Research on the changing mechanism of negative workplace gossip on helping behavior in Chinese cultural context

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Abstract: *Based on the moral cleansing theory, our study investigates the effect of negative workplace gossip on helping behavior. In our study, 170 employees of enterprises in China were investigated by Internet questionnaire. The results showed that guilt played a partial mediating role in the influence of negative workplace gossip on helping behavior. Our study further enriched moral cleansing theory, provided a new research perspective and theoretical basis for the study of negative workplace gossip, and also provided new enlightenment for enterprises to cope with employees' negative behaviors.*

Keywords: *Moral cleansing theory, Face awareness, Negative workplace gossip, helping behavior*

1. Introduction

In the workplace, employees often enjoy talking gossip in the office, in the break room or in the hallway. In China, people call this practice "spill the tea". Workplace gossip is an important part of an employee's job. Workplace gossip refers to the exchange of information about absent third parties in a social context known to all participants [1]. However, employees are more likely to talk about negative workplace gossip in the workplace. Negative workplace gossip refers to the negative, informal and evaluative talk about another absent member in an organization [2]. Therefore, Negative workplace gossip is generally regarded as a kind of workplace cold violence. In a gossip event, the main body of workplace gossip mainly includes the gossip speaker, the gossip listener and the gossip target. As an important participant in workplace gossip, the gossip speaker have attracted the attention of many researchers in previous studies. Throughout previous studies, the spread of negative workplace gossip has certain negative effects on both organizations and individuals, such as seriously affecting team production and reducing employees' work efficiency and job satisfaction [3] and influence the establishment of trust or partnership. Our study raises questions, considering the negative effect of negative workplace gossip, will this negative influence change from the perspective of gossip, and will there be positive influence?

Moral cleansing theory points out that after doing something immoral, individuals will feel negative emotions and hope to make compensatory actions to make up for the morally damaged image [4].For gossip speakers, negative workplace gossip is a kind of immoral behavior. Under the influence of the moral cleansing theory, when gossip speakers engage in negative workplace gossip, they will feel guilty and regret the immoral behavior. So they expect to make compensatory actions to compensate for the immoral behavior, such as providing help to the organization. Helping behavior, as an extra-role behavior, refers to employees voluntarily helping others to solve or prevent work-related problems. Some studies have pointed out that helping behavior can not only promote the work efficiency of organizations but also improve interpersonal relationships among organizations [5]. Therefore, helping behavior can be used as moral compensation behavior after an employee engages in unethical behavior (such as negative workplace gossip). On the one hand, helping behavior can help gossip speakers make up for the adverse effects of negative workplace gossip on organizational operation; on the other hand, helping behavior can also relieve the tension between organizations caused by negative workplace gossip. In our study, it is of theoretical and practical significance to take helping behavior as a compensation mechanism for immoral behavior brought about by negative workplace gossip. What mechanism facilitates the transformation of "immoral" negative workplace gossip into "moral" helpful behavior. Our study suggests that guilt plays a mediating role. Based on moral cleansing theory, there is a mismatch between the employee's "want to be" (such as negative workplace gossip) and the "should to be" (such as being a moral person). When reviewing past immoral behavior, the gap between the "want to be" and the "should to be" can cause the employee to have negative emotions, like feeling guilty [6]. Throughout the previous studies, the spread of negative gossip in the workplace has a certain negative impact on both organizations

and individuals. This kind of negative influence is easy to make the gossip feel guilty, and their behavior affects the organizational development, even the mental state and work performance of other colleagues. Based on the moral cleansing theory, in order to eliminate and relieve the inner restlessness and negative emotions, employees make compensation by helping behavior, so that the heart is balanced. Our study proposes that negative workplace gossip is transformed into helpful behavior through guilt.

In the traditional Chinese cultural background, be afraid of losing face is very typical individual psychological characteristics and behaviors. And there is even an old saying that "a person lives a face, a tree lives a skin". The definition of face awareness has not yet been accurately defined. Some researchers define it as an individual's desire to leave a positive or favorable self-image to others in the process of social communication. When a person cares more about his or her face, he or she will be more sensitive to the gain or loss of face. Therefore, one's own behavior is also influenced by social expectations and others' evaluation. When the gossip speaker talks about negative gossip, people will feel guilty because he or she realizes that it may be an immoral behavior. However, because the employee has a strong sense of face, people is very concerned about whether he or she has done an immoral behavior, and believes that his or her previous gossiping behavior is correct, so people will reduce their helping behavior.

Our study aims to explore the following questions: First, it reveals the changing mechanism of negative workplace gossip and helping behavior. Negative employee behavior, i.e., negative workplace gossip, can be based on the moral cleansing theory by helping behavior to compensate for previous unethical behavior. Second, based on the Chinese cultural context, our paper puts forward the moderating effect of face awareness and explores the boundary conditions of negative gossip on helping behavior in the workplace. In summary, based on the moral cleanliness theory, our study explores the mechanism of the influence of employees' negative gossip behavior on proactive behavior, and examines the mediating role of guilt and the moderating role of face awareness. It provides new insights into how employees' negative behaviors such as negative workplace gossip transform into positive behaviors conducive to organizational development, and also provides new revelations for enterprises to cope with employees' negative behaviors.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1 Negative Workplace Gossip and Helping Behavior

Workplace gossip is a social behavior that almost everyone working in any organization can experience, hear, and participate in. Negative workplace gossip is by nature negative and covert, such as sensitive, private, or not publicly available, and the information discussed as gossip should be private [1]. It is widely believed that negative workplace gossip is a form of abuse with malicious purpose and aimed at causing harm to individuals and organizations [7]. The moral cleansing theory suggests that when individuals perceive their moral self-image as diminished or threatened by violating established moral norms or recalling past transgressions, they will experience negative emotions. As a result, they exhibit altruistic behavior in order to obtain satisfaction. Our study proposes that, from the moral cleansing theory, when gossip speaker and gossip listener negatively talk about other colleagues who are not present, individuals perceive that this behavior may be immoral. This behavior contradicts the moral image of the self and creates feelings of guilt. People hope to alleviate this negative emotion through altruistic behavior, so as to make helpful behaviors that benefit the organization and its members. Helping behavior, a key element of organizational citizenship behavior, refers to voluntarily helping others to solve or prevent work-related problems. Since helping behavior is a way of caring, our study believes that helping behavior can be used as a compensatory behavior of gossip speakers after negative gossip in the workplace to compensate for their self-moral image.

2.2 Mediating Role of Guilty

How can negative workplace gossip turn into helpful behavior? Based on the moral cleansing theory, our study further proposes guilty as the mediating mechanism of the influence of negative gossip on helping behavior. Guilty refers to the feeling of guilt that occurs when a person makes an internal, unstable, specific attribution to their own behavior, which can lead to negative emotions about the particular behavior they committed. Based on the moral cleansing theory, when an individual does something immoral or lower than his moral level, he will feel upset and have negative emotions, such as guilt. Therefore, people hope to make up for their moral deficiency by doing something helpful to relieve

their guilt. When gossip speakers engage in negative gossip behavior in the workplace, the moral cleansing theory points out that people's moral level can be self-regulated, and individuals maintain their moral level at a certain level. When individuals find their moral level is lower than the original ideal moral level, they will attempt to adopt moral behavior (for example, do good deeds) to bring their moral level back to the level. Negative workplace gossip can make gossip speakers feel guilty. Previous studies have shown that negative workplace gossip often has a negative impact on organizations and individuals. Negative workplace gossip is a kind of social destruction for employees. Employees surrounded by negative gossip may find it difficult to trust others or establish good cooperative relationships. At the same time, negative workplace gossip will have a huge negative impact on employees, such as reducing employees' work efficiency and job satisfaction [3], and bringing more harm than good to their team. The influence of negative workplace gossip is uncontrollable. When the gossiper realizes the psychological and work impact of negative workplace gossip on the organization and other members of the organization, the employee will feel a profound sense of immorality and thus generate guilt. The moral cleansing theory points out that when an individual feels guilty for his or her moral deficiency, he or she expects to make amends to maintain his or her moral image and level. Guilt will make gossip speakers make helpful behavior, which is a kind of extra-role behavior. On the one hand, helping behavior can establish and maintain the harmony of interpersonal relationship in the workplace; on the other hand, it can improve the efficiency of organization operation [5], and it is a way to make up for guilt. Therefore, based on the moral cleansing theory, we argue that negative workplace gossip can be transformed into helpful behavior through guilt. Based on the above analysis, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Negative workplace gossip positively affects guilt.

H2: Guilt positively affects helping behavior.

H3: Negative workplace gossip positively influences helping behavior through guilty.

2.3 Moderating role of Face awareness

Face awareness refers to the degree to which an individual expects others to give a correct evaluation, reflecting the degree to which a person attaches importance to face. Face awareness plays a very important role in Chinese culture. As a variable of interpersonal relationship, previous studies pointed out that face awareness affects individual choices, such as extravagant consumption, conspicuous consumption, energy saving behaviors and so on. Based on this, our study proposes that face awareness regulates the relationship between guilt and helping behavior. Specifically, when the gossiper's negative gossiping behavior in the workplace has a negative impact on the organization and other members of the organization, based on the above analysis, negative emotions such as guilt will be generated. When the gossiper has a strong face awareness, although he or she is aware of his or her immoral behavior and feels guilty, in order to maintain a positive and positive image of himself or herself, showing helpful behavior will make the gossip speaker lose face and indirectly admit his or her wrong behavior in front of the public, thus reducing helpful behavior. On the contrary, when employees have a weak face awareness, they do not consider it a loss of face to recover their moral losses. Therefore, when they feel guilty, they will make amends by helping them. Based on the above analysis, we propose the hypothesis,

H4: Face awareness moderates the relationship between guilt and helping behavior, that is, the more face awareness individuals have, the more difficult it is to give helping behavior when they feel guilty.

3. Method

3.1 Design, Participants, and Procedure

Our study adopts questionnaire survey to collect data. Before respondents fill in the questionnaire, they are informed that the questionnaire is only used for academic research and the results are completely confidential. The research requires respondents to have fixed working hours and work units. A total of 204 questionnaires were issued, and 170 effective questionnaires were obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 83.3%. According to statistics, the sample data are mainly from Zhejiang province, Hubei province, Jiangxi province in China. The data on the demographic variables of the questionnaire showed that: in terms of gender, males accounted for 20% and females accounted for 80%; In terms of age, 58.8% were under 20 years old, 22.4% were between 20 and 30 years old, 10.6% were between 30 and 40 years old, 3.5% were between 40 and 50 years old and 4.7% were over 50 years old. In terms of marital status, unmarried 76.5%, married with no children 5.9%, married with children 17.6%; In terms

of education, high school or below 5.9%, college 11.8%, bachelor 65.9%, master's degree or above 16.5%; In terms of Seniority, 54.1% were less than 1 year, 21.2% were 1 to 3 years, 5.9% were 4 to 6 years, 7.1% were 7 to 10 years, and 11.8% were 11 years or more. Ordinary employees 85.9%, junior managers 11.8%, middle and senior managers 2.4%.

3.2 Measures

Our study uses a mature scale in both Chinese and English as a measuring tool, and these scales show good reliability and validity in Chinese and English situations. Among them, the Chinese version of the English scale was obtained in strict accordance with the translation-back-translation procedure, and all variable measurements were scored by Likert5 points, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely).

Negative workplace gossip scale developed by Kuo et al.,2014 [8] is used, including 20 items of work-related gossip and non-work-related gossip. In our study, 10 negative gossip items are used as the workplace negative gossip scale. Sample question items such as "talking about colleagues' poor performance" (Cronbach's α =0.882).

Guilt adopts the Guilt and Shame Propensity Scale (GASP). Referring to the Wang[6] processing scale method, some items were deleted to adapt to the Chinese context of this study. The original scale consisted of 16 items. For brevity, 4 items that were highly overlapping with other items or did not apply to the scenario were removed. Sample question items include: "After doing this, I feel uneasy inside" and "Although I did this, I knew it was inappropriate" (Cronbach's α =0.948).

Face awareness adopts the face scale developed by Zhang Xin 'an (2012) [9], which has 11 items, including two dimensions: wanting face and fearing losing face. Sample questions include "I want people to think I can do things that other people can't do" (Cronbach's α =0.849).

Helping behavior scale was adopted Farh et al, (2007) [10] based on the Chinese citizen organizational behavior scale developed under the Chinese cultural background, and the wording was adapted as appropriate, and the dimensions of helping behavior were selected to form the helpful behavior scale, which consisted of 3 items. Sample question items such as "I am willing to help new employees adapt to the working environment" (Cronbach's α =0.789).

Control variable. Based on previous studies, we controlled for gender, age, marital status, education, Seniority, and Job level.

4. Analysis and Results

In our study, SPSS23.0 and Amos23.0 were used to test and analyze the data. Firstly, SPSS23.0 was used for reliability and validity test, common method deviation test, descriptive analysis and correlation analysis. Secondly, confirmatory factor analysis was carried out by Amos23.0. Finally, SPSS 23.0 and SPSS macro program PROCESS were used for hypothesis testing.

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analyses

In our study, Amos23.0 was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis for negative workplace gossip, guilty, helping behavior and face awareness. $\chi2/df$ = 1.835, RMSEA = 0.036, CFI =0.867, TLI =0.848, IFI=0.872. In our study, all Indicators loaded on their respective significantly. In addition, the Harman single factor test was used to conduct a common method bias test. Unrotated factor analysis results extracted a total of 7 factors with feature roots greater than 1 (greater than 1), and the maximum factor variance explanation rate was 21.7% (less than 40%), so there was no serious common variance bias in our study.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

The table 1 shows the mean value of each variable, the standard deviation, and the relationship between the individual variables. There was a significant positive correlation between negative gossip and face awareness ($r = 0.432$, $p < 0.01$). There was a significant positive correlation between guilt and helping behavior ($r = 0.346$, $p < 0.01$). Negative workplace gossip significantly positively affects guilt ($r = 0.004$, $p < 0.05$). But negative workplace gossip was not associated with helpful behavior ($r = -0.072$, $p > 0.01$), H1 and H2 are confirmed.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Gender	1.80	.40										
2 Age	1.73	1.10	-.340**									
3 Marital status	1.41	8.78	-.229*	.805**								
4 Education	2.93	.72	-.008	-.402**	-.629**							
5 Seniority	2.01	1.40	-.270*	.863**	.860**	-.506**						
6 Job level	1.16	.43	-.219*	.322**	.257*	-.039	.292**					
7 Negative workplace gossip	2.44	.77	.007	-.167	-.238*	.189	-.233*	.062				
8 Guilty	3.90	.88	-.093	-.201	-.206	.068	-.163	-.241*	.004*			
9 Face awareness	3.23	.65	.042	-.245*	-.274*	.411**	-.303**	-.075	.432**	.081		
10 Helping behavior	4.04	.67	-.029	-.023	.098	-.060	.046	-.200	-.072	.346**	-.084	

*p < .05. **p < .01. For gender, 1= male; 2 = female. For age, 1= under 20 years old;2= between 20 and 30 years old;3= between 30 and 40 years old;4= between 40 and 50 years old;5= over 50 years old. For marital status,1= unmarried;2= married with no children;3= married with children. For education, 1 = high school and below, 2 = college, 3 = bachelor's degree, and 4 = master's degree or above. For Seniority,1=less than 1 year;2=1 to 3 years;3= 4 to 6 years;4=7 to 10 years;5=11 years or more. For Job level,1=Ordinary employees;2= junior managers ;3= middle and senior managers.

4.3 Hypotheses Test

In order to further study the mechanism of the influence of negative gossip on helping behavior, we used the SPSS macro program PROCESS statistical software to conduct the Bootstrapping test for deviation correction (5000 samples) to study the mediating and regulating mechanism of negative gossip on helping behavior. In the mediating effect and moderating effect analysis models of our study, the independent variable (negative workplace gossip), the mediating variable (guilty), the dependent variable (helping behavior) and the moderating variable (face awareness) are all continuous variables.

H3 proposes that negative workplace gossip positively influences helping behavior through guilty, that is, guilt acts as an intermediary between negative workplace gossip and helping behavior. Table 2 shows that the positive correlation between negative gossip and guilty behavior is not significant, while guilt and helping behavior are significantly positive. Therefore, H3 is partially supported.

Table 2 Regression results

	Guilty			Helping behavior		
	coeef	se	t	coeef	se	t
Intercepts	4.79	1.494	3.210*	7.463	1.863	4.007**
Negative workplace gossip	-.585	.634	-.923	-.930	.449	-2.073
Face awareness	-.240	.468	-.512	-1.411	.607	-2.324
Guilty				-.199	.381	-.522
Guilty* Face awareness				.152	.125	1.215
R²		.017			.199	
F		.476			3.916	

*p < .05. **p < .01.

H4 proposes that face awareness negatively regulates the relationship between guilt and helping behavior, that is, the more face awareness individuals have, the more difficult it is to help behavior when they feel guilty. SPSS macro program PROCESS statistical software was used to test the adjustment effect of the sense of boundary control, and Bootstrap random sampling was set to 20000 times. The results in Table 3 show that the interaction term of guilt and face awareness has no significant positive impact on helping behavior. We use face awareness to add or subtract one standard deviation to calculate the confidence interval, the 95% confidence interval is [-0.130, 0.093], contains 0.

Table 3 Moderating role of Face awareness

Face awareness	effect	bootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
eff1(M-1SD)	-0.033	0.083	-0.266	0.067
eff2(M)	-0.019	0.055	-0.130	0.093
eff3(M+1SD)	0.016	0.833	-0.141	0.208

*p < .05. **p < .01.

5. Discussion

From the perspective of moral cleansing theory, our study studies the mechanism and boundary conditions of how negative workplace gossip transforms into helpful behavior. These findings deepen the understanding of the mechanism between negative workplace gossip and helping behavior, and have certain contributions and implications for management theory and practice.

First of all, previous studies on the impact of negative workplace gossip mainly focused on the negative effects, and a small number of studies suggested that it could bring positive effects. However, different from previous studies, from the perspective of moral cleanliness theory, our study proposes that negative workplace gossip can be transformed into helpful behaviors through guilt. Our study focus is on whether such immoral behaviors as negative workplace gossip can be transformed into moral behaviors. According to the moral cleanliness theory, when gossip speaker engages in negative workplace gossip, they will perceive a decline in self-image, generate negative emotions, and then obtain satisfaction by showing altruistic behaviors (such as helping behaviors). Our study expands the research on negative workplace gossip, changes the previous stereotype about the mechanism of negative workplace gossip, and has certain implications for future research on negative workplace gossip. Second, our study introduces face awareness as a boundary mechanism. Throughout the ages, face has played an important role in Chinese culture, especially in the workplace, where face is particularly important in interpersonal interactions. In previous studies, face is more involved in the study of consumer behavior, while organizational behavior does not discuss face awareness, which mainly focuses on the study of voice behavior. Employees with a strong face awareness pay more attention to negative evaluations. When individuals feel threatened by losing face, they will remedy it through some remedial actions.

Secondly, our study explores the mechanism of negative gossip on helping behavior change, as well as the mediating mechanism of guilt and the regulating effect of face awareness. We believe that our study brings new insights to organizational development and employee management. Although our study suggests that negative workplace gossip can be transformed into helping behavior through guilty, it does not encourage negative workplace gossip. Our study supports the existing research on negative workplace gossip, that is, negative workplace gossip can have a certain negative impact on organizations and their members. Negative workplace gossip widely exists in the workplace, so the organization manager must treat the negative workplace gossip correctly, strengthen the prevention and control of negative workplace gossip, and prevent the problem before it happens. To intervene the formation of workplace gossip from the source, and establish an open and harmonious organizational culture and environment. Despite the negative emotions associated with guilt, our study suggests that guilt enhances helpful behavior in employees. Therefore, managers and members of organizations need to recognize the positive effects of negative emotions such as guilt, perhaps leading to a more open and friendly atmosphere. Employees who feel guilty about their work or the organization for any reason are encouraged to make amends by offering acts of help.

Finally, there are also some limitations in our study, which need to be overcome and improved in subsequent studies. First of all, in order to overcome the problem of common method bias, our study controlled common method bias to a certain extent by using anonymous measurement and reverse scoring of some items, and the results also passed Harman's one-way variance test. However, for the sake of the rigor of the study, data should be collected in the way of self-assessment and other assessment, as well as in the way of multi-time collection to avoid the common method bias. Secondly, as negative workplace gossip is a kind of negative behavior, our study adopts the method of self-evaluation for measurement, and the respondents may be unwilling to truthfully report negative workplace gossip or whitewash their own behavior. Therefore, in future research, the content of negative workplace gossip can be evaluated by others to make the research results more accurate. Third, future studies may consider richer boundary conditions, such as the individual characteristics of individuals that also influence behavior choices in the face of guilt. In addition, whether there are boundary conditions between negative workplace gossip and guilt in the workplace to affect employees' behavioral choices is also a perspective worth exploring. Finally, part of the research results of our study have not been verified. Our study believes that due to the limited data of the survey sample, it is impossible to obtain the survey data of a large sample, resulting in inconsistent research results.

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