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The Gendered Impact of Gossip on Perceptions of Powerful People

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess whether the effect of gossip on perceptions of powerful people varies as a function of the gender of powerful people. Previous research has demonstrated that gossip is used by low power people as a tool for controlling the reputation and constraining the influence of powerful people. However, previous research has not taken into account well-documented gender biases which may combine with this effect to suggest that gossip more effectively undermines the influence of women (versus men) who are power holders. This study is the first to examine whether the gender of powerful people affects the persuasiveness of gossip about them. In this study, students from the Pennsylvania State University were recruited through the university's psychology subject pool. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the four conditions of a student review of an accomplished professor. The reviews featured either a male or female professor and the type of information included in the review was either gossip or first-hand. Participants then completed dependent measures of social closeness, warmth and competence, dominance and prestige, perceived leadership integrity, and harm. We predict that gossip will more strongly undermine the perceptions of professors who are women than men. Specifically, we predict that when professors are the target of gossip that women, compared to men, will be perceived as less warm, less competent, less prestigious, more dominant, more harmful, and as having less leadership integrity. We also expect the participants to demonstrate a preference for greater social closeness to men than women who are targets of gossip. Contrary to predictions, we found that gossip undermined the reputation of the professor regardless of gender.

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This study has been approved by The Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board (#00021252) and pre-registered on AsPredicted (#113420 and #121087)

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Despite comprising about half of the American workforce and achieving higher levels of education than men, women in America are significantly underrepresented in high power positions (Hideg & Shen, 2019). Women make up only 19.9 percent of seats on boards of directors in S&P 500 companies (Catalyst, 2016a), 14.6 percent of executive officer positions at Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2013), and just 4.6 percent of S&P 500 CEOs (Catalyst, 2016b). The overall gender disparity in leadership positions restricts the career achievement of half of the country's population and limits overall organizational success. Many factors contribute to the gender disparity in leadership. An important factor is the prejudice in the form of backlash and negative evaluations that women in powerful positions are subject to. This has been demonstrated in both public and private sectors. One far-reaching example is the gendered criticism Hillary Clinton faced as a woman pursuing a leadership position in the 2016 presidential election (Brescoll et al., 2018).

The goal of the present work is to examine if gossip more effectively and extremely undermines the reputation of powerful women than powerful men. To consider this possibility, we first discuss the conceptualization of gossip as a form of prosocial action to control abuses of power and review recent relevant work. Additionally, the role of power levels in gossip are analyzed, demonstrating its value for low-power individuals. Next, we explore theories which account for the gender biases faced by women in powerful positions. An example of gossip being used to undermine a woman leader in the popular media is offered, as it served as the inspiration to this study. This leads us to the hypothesis that, due to existing gender biases which result in

negative evaluations and backlash, gossip is a powerful tool used to harm perceptions of woman leaders, more so than men.

### **Gossip**

Gossip is defined as “a conversation about a third person who is not participating in the conversation” (Wittek & Wielers, 1998, p. 1). As gossip plays a large role in social networks and is known as a “central organizational construct”, it is crucial to understand its functions and power (Sun et al., 2023, p. 312). One suggested function of gossip is that of a prosocial nature. Prosocial gossip is gossip that shares negative information about an individual to protect others from the potentially harmful behavior of the target of gossip (Feinburg et al., 2012). This demonstrates a motivation for sharing negative evaluations through gossip with the goal of protecting others. Additionally, levels of power are often involved when gossip takes place. Keltner et al. (2008) demonstrated that gossip is often used by low-power people to assert power over those in positions above them. Because low power people have limited means for control, sharing negative gossip is a tool which allows them to influence the reputation of power holders. This, in turn, grants low power individuals the ability to curtail leaders’ authority and power. This demonstrates the process through which gossip has the potential to harm the reputation of a leader and their followers' perceptions of them.

As gossip is a powerful resource, understanding the conditions which impact its influence is critical. One factor which may play a role is gender. Below we turn attention to gender biases and gendered processes that disadvantage women.

### **Gender Biases and Backlash**

Women in powerful positions may be evaluated more negatively than male leaders due to role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This theory proposes that when individuals hold

stereotypes about certain groups, prejudice often arises when a member of the group is perceived as incongruent with the stereotype. Eagly & Karau (2002) proposed that this applies to women leaders, as individuals perceive stereotypical female characteristics as incongruent with characteristics required for leadership. Holding a powerful role is consistent with expectations for male behaviors and characteristics, but not female. According to the role incongruity theory, this violation of stereotypes leads to prejudice towards female leaders. This causes women to be perceived as less favorable for a potential leadership position and when women complete leader behaviors, they are evaluated more negatively (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Powerful women often face high rates of backlash. Backlash refers to “social and economic reprisals for behaving counter stereotypically” (Rudman & Phelan, 2008, p.1). Rudman et al. (2012) argue that women in leadership positions often face backlash due to the status incongruity hypothesis. This theory proposes that women, due to their gender, are perceived as low in status. However, women who hold powerful positions are incongruent with this status expectation. This is particularly true in women leaders who exhibit agentic behavior. According to the status incongruity hypothesis, the disconnect between an agentic women leader and status expectations leads to backlash. Rudman et al. (2012) also demonstrated that backlash against women leaders was mediated by a dominance penalty. The dominance penalty explains that agentic women are viewed as more extreme in dominance compared to agentic men, leading these women to be liked less than equivalently behaving men. This results in backlash against agentic women to defend the gender status quo. Rudman et al. (2012) demonstrated this phenomenon as agentic women leaders were more likely to endure sabotage than men who were viewed as similarly qualified in their study.



## **Gossip as a Form of Gendered Backlash**

We suggest that backlash may take the form of gossip. For example, a recent article in the Washington Post, which is a well-respected news outlet, targeted Kamala Harris, the current Vice President of the United States. The article focused on the resignation of one of Harris' high-profile office members. Despite the office member stating that the resignation was a positive one caused by personal preference, the author of the article implies that Harris is the problem. The article cited many outside sources and speculations about Harris as evidence against her character and leadership abilities. In doing so, the article appears to capitalize on gossip as a function to discredit Kamala Harris, the first woman elected as Vice President of the United States. The influence of this gossip is potentially more damaging to follower's perception of her, due to her gender and status level. Harris is a high-status woman leader who displays agentic behaviors. Consistent with the role incongruity theory and status incongruity hypothesis, it is expected that Kamala Harris would be viewed more negatively and face strong backlash. This led us to theorize that the impact of gossip on people's perceptions of leaders varies by gender, such that women's reputations are more negatively impacted.

Women in powerful positions face prejudice which leads perceivers to evaluate them less favorably than male leaders and enact backlash against them (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman et al., 2012). Additionally, people in lower power positions have scarce opportunities and resources to assert power over those above them. Gossip is one tool through which low power individuals can influence the reputation and authority of high-power individuals. Therefore, gossip may be a resource for individuals to exhibit prejudice against women leaders. Furthermore, the motivation behind gossip has been argued to be prosocial, meaning individuals partake in it to protect others (Feinburg et al., 2012). However, when considering prejudice towards women leaders, citing the

use of gossip as prosocial may simply be a justification for sexism. This led us to theorize that gossip would be more impactful on the perceptions of women leaders than leaders who are men.

### **Overview of Hypotheses and the Present Research**

While we expect gossip to generally lead to more negative evaluations of powerful people, we hypothesize that when presented with gossip about a leader, evaluations will be more negative when the leader is a woman than a man. To test this, we created stimuli material which presented information about a professor, a powerful position which is relevant to the sample of our study. The information in the stimuli material was either gossip or first-hand information about the same professor, creating two conditions for information type. The type of information (gossip or first-hand) was also crossed with professor gender so that participants either read first-hand information or gossip about a professor who was either a man or a woman. After reading a vignette, students provided their impressions of the professor.

We predicted that when viewing these materials, participants would evaluate women leaders in the gossip condition most negatively. Additionally, we predicted the impact of gossip would be stronger for the women leaders, such that the difference between evaluations of women in the second-hand information condition versus gossip would be larger than the difference between each condition when the professor is a man. Participants evaluated the professor in terms of perceived harm, preferred social closeness, warmth and competence, dominance and prestige, and perceived leadership integrity.

## Chapter 2 Study 1

### Methods

#### Participants

Participants were 199 male<sup>1</sup> undergraduate students from the Pennsylvania State University, who were recruited through the psychology department's subject pool and who are over the age of 18. IRB approval was obtained, and study predictions were preregistered (#113420) prior to recruiting participants. The study was posted on the psychology subject pool website. Participants selected this study on the website and obtained partial course credit for their participation. Students are given multiple opportunities in these courses for obtaining credit and participating in research through the subject pool is one of these opportunities.

#### Procedure and Design

Participants completed the study through an online survey. Participants read a consent form which informed them that the study would examine the impact of student reviews on impressions of professors. Then, participants were asked to read two short paragraphs. One paragraph was a biography of an accomplished professor and the other contained a student's review of the same professor.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions created by crossing professor gender (male, female) with information condition (gossip, first-hand) in a between participants design. All participants read the following description of a named professor:

Professor Anderson is the Eugene Higgins Professor of Psychology. He/She is known for his/her work on social cognition, person perception, and emotion. Professor Anderson

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<sup>1</sup> 201 female participants also signed up to complete the experiment in Study 1, however, their responses on the critical dependent variables were lost due to a programming error with Qualtrics.

has published more than 150 academic articles and has received numerous teaching and research awards. Professor Anderson has served as president of the American Psychological Association and is an elected member of the National Academy of Sciences.

After reading the basic information about the professors, participants read an evaluation of a male or female professor that was based on either first-hand experience or gossip. In the first-hand experience conditions, participants read the following:

I dropped Professor Anderson's class this past semester. It was not because of problems with him/her, but because I had schedule conflicts. I know Professor Anderson is old school tough; he/she demands a lot of work in his classes. He/she is also direct with his critiques of your work. I feel better when professors say, "good job, but . . ." and then more kindly suggest how I can improve my work. It is easier on my confidence and mood. But I have learned more from Professor Anderson when I had him/her for a previous class than I have learned from any other professor. I am sure I would have learned a lot from him/her in this class as well, if I didn't have to drop it. I think it is interesting that even though other faculty members say it's common for students to drop classes throughout the semester, people assume that if you drop Professor Anderson class it is because he/she is to blame.

In the gossip condition, the student evaluations were based on hearsay and shown below:

Professor Anderson had many students drop his/her class this past semester. The students that dropped his/her class say it was not because of problems with Professor Anderson, but because they're taking their work in a new direction or had schedule conflicts, but I heard that Professor Anderson is too demanding and aggressive. I know several people who have taken one of his/her courses and in our little text groups they talk about what the common denominator in students dropping his/her classes -- it's him/her. They have told me that throughout the semester it's clear you're working with a man/woman who is not willing to do the necessary prep or work. They also said that with Professor Anderson you have to put up with a constant amount of soul-destroying criticism and also his/her own lack of confidence. And even though other faculty members say it's common for students to drop classes throughout the semester, I was told that everyone agrees that Professor Anderson is to blame.

After reading the short, 265-word paragraph of a student's evaluation of a professor, participants reported their preferred social closeness in relation to the professor, their impressions of the professor's warmth, competence, prestige, dominance, and integrity. Participants then answered demographic questions. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Dependent Variables

**Social Closeness.** Participants completed a modified version of a Social Distance Scale (Crandall, 1991). This scale assessed participants' willingness and comfort interacting with the professor in various contexts. The scale was revised to fit the scenario and consisted of 9 Likert scale questions. Participants indicated their level of agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (see Appendix A). An example of an item is "I wouldn't mind asking Professor Anderson questions after class." We averaged across responses to create a social closeness variable ( $\alpha = .90$ ); higher numbers reflected greater willingness and comfort interacting with the professor.

**Professor Evaluations: Warmth and Competence.** The warmth and competence scale (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007) was used to measure participant's perception of the accuracy of the following attributes as they describe the professor: warm, friendly, well-intentioned, considerate, competent, talented, intelligent, persistent. Participants indicated the level of accuracy on a 5-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (see Appendix A). We averaged across appropriate items to create a warmth variable (i.e., warm, friendly, well-intentioned, considerate,  $\alpha = .77$ ) and a competence variable (i.e., competent, talented, intelligent, persistent,  $\alpha = .85$ ). Because the same pattern of results emerged across warmth and competence variables we also averaged across all items to create a single evaluation variable ( $\alpha = .80$ ), which is presented in the results section. Higher numbers indicated greater perceived warmth and competence.

**Dominance and Prestige.** The Dominance and Prestige Peer Rating scale (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010) was used to measure participants' perceptions of the degree of respect, regard, and admiration afforded to the professor by the academic community and the influence or control

the professor exercised over others. The scale was revised to fit the scenario and consisted of 17 Likert scale questions. Participants indicated how well they felt the statements described the professor on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much” (see Appendix A). An example of an item is “Students do NOT value his/her opinion.” After reverse scoring appropriate items, responses were submitted to a principal components factor analysis using a varimax rotation. The scree plot confirmed a two-factor solution. We averaged across items loading on the first factor (i.e., items 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, and 17), which accounted for 33.20% of the variance, to create a dominance variable ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Higher numbers revealed more dominance. We also averaged across items loading on the second factor, (i.e., items 1, 4, 6, 8, 13, 14, and 15), which accounted for 19.33% of the variance, to create a prestige variable ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Higher numbers revealed more perceived prestige.

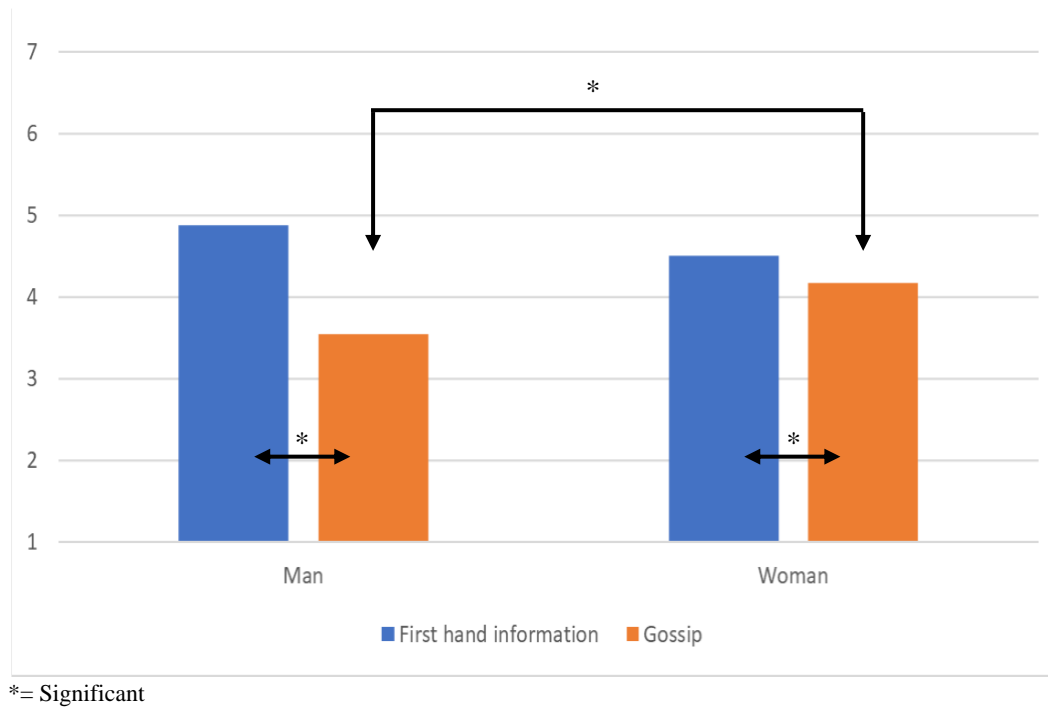
**Leadership Integrity.** The Perceived Leadership Integrity Scale (Craig & Gustafson, 1998) was used to measure the participants’ perceptions of the leaders’ quality of morality, honesty, and truthfulness with him or herself and others. The scale was revised slightly to fit the scenario and consisted of 31 Likert scale question. Participants indicated how well they felt the statements described the professor on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “exactly” (see appendix A). An example of an item is “Would limit my educational opportunities to prevent me from advancing.” We averaged across responses to individual items to create an integrity variable ( $\alpha = .98$ ). Higher numbers revealed less integrity.

## Results

Each variable (social closeness, professor evaluations, dominance, prestige, and leadership integrity) was submitted to a professor gender (male, female) by type of information (gossip, first-hand experience) between participants Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). A main effect of gossip emerged on each variable: social closeness ( $F(1,195) = 32.11, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .141$ ), professor evaluation ( $F(1,195) = 24.42, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .111$ ), warmth ( $F(1,195) = 17.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .081$ ), competence ( $F(1,195) = 13.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .063$ ), dominance ( $F(1,194) = 10.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .052$ ), prestige ( $F(1,194) = 69.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .262$ ) and leadership integrity ( $F(1,193) = 26.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .120$ ). In the gossip (vs. first-hand experience) conditions, participants preferred more distance from the professor ( $M_s = 3.86$  vs.  $4.69$ ) and more negatively evaluated the professor ( $M_s = 3.35$  vs.  $2.91$ ). Participants also perceived the professor as more dominant ( $M_s = 4.22$  vs.  $4.64$ ), less prestigious ( $M_s = 4.79$  vs.  $3.70$ ), and having less leadership integrity ( $M_s = 1.93$  vs.  $1.50$ ).

However, the main effect of gossip was qualified by a professor gender by information condition interaction on two variables: social closeness ( $F(1,195) = 11.47, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .056$ ), and perceived prestige ( $F(1,194) = 5.51, p = .020, \eta_p^2 = .028$ ). To interpret these interactions, we performed simple effects tests comparing the magnitude of the information condition effect within gender and by comparing the magnitude of the gender effect within information condition. The means for the interaction on social closeness are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Means for the interaction on social closeness



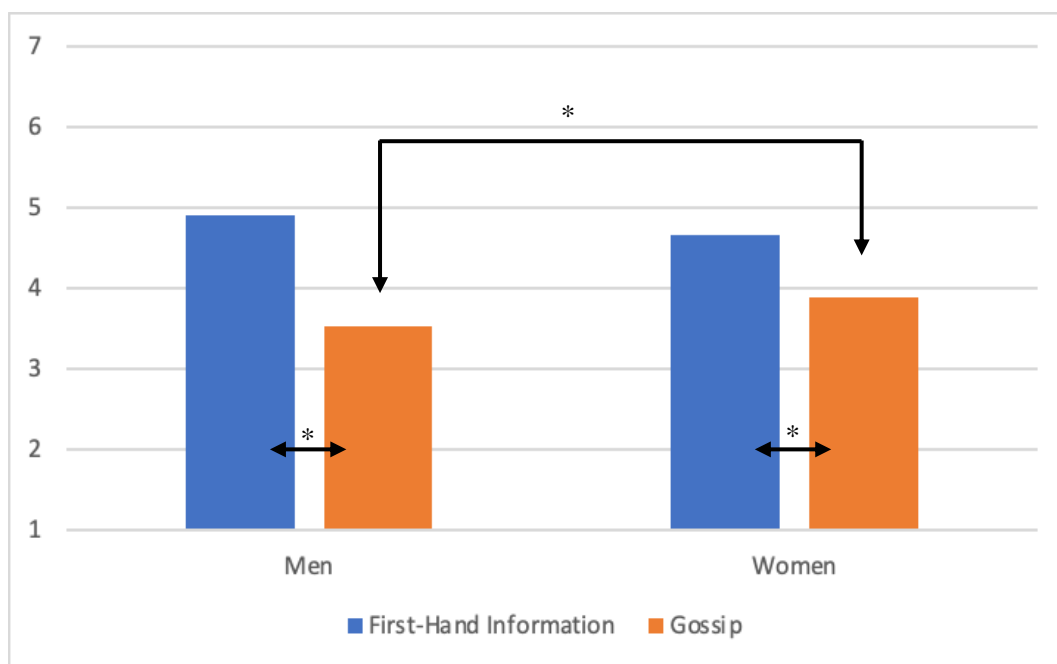
When the professor was a man, participants in the gossip (vs. first-hand information) condition preferred less social closeness ( $F(1, 195) = 41.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .174$ ). By contrast, when the professor was a woman, participants preferred closeness to the professor did not vary as a function of information condition ( $F(1, 195) = 2.59, p = .109, \eta_p^2 = .013$ ). Comparisons within information condition further revealed, contrary to predictions, that in the gossip condition greater social closeness was preferred to the woman than the man ( $F(1, 195) = 8.69, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .043$ ). In the first-hand information conditions, however, preferred closeness did not vary as a function of professor gender.

A similar pattern emerged on perceived prestige of the professor. Again, we performed simple effects tests comparing the magnitude of the information condition effect within gender



and by comparing the magnitude of the gender effect within information condition. The means for the interaction on social closeness are presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 Means for the interaction on perceived prestige**



\*= Significant

Participants perceived both the male and the female professor as less prestigious in the gossip (vs. first-hand information), but this effect was stronger when the professor was male ( $F(1, 194) = 57.33, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .228$ ), than when the professor was female ( $F(1, 194) = 17.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .083$ ). Comparisons within information condition further revealed, contrary to predictions, that in the gossip condition the professor was perceived as more prestigious when a woman than a man ( $F(1, 194) = 3.78, p = .053, \eta_p^2 = .019$ ). In the first-hand information conditions, however, perceived prestige did not vary as a function of professor gender ( $F(1, 194) = 1.89, p = .171, \eta_p^2 = .010$ ). However, the effect was stronger when professors were men than when professors were women.

## Discussion

We analyzed five variables in Study 1 and a main effect of gossip emerged on each. Gossip undermined leader reputation. Contrary to predictions, the professor gender by information condition interaction was significant on only two variables: social closeness and perceived prestige. However, the means corresponding to the interaction were in a direction opposite to predictions. The predicted interaction on social closeness and perceived prestige revealed that the effects of gossip were stronger when the professor was a man than a woman. Male participants preferred less social closeness and perceived less professor prestige when receiving gossip about the professor who was a man compared to a woman.

In Study 1, the participants were all men. This was due to an error. Because of this error, it is unclear whether women participants would respond similarly to the men of this study. It is possible that women may show negativity towards women and the results would demonstrate our predicted effect. If this were the case, the black sheep hypothesis may be at play. The black sheep hypothesis states that an undesirable person is evaluated more critically by their in-group members (Marques et al., 1988). However, if women respond similarly or the same as the men of this study, this may be indicative of the women-are-wonderful effect. This phenomenon suggests that women are evaluated more positively overall by both men and women (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). To understand how women will respond, study two will include participants who are women. The variable of perceived harm to the professor's students will also be added, to assess whether there are gender differences in perceived effect on others, as well as general evaluations.

## Chapter 3 Study 2

Study 2 aims to analyze whether the effect observed in Study 1 holds when women participants are included. Study 1 demonstrated that gossip undermined social closeness preferences and prestige perceptions of professors who are men, but contrary to predictions, not or more so when the professor was a woman. If the effect of gossip is qualified by a higher order interaction on the variables of social closeness and perceived prestige in the results of Study 2, then this study will test between the competing possible explanations for the contrary findings of Study 1. If the results of Study 1 are replicated in Study 2, the women-are-wonderful effect may be at play, such that people – men and women - evaluate women more positively than men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). However, a competing prediction is the presence of the black sheep effect (Marques et al., 1988). This may be present if women demonstrate more critical evaluations when the professor is a woman.

### Methods

#### Participants

Participants were 192 male and 200 female undergraduate students from the Pennsylvania State University, who were recruited through the psychology department's subject pool and who are over the age of 18. IRB approval was obtained, and study predictions were preregistered (#121087) prior to recruiting participants. The study was posted on the psychology subject pool website. Participants selected this study on the website and obtained partial course credit for their participation. Students are given multiple opportunities in these courses for

obtaining credit and participating in research through the subject pool is one of these opportunities.

### **Procedure and Design**

The procedure and design of Study 2 was identical to Study 1, with two exceptions. First, Study 2 included participants who were women, as well as men. Second, Study 2 included a measure of perceived harm.

### **Dependent Variables**

**Harm.** Perceived harm was added to the study to measure participant's perceptions of the level of harm that the professor's actions had on the students. This consisted of three Likert scale questions. Participants indicated their level of agreement with the three statements on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (see Appendix A). An example of an item is "Professor Anderson's actions were stressful to the students." We averaged across responses to create a harm variable ( $\alpha = .60$ ). Higher numbers indicate greater perceived harm.

**Social Closeness.** Measured using the same measure as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Warmth and Competence.** Measured the same way as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .85$ ). We again created warmth ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and competence ( $\alpha = .88$ ) variables.

**Dominance and Prestige.** Measured the same way as in Study 1, which allowed us to create dominance ( $\alpha = .59$ ) and prestige ( $\alpha = .87$ ) variables.

**Leadership Integrity.** Measured the same way as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .98$ ).

## Results

We submitted each dependent variable (harm, social closeness, professor evaluations, dominance, prestige, and leadership integrity) to a professor gender (male, female) by information condition (first-hand, gossip) by participant gender (male, female) between participants ANOVA. As in Study 1, a main effect of information condition emerged on each variable: social closeness ( $F(1,187) = 35.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .161$ ), professor evaluation ( $F(1,187) = 43.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .190$ ), warmth ( $F(1,187) = 36.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .164$ ), competence ( $F(1,187) = 19.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .095$ ), dominance ( $F(1,187) = 7.41, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .038$ ), prestige ( $F(1,187) = 58.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .237$ ), leadership integrity ( $F(1,187) = 20.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .098$ ) and harm ( $F(1,186) = 42.98, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .188$ ). As in Study 1, in the gossip (vs. first-hand experience) conditions, participants preferred more distance from the professor ( $M_s = 3.79$  and  $4.76$ ) and more negatively evaluated the professor ( $M_s = 2.82$  and  $3.41$ ). Participants also perceived the professor as more dominant ( $M_s = 4.51$  vs.  $4.26$ ), less prestigious ( $M_s = 3.73$  vs.  $4.77$ ), having less leadership integrity ( $M_s = 1.92$  vs.  $1.52$ ), and delivering more harm to students ( $M_s = 3.45$  vs.  $2.78$ ). There was also a significant main effect of participant gender on social closeness ( $F(1,373) = 7.84, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .021$ ); preferred social closeness to the professor was smaller for participants who were men ( $M = 4.27$ ) than for participants who were women ( $M = 3.97$ ).

Importantly, neither the main effects of information condition on each variable nor the main effect of participant gender on social closeness was qualified by a higher order interaction. In other words, contrary to predictions, professor gender did not interact with information condition. Participants were less favorable in their perceptions and evaluations of professors in

the gossip condition than in the first-hand information condition and this was equally true when the professor was a man as when the professor was a woman.

### **Discussion**

The findings of Study 2 document the importance of gossip. In the gossip condition, compared to first-hand information condition, participants perceived the professor as less warm, less competent, more dominant, less prestigious, and has having less leadership integrity. Participants also preferred greater social closeness to the professor in the first-hand information condition than in the gossip condition. Contrary to predictions, these effects were not qualified by a higher order interaction. These effects held regardless of the gender of the professor and held regardless of the gender of the participant.

## Chapter 4 General Discussion

As noted at the outset, the prediction that motivated the present work was that gossip about a powerful person would lead to more negative perceptions of a leader compared to first-hand information sharing, particularly when the powerful person is a woman versus a man. In other words, we predicted that the impact of gossip about powerful people would vary as a function of gender, leading to women leaders being perceived most negatively, undermining their reputations more effectively than men's. As a result, we expected the difference in the results between information condition (first-hand and gossip) to be larger when the target is a woman compared to man. In terms of the outcomes examined in this study, we specifically predicted that women (vs. men) leaders who were women who were targets of gossip would be perceived as less warm, less competent, more dominant, less prestigious, and as having less leadership integrity. Also, we expected results to show greater preferred social closeness to men who were targets of gossip compared to women who were targets of gossip. The findings of Study 1 led to a mixed set of findings. Consistent with predictions, we found that gossip undermined the reputations of professors. That gossip effect was also qualified by the predicted professor gender by information condition interaction on social closeness and prestige, however, the effects were small and/or marginally significant and in a direction opposite of predictions; namely, gossip (vs. first-hand information) led to less preferred social closeness and less perceived prestige when the professor was a man than a woman.

The mixed findings of Study 1 led us to consider two alternative sets of predictions in the design of Study 2: the women-are-wonderful effect and the black sheep hypothesis. When women were included, along with men, as participants in Study 2 it was possible that a black

sheep effect might have led to more negativity toward poor performing in-group members. In that case we would have expected that participants who were women would show negativity towards women and participants who were men would show more negativity toward men; in other words, a participant gender by professor gender by information condition interaction would be expected to emerge as evidence of the black sheep hypothesis (Marques et al., 1988). By contrast, the findings of Study 1 could have also been due to a women-are-wonderful effect, resulting in the predicted professor gender by information condition interaction in the opposite direction as originally predicted (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). If the results of Study 1 were due to a women-are-wonderful effect, then the findings of Study 2 would have revealed that gossip overall lead to less favorable evaluations of the professor than first-hand information. However, in Study 2, gossip was not qualified by information condition on any dependent variable. In other words, we did not replicate the two-way interactions documented in Study 1 nor did we document three-way interactions that would support the black sheep hypothesis. In sum, although Study 2 was designed to test between competing predictions made by the women-are-wonderful effect versus the black sheep hypothesis, Study 2 only demonstrated the main effect of gossip regardless of gender.

Together, the results of Studies 1 and 2 show a strong effect of gossip. Professors were less positively evaluated, avoided, perceived as less prestigious, and perceived as having less leadership integrity in the gossip condition than in the first-hand information condition, but that effect was not qualified by professor gender.



## Limitations and Future Research

This study was inspired by a Washington Post article which used gossip as evidence against Kamala Harris, a woman in a leadership role displaying agentic behaviors. However, there are some limitations of our interpretation of the original research and design of the current studies that suggest important directions for future research.

First, the focus of the Washington Post article was on gossip and inuendo directed toward a woman of color. In the present research, we did not specify the ethnicity of the professors, however, our sample was predominantly White undergraduates. Much prior research indicates that when White people think of average people, they assume a White, male default unless otherwise told (Zarate & Smith, 1980). Participants were told that the target was male or female. But neither ethnicity nor race was indicated. In addition, most professors at the Pennsylvania State University are White (*Faculty and Staff Data Digest*, n.d). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that our White participants called to mind a White professor. It is therefore possible that gossip is particularly influential in undermining the reputations of women of color, as another factor that women with intersecting identities face which white women and men of color do not.

Second, it is possible that the combination of gossip and gender bias allowed this article to be published in such a widely known media source and accepted by the general public as reliable information. However, it is possible that expectations for journalistic integrity were simply lowered due to the gender biases at play, allowing the article to be published. This poses an interesting area for future research, as journalistic and moral standards for information-sharing may be impacted by gender biases.

Finally, the Washington Post article used gossip which targeted a woman in one of the highest positions in the American government. Because of this position, Kamala Harris is widely known. The use of gossip when targeting famous figures may be different than that of an everyday person. Gossip which targets a person of very high status may serve a different purpose for individuals and vary in its influence, as it allows for low-stakes judgement which may offer personal stress relief or even parasocial connection.

Our study was based on a narrow view of gossip, as we only analyzed gender biases towards powerful women. Taking an intersectional approach to gossip study presents an opportunity for further research. The varying standards for information sharing based on the target's gender also presents an area for further exploration. Finally, the function and impact of gossip may differ by the status of the target, such that gossip about widely known people can serve different purposes than gossip which targets those not of celebrity status. This offers yet another intriguing area for potential future research involving gossip.

## Appendix A Dependent Variables Scales

### Social Closeness

Using the below scale, please indicate your agreement with the following 7 items.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

Original:

1. Dan Lewis appears to be a likeable person.
2. I would like Dan Lewis to be a close personal friend.
3. I wouldn't mind it at all for Dan Lewis to move into my neighborhood.
4. I would like Dan Lewis to come and work at the same place I do.
5. Dan Lewis is a person who is similar to me.
6. I would like to have Dan Lewis marry into my family.
7. Dan Lewis is the kind of person that I tend to avoid.

Revision:

1. Professor Anderson appears to be an accomplished Professor.
2. I wouldn't mind at all if Professor Anderson worked at my university.
3. I wouldn't mind at all if Professor Anderson worked in my major department.
4. I would like to take a class from Professor Anderson
5. I wouldn't mind asking Professor Anderson questions after class.
6. I wouldn't mind going to Professor Anderson's office hours.
7. I would like to work in Professor Anderson's lab as a research assistant.
8. I would like to have a letter of recommendation from Professor Anderson.
9. Professor Anderson is the kind of professor that I tend to avoid.

**Warmth and competence**

Please rate the following attributes on how accurately they portray Professor Anderson.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Not at all                      Somewhat                      Extremely

1. Warm
2. Friendly
3. Well-intentioned
4. Considerate
5. Competent
6. Talented
7. Intelligent
8. Persistent

**Dominance and Prestige Peer Rating**

Select responses to indicate how well you believe each item describes Professor Anderson.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Somewhat			Very much

**Original:**

1. Members of your group respect and admire him/her.
2. Members of your group do NOT want to be like him/her.
3. He/she enjoys having control over other members of the group.
4. Members of your group always expect him/her to be successful.
5. He/she often tries to get his/her own way regardless of what others in the group may want.
6. Members of your group do NOT value his/her opinion.
7. He/she is willing to use aggressive tactics to get his/her way.
8. He/she is held in high esteem by members of the group.
9. He/she tries to control others rather than permit them to control him/her.
10. He/she does NOT have a forceful or dominant personality.
11. Members of the group know it is better to let him/her have his/her way.
12. He/she does NOT enjoy having authority over other members of the group.
13. His/her unique talents and abilities are recognized by others in the group.
14. He/she is considered an expert on some matters by members of the group.
15. Members of your group seek his/her advice on a variety of matters.
16. Members of your group are afraid of him/her.
17. Others do NOT enjoy hanging out with him/her.

**Revision:**

1. Students respect and admire him/her.
2. Students do NOT want to be like him/her.
3. He/she enjoys having control over students
4. Students always expect him/her to be successful.
5. He/she often tries to get his/her own way regardless of what students may want.
6. Students do NOT value his/her opinion.
7. He/she is willing to use aggressive tactics to get his/her way.
8. He/she is held in high esteem by students.
9. He/she tries to control others rather than permit them to control him/her.
10. He/she does NOT have a forceful or dominant personality.
11. Students know it is better to let him/her have his/her way.
12. He/she does NOT enjoy having authority over students.
13. His/her unique talents and abilities are recognized by students.
14. He/she is considered an expert on some matters by students.
15. Students seek his/her advice on a variety of matters.
16. Students are afraid of him/her.
17. Others do NOT enjoy hanging out with him/her.

### Perceived Leadership Integrity Scale

Select responses to indicate how well you believe each item describes Professor Anderson.

1	2	3	4
Not at all	Somewhat	Very much	Exactly

Original:

1. Would use my mistakes to attack me personally
2. Always gets even
3. Gives special favors to certain “pet” employees, but not to me
4. Would lie to me
5. Would risk me to protect himself/herself in work matters
6. Deliberately fuels conflict among employees
7. Is evil
8. Would use my performance appraisal to criticize me as a person
9. Has it in for me
10. Would allow me to be blamed for his/her mistake
11. Would falsify records if it would help his/her work situation
12. Lacks high morals
13. Makes fun of my mistakes instead of coaching me as to how to do my job better
14. Would deliberately exaggerate my mistakes to make me look bad when describing my performance to his/her superiors
15. Is vindictive
16. Would blame me for his/her own mistake
17. Avoids coaching me because (s)he wants me to fail
18. Would treat me better if I belonged to a different ethnic group
19. Would deliberately distort what I say
20. Deliberately makes employees angry at each other
21. Is a hypocrite
22. Would limit my training opportunities to prevent me from advancing
23. Would blackmail an employee if (s)he thought (s)he could get away with it
24. Enjoys turning down my requests
25. Would make trouble for me if I got on his/her bad side
26. Would take credit for my ideas
27. Would steal from the organization
28. Would risk me to get back at someone else
29. Would engage in sabotage against the organization
30. Would fire people just because (s)he doesn’t like them if (s)he could get away with it
31. Would do things which violate organizational policy and then expect his/her subordinates to cover for him/her

Revision:

1. Would use my mistakes to attack me personally
2. Always gets even
3. Gives special favors to certain “pet” students, but not to me
4. Would lie to me
5. Would risk me to protect himself/herself in work matters
6. Deliberately fuels conflict among students

7. Is evil
8. Would use my performance appraisal to criticize me as a person
9. Has it in for me
10. Would allow me to be blamed for his/her mistake
11. Would falsify records if it would help his/her situation
12. Lacks high morals
13. Makes fun of my mistakes instead of coaching me as to how to do my school work better
14. Would deliberately exaggerate my mistakes to make me look bad when describing my performance
15. Is vindictive
16. Would blame me for his/her own mistake
17. Avoids coaching me because (s)he wants me to fail
18. Would treat me better if I belonged to a different ethnic group
19. Would deliberately distort what I say
20. Deliberately makes students angry at each other
21. Is a hypocrite
22. Would limit my educational opportunities to prevent me from advancing
23. Would blackmail a student if (s)he thought (s)he could get away with it
24. Enjoys turning down my requests
25. Would make trouble for me if I got on his/her bad side
26. Would take credit for my ideas
27. Would steal from the university
28. Would risk me to get back at someone else
29. Would engage in sabotage against the university
30. Would fire people just because (s)he doesn't like them if (s)he could get away with it
31. Would do things which violate the university's policy and then expect his/her students to cover for him/her

**Harm**

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Neither Agree nor disagree		Strongly Agree

1. The students were harmed by Professor Anderson
2. Professor Anderson's actions were stressful to the students
3. It is likely that Professor Anderson's actions made students feel safe



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## ACADEMIC VITA

**Morgan Zipfel**

### **Education**

**B.S. in Psychology with business concentration**

2019 – 2023

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Schreyer Honors College

Thesis: *The Gendered Impact of Gossip on Perceptions of Powerful People*

Advisor: Dr. Theresa Vescio

### **Honors and Awards**

- Schreyer Honors College scholar
- Dean's List Honoree in the College of the Liberal Arts, 7 semesters
- Member of Psi Chi, International Honors Society for Psychology
- Top 8 Presentation in KCF Technologies' Future Innovators Program Capstone project
- Harold L. Hinman Memorial Scholarship, \$1500
- Liberal Arts Enrichment Fund, \$1500
- Schreyer Honors College Grant, \$1500

### **Research Experience**

**Research Assistant**, Gender, Privilege, and Power Lab

May 2021 – Present

Social Psychology Lab

Director: Dr. Theresa K. Vescio

- Conceptualized study designs with research advisor, graduate students, and other research assistants
- Collaborated with other lab participants to construct surveys and attitude scales
- Theorized with research advisor following completion of studies
- Analyzed data via SPSS software

**Research Assistant**, Workplace Emotional Labor and Diversity Lab.

May 2022 – Present

Industrial-Organizational Lab

Director: Dr. Alicia Grandey

- Assisted graduate students and research advisor with research projects through coding data, authoring literature reviews, and creating data graphics
- Evaluated academic articles with research advisor, graduate students, and other research assistants

## **Conference Presentations**

**Zipfel, M., Hilands, H., & French, R. (2021, April).** *Attitudes Towards the COVID-19 Vaccine.* Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Psi Chi Undergraduate Research Conference, State College

## **Teaching**

### **Teaching Assistant, Psych 281**

January 2023 – Present

#### Intro to Industrial-Organizational Psychology

- Assisted Dr. Amie Skattebo in teaching introductory I-O psychology course for class of 80 students
- Advanced student learning by holding weekly office hours to address any questions or concerns

### **Teaching Assistant, Psych 100**

August 2022 – December 2022

#### Intro Psychology

- Assisted Dr. Sean Laurent in teaching introductory psychology course for class of over 350 students
- Advanced student learning by holding weekly office hours to address any questions or concerns
- Generated questions for 5 course exams
- Led virtual exam review sessions for 5 course exams

### **Peer Mentor, Business Psychology**

#### Psi Chi International Honors Society

- Created communication channels for members interested in the business area of psychology
- Planned social events for members

## **Service**

### **Member of Epsilon Sigma Alpha, Greek service organization**

February 2019 – Present

### **Member of THON Fundraising Team, Epsilon Sigma Alpha**

May 2021 – January 2022

- Contributed to fundraising efforts for THON, a student-run philanthropy committed to enhancing the lives of children and families impacted by childhood cancer
- Elected to position by members of the organization
- Collaborated with team to create, plan, promote, and execute 5 fundraising events

**Independent Dancer Couple, Penn State THON**

August 2022 – Present

- Year-long effort to reach fundraising goal with a partner which will allow pair to participate in Thon weekend, the 46-hour no-sitting, no sleeping event which is dedicated to advancing the mission of THON
- Successfully met fundraising goal by raising over \$4,000

**Skills**

- Qualtrics Programming
- SPSS Data Analysis Software
- SONA participant software
- Microsoft Office proficient
- Google Workspace proficient
- Limited proficiency in French language

**Certification**

Social and Behavioral Human Subjects Research IRB certified

October 2021- Present