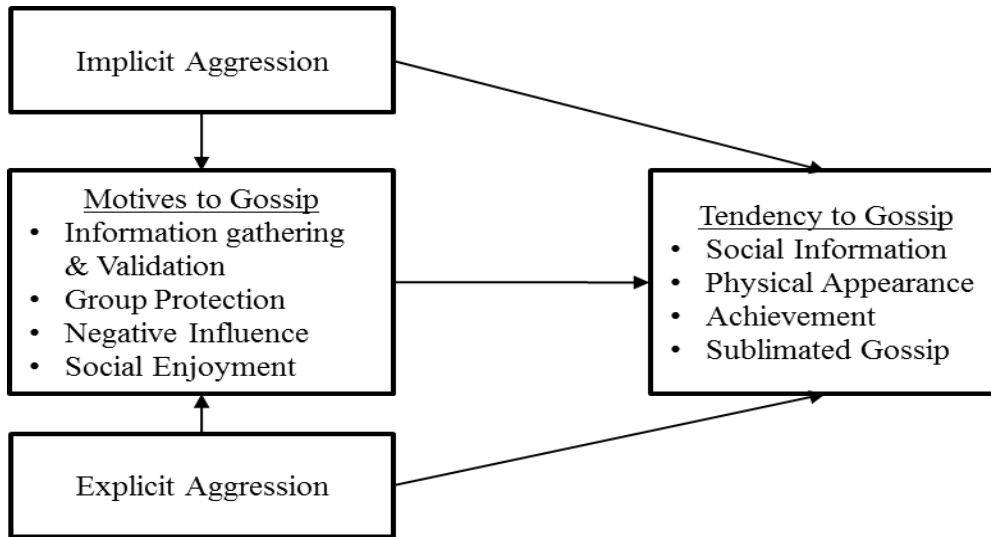
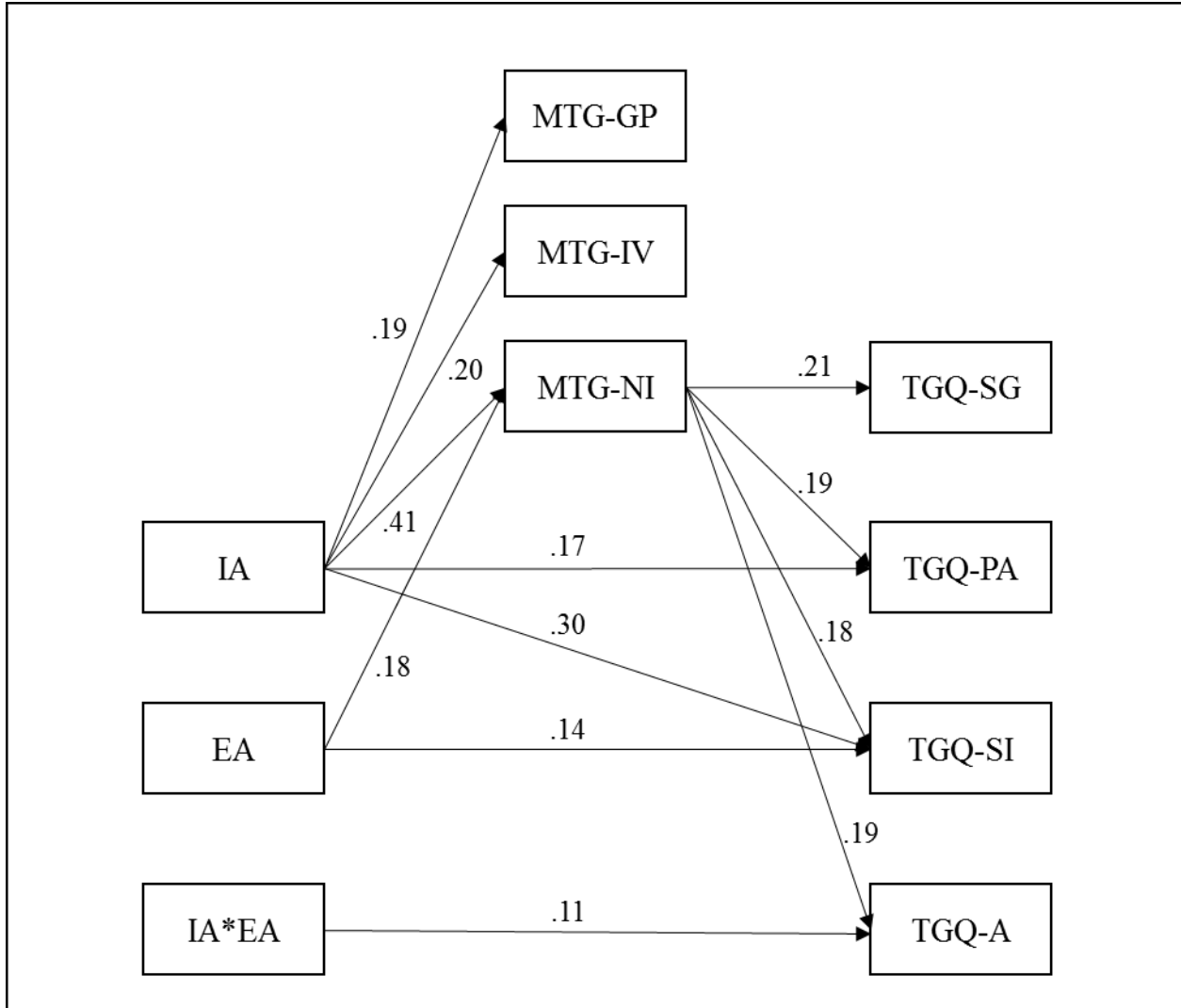


Figure 3. Results of final tested model including only significant paths.



<p>IA = Implicit aggression          EA = Explicit aggression          MTG-IV = Information gathering &amp; validation          MTG-NI = Negative influence          MTG-GP = Group protection          TGQ-SI = Social Information          TGQ-A = Achievement          TGQ-SG = Sublimated gossip          TGQ-PA = Physical Appearance</p>	<p>All paths significant at the <math>p &lt; .05</math> level</p>
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Figure 4. Interaction effects of implicit and explicit aggression when predicting the tendency to gossip about others' achievements.

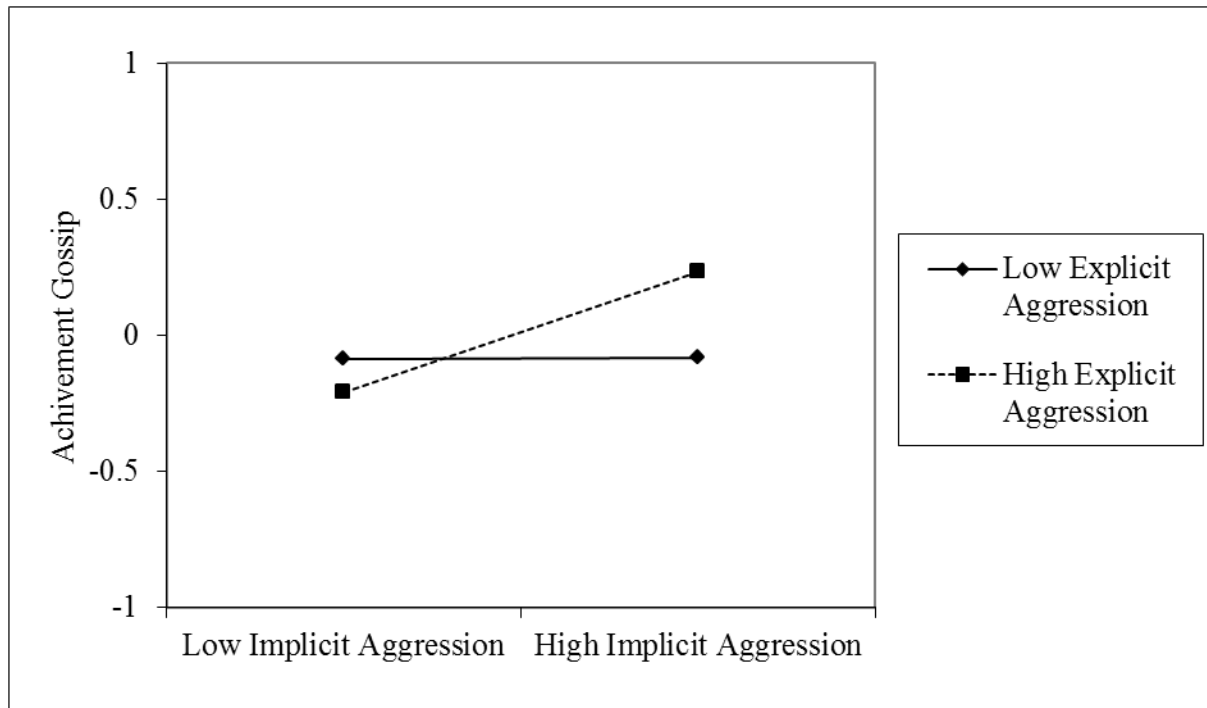


Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations of Variables in the Path Analysis (N = 353)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 TGQ-A	2.29	.92	1.00									
2 TGQ-PA	3.60	1.36	.41	1.00								
3 TGQ-SG	2.79	1.06	.50	.62	1.00							
4 TGQ-SI	3.27	1.33	.43	.74	.67	1.00						
5 MTG-SE	5.09	1.37	.03	.04	.09	.09	1.00					
6 MTG-NI	2.16	1.11	.24	.31	.26	.38	-.01	1.00				
7 MTG-IV	4.07	1.38	.05	.15	.12	.22	.34	.40	1.00			
8 MTG-GP	4.11	1.37	.08	.17	.16	.17	.40	.32	.67	1.00		
9 IA	4.80	2.07	.23	.30	.20	.44	.07	.47	.23	.19	1.00	
10 EA	22.04	4.63	.14	.20	.11	.29	.00	.31	.16	.07	.32	1.00

*Note.* TGQ-A = tendency to gossip about achievements; TGQ-PA = tendency to gossip about physical appearance; TGQ-SG = tendency to gossip about sublimated gossip; TGQ-SI = tendency to gossip about social information; MTG-SE = motive to gossip for social enjoyment; MTG-NI = motive to gossip for negative influence; MTG-IV = motive to gossip for information gathering/validation; MTG-GP = motive to gossip for group protection; IA = implicit aggression; EA = explicit aggression

Table 2  
*Decomposition of Effects from the Path Analysis*

Effect	(Intercept) Standardized Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
TGQ-SI	(-.001)			.25***
on MTG-SE	.054	.052	1.04	
on MTG-NI	.182	.057	3.18***	
on MTG-IV	.040	.065	0.61	
on MTG-GP	-.003	.065	-0.04	
on IA	.296	.052	5.71***	
on EA	.137	.049	2.77**	
TGQ-SG	(.001)			.09**
on MTG-SE	.068	.058	1.16	
on MTG-NI	.208	.063	3.30***	
on MTG-IV	-.067	.072	-0.93	
on MTG-GP	.093	.072	1.29	
on IA	.089	.059	1.51	
on EA	.016	.055	0.30	
TGQ-PA	(.001)			.14***
on MTG-SE	.010	.056	0.18	
on MTG-NI	.192	.061	3.12**	
on MTG-IV	-.035	.070	-0.50	
on MTG-GP	.085	.069	1.23	
on IA	.172	.057	3.02**	
on EA	.083	.053	1.57	
TGQ-A	(-.031)			.10***
on MTG-SE	.050	.058	.87	
on MTG-NI	.191	.063	3.06**	

on MTG-IV	-.126	.072	-1.75	
on MTG-GP	.056	.072	0.77	
on IA	.114	.059	0.11	
on EA	.048	.055	0.05	
on IA*EA	.109	.046	2.37*	
MTG-GP	(.004)			.04
on IA	.190	.054	3.46***	
on EA	.015	.055	0.27	
MTG_IV	(-.002)			.06*
on IA	.200	.053	3.75***	
on EA	.093	.054	1.73	
MTG-NI	(-.008)			.25***
on IA	.410	.046	9.00***	
on EA	.182	.048	3.78***	
MTG-SE	(.001)			.01
on IA	.080	.056	1.42	
on EA	-.030	.056	-0.52	

*Note.* TGQ-SI = tendency to gossip about social information; TGQ-SG = tendency to gossip about sublimated gossip; TGQ-PA = tendency to gossip about physical appearance; TGQ-A = tendency to gossip about achievements; IA = implicit aggression; EA = explicit aggression; MTG-GP = motive to gossip for group protection; MTG-IV = motive to gossip for information gathering/validation; MTG-NI = motive to gossip for negative influence; MTG-SE = motive to gossip for social enjoyment; \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Appendix A: IRB Approval



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office**  
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 · [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)

### Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: Mark Bowler  
CC:

Date: 4/10/2014  
Re: UMCIRB 13-002491  
Aggressive Behavior

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 4/10/2014 .  
This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category #2 .

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

The UMCIRB office will hold your exemption application for a period of five years from the date of this letter. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit an Exemption Certification request at least 30 days before the end of the five year period.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.



