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Individual differences in attitudes towards gossip

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Abstract

Four studies were conducted to develop and validate a measure of individual differences in attitudes towards gossip (ATG). In Study 1, exploratory factor analyses of responses to a pool of ATG items identified two factors reflecting attitudes about gossip's Social Value (SV) and Moral Value (MV), which provided the basis for constructing a 12-item ATG scale. In Study 2, the SV and MV factors were verified with confirmatory analysis. In Studies 3 and 4, the construct validity of the ATG scale was evidenced by (1) the ability of the SV subscale to predict interest in and intent to transmit gossip, (2) positive correlations with the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994) and (3) negative correlations with social approval needs.

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0. Introduction

Gossip refers to unverified news about the personal affairs of others, which is shared informally between individuals. Though gossip is typically dismissed as “small talk”, the transmission of gossip is considered important for establishing friendships (Rosnow, 2001), exchanging knowledge (Dunbar, 1996; Suls, 1977), and providing mutual entertainment (Rosnow & Fine, 1976). Thus,

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it is not surprising that gossip is a common element of everyday conversation among both adults and children (Fine, 1977; Taylor, 1977), and practiced across a wide range of cultures (Brenneis, 1984; Beisner, 1989; Cox, 1970).

Of course, gossip has less benign uses as well, and may be transmitted to malign our enemies or those we perceive as potential adversaries (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Due to its close association with rumor,¹ gossip has also been implicated in several social problems, including the incitement of riots (Rosenthal, 1971), increasing anxiety during wartime, and even jeopardizing national security (Allport & Postman, 1947). Because of gossip's potential for causing serious harm, gossiping has a long history of being viewed as a morally questionable, and therefore prohibited, activity (Wert & Salovey, 2004; Oakley, 1972; Schein, 1994).

While gossip is denounced *publicly*, its useful role in socializing, informing, and entertaining, raises the question of whether there are individual differences in people's *private attitudes* about gossip. Accordingly, Ben-Ze'ev (1994) noted that, despite gossip's bad reputation, some individuals appear to view gossip quite positively, and recognize its value for making friends and gathering information, while others choose to eschew it entirely. Consistent with Ben-Ze'ev (1994), Jaeger, Skleder, and Rosnow (1994) found a striking divergence in people's views on the nature of gossip: Half of their respondents referred to gossip as negative talk behind someone's back, whereas the other half described gossip as a fun way to learn about others. Some studies have found similar divergences in gossip-attitudes attributable to gender, such that women tend to express more positive attitudes than men (e.g., Leaper & Holliday, 1995).

Nevo et al.'s (1994) Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ) was specifically designed for assessing individual differences in thoughts and feelings concerning gossip, and is comprised primarily of items that ask how frequently respondents transmit gossip and also their enjoyment in so doing (e.g., "I tend to talk to friends about the success of certain people in their jobs"). Several TGQ items also reflect interpersonal curiosity, and involve gathering information that is useful for future gossip sharing (e.g., "I like reading biographies of famous people"). Nevo et al. (1994) report that the TGQ demonstrates adequate internal-consistency reliability and is correlated positively with interest in people-oriented professions and with peer-ratings of tendencies to gossip. As would be expected, TGQ scores are negatively correlated with social approval needs.

While the TGQ appears to be a reliable and valid measure of attitudes and self-evaluations concerning gossip transmission, it has several limitations. First, rather than assess attitudes reflecting a liking or disliking of gossip "in general", nearly all of the TGQ items identify very specific topics (e.g., others' personal appearance, problems at work, relationships, etc.). Because the range of possible subject matter for gossip is virtually infinite, the small number of topics included in the TGQ may limit its generalizability. Congruent with this criticism, Nevo et al. (1994) noted that gender differences found on TGQ scores appeared to reflect differential interest in the particular topics addressed by the items.

Second, all of the TGQ items are positively worded, which may increase the potential for positive response biases. Third, and most importantly, as previously noted, the TGQ assesses ten-

¹ Some theorists explicitly differentiate gossip from rumor, but there is no clear consensus on this distinction. For example, Morreall (1994) suggests that rumor, unlike gossip, is concerned with matters of little personal relevance (e.g., politics, the weather). According to Rosnow (2001), gossip differs from rumor because it generally involves "non-essential" information, though both may address personal affairs.

dencies to *transmit* gossip (i.e., behaviors), but does not inquire about peoples' views (i.e., cognitions) on how gossip itself is construed. For example, the TGQ does not inquire about people's attitudes concerning gossip's moral character, nor does it measure attitudes about gossip's value as a source of information or as a means of improving interpersonal relations, although these are recognized by most theorists as the primary factors that motivate sharing gossip with others (Dunbar, 1996; Oakley, 1972; Rosnow, 2001; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Suls, 1977). Besides predicting transmission, a better understanding of these underlying factors may also illuminate the reasons why individuals choose (or do not choose) to publicly share private information, which can have serious consequences for those who are gossiped about.

We conducted four studies to investigate individual differences in general attitudes towards gossip (ATG), defined as the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the nature of gossip. In Studies 1 and 2 our goals were to develop an internally consistent scale for measuring ATG, and to assess the dimensionality of this construct. In Study 3, we investigated the criterion validity of the ATG scale by examining whether ATG scores predicted self-reported interest in and also intentions to transmit gossip. In Study 3, we also compared the ATG scale's ability to predict these outcomes with Nevo et al.'s (1994) TGQ. In Study 4, we further evaluated the construct validity of our ATG scale by observing its correlations with several measures of conceptually related constructs.

1. Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to develop a measure of individual differences in ATG. We created a pool of items describing a variety of attitudes about the general nature of gossip, with the intention of using factor analysis to identify the best items for measuring ATG, and to determine whether such attitudes were multidimensional.

1.1. Study 1 method

1.1.1. Participants

Six hundred-forty four undergraduate psychology students (351 women, 293 men), aged 18–22, were recruited from a private, liberal arts university in North Carolina. All students received extra credit for their participation.

1.1.2. Measures and procedures

The ATG item pool. We constructed 29 face-valid items with content describing thoughts about the usefulness of gossip as a facilitator of social interaction; feelings of interest in hearing gossip to learn about others; beliefs about the appropriateness of transmitting gossip; and views on the truthfulness of gossip.² The pool included 13 items that were positively worded

² As discussed in the previous footnote, the meaningful distinction between gossip and rumor is unclear. In everyday language, the two terms overlap substantially; the dictionary defines gossip as “idle talk or rumor” and has as one definition of rumor “gossip or hearsay” (Random House, 2001). Thus, we included items in our pool that used the term “rumor” as well as “gossip”. Similarly, because gossip invariably reflects news of a personal nature (Rosnow, 2001), we also included items that referred to attitudes about learning or sharing “personal information” and also “eavesdropping”.

(e.g., “It is fun to talk about other people”), and 16 items that were negatively worded (e.g., “I have never known gossip to be helpful to anyone”) to minimize potential acquiescence biases. Participants rated each item using a five-point scale, anchored by “Disagree Strongly” and “Agree Strongly”. The ATG items were administered in group testing sessions; participants were informed that the goals of the study were to learn about their attitudes, and that additional information would be provided afterwards. About 10 min were required to respond to the 29 items.

1.2. Study 1 results

Responses to the 29 ATG items were submitted to exploratory principal axis factor analyses with oblique (promax) rotation. Because gossip-attitudes may vary with gender (e.g., Leaper & Holliday, 1995), these analyses were conducted separately for women and men. Three main criteria were considered in determining the number of factors to retain: (1) Cattell’s (1958) scree test; (2) the amount of common variance explained by the factors (Hatcher, 1994); and (3) the psychological meaningfulness of the rotated factors (Rummel, 1970).

The scree plots suggested that two or three factors could be extracted for women (7.08, 1.16, .94, .87, .77...) and also for men (6.59, 1.51, 1.08, .81, .75...). In both analyses, the first factor accounted for over 60% of the common variance, over 10% was attributed to the second factor, while the third factor explained about 9%; subsequent factors accounted for relatively trivial amounts of variance. Thus, two and three factor solutions with oblique rotation were computed, and the factors that emerged in these analyses were evaluated. The results of the two-factor solutions are reported in Table 1.1.

The two rotated factors were substantially correlated for both women ($r = .65$) and men ($r = .53$). The first factor was defined by 11 items with dominant loadings of .32 or greater for both sexes, and no salient ($\geq .30$) dual loadings. The items that loaded on this factor referred to the *social value* (SV) of gossip and described using gossip as a fun way to share information or learn about others. On the second factor, seven items had dominant loadings of .31 or greater for both sexes, of which two (#14, #11) had salient dual loadings for men. This factor reflected judgments about the *moral value* (MV) of gossip, such as beliefs about whether it was ethical to talk about others, and opinions about the truthfulness of gossip. Interestingly, most of the items that loaded on the MV factor were reverse coded, as may be noted in Table 1.1.

In the three-factor solution, the first two factors were nearly identical to those found in the two-factor solution. However, the third factor was primarily composed of different items for women and men, and its meaning was difficult to interpret. Thus, the three-factor solution was considered inferior to the two-factor solution, and was not considered further.

The next step was to develop measures of the two ATG dimensions; from the second factor, six items with dominant loadings of .50 or greater for both sexes were selected to form a MV subscale. As it was considered desirable to have an equal number of items for measuring each dimension, the 11 items with dominant salient loadings for both sexes on the SV (first) factor were evaluated on the basis of the strength of their loadings and item content. Three items (#1, #2, and #21) were eliminated because their content appeared redundant with other items that had better loadings. Two additional items (#7 and #8) were also dropped because the specific attitudes to

Table 1.1

Principal axis factor loadings with oblique rotation of the 29 attitudes towards gossip items for women ($n = 351$) and men ($n = 293$)

Item no.	Abbreviated item statement	Factor I		Factor II	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
17	Mind business instead of gossiping (R)	.67	.46	-.04	.24
15	Love to know what is going on in people's lives	.64	.62	-.29	-.17
8	Never gossip (R)	.64	.36	.00	.29
7	Pass along rumors	.62	.59	.05	-.01
28	Like to share what I hear	.61	.67	.01	-.10
2	Curious to know what people talking about	.58	.38	-.17	.02
4	Would not eavesdrop	.58	(.28)	-.08	.26
3	Hate to hear gossip (R)	.55	.32	.14	.34
1	Talk about people	.53	.48	.07	.11
9	Fun to talk about people	.51	.59	.14	.06
19	Gossiping is great way to pass time	.47	.63	.24	-.03
12	Have eavesdropped	.43	.12	-.12	(.27)
6	Gossip is good ice-breaker	.37	.63	.23	-.07
20	People who gossip have no life (R)	.36	.29	.30	.34
21	Gossiping is good way to keep up with what is going on	.32	.52	.29	.05
16	Would never disclose personal information (R)	.31	.13	.14	(.27)
13	Not bad to eavesdrop	.30	(.26)	.11	(.26)
10	Uncomfortable when people gossip (R)	(.26)	.01	.17	.43
23	Cannot trust gossip (R)	-.07	-.12	.60	.66
26	Never known gossip to be helpful (R)	-.02	-.17	.59	.63
27	Gossip is often true	-.09	.01	.59	.54
22	Wrong to talk about others (R)	.02	.20	.56	.51
24	Never mention rumors even if true (R)	.15	.25	.55	.52
14	Rumors are hardly ever true (R)	-.04	-.31	.50	.65
29	People's lives are own business (R)	-.02	.19	.50	(.26)
25	Gossiping is talking behind backs (R)	-.06	.09	.43	(.25)
11	Disgusting to talk behind backs (R)	.25	.30	.31	.43
18	People look to me to know what is going on	.18	.38	(.19)	-.12
5	Others know what is going on more (R)	.04	-.07	(.14)	(.18)

Notes:

1. "Item no." refers to the ordinal position of an item within the 29-item Attitudes Towards Gossip Questionnaire.
2. Items are listed in the descending order of magnitude of their dominant loadings for women on each factor.
3. (R) indicates that this item was reverse scored.
4. Rotated loadings $\geq .30$ are in bold; secondary loadings $\geq .30$ are in parentheses.

which they referred were ambiguous relative to other items with similar content. The remaining six items were selected for the SV subscale, which was joined with the six-item MV subscale to form a 12-item ATG scale.

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and t -tests of gender differences for the ATG scale and its SV and MV subscales are reported in Table 1.2. Alphas were .74 or greater for these measures, which was satisfactory, especially considering their brevity. Men scored significantly higher than women on the MV subscale, although the effect size was very small (Cohen's $d = .23$).

Table 1.2

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and *t*-tests of Gender Differences for the Attitudes Towards Gossip Scale and Subscales

Scale		Women (<i>n</i> = 351)	Men (<i>n</i> = 293)	<i>t</i>
ATG total	<i>M</i>	33.52	34.15	1.09
	SD	7.47	7.16	
	α	.81	.80	
ATG-SV	<i>M</i>	17.89	17.52	-1.08
	SD	4.30	4.30	
	α	.75	.76	
ATG-MV	<i>M</i>	15.63	16.62	2.92**
	SD	4.35	4.28	
	α	.74	.75	

** $p < .01$.

1.3. Study 1 discussion

Exploratory factor analyses identified two ATG factors; the items that defined the two factors addressed feelings about gossip's social and moral value (SV and MV, respectively). On the basis of factor loadings and item content, the best SV and MV items were selected to form a 12-item ATG scale with two six-item subscales, for which the alphas were satisfactory. Men scored slightly higher than women on the MV subscale, suggesting that they were somewhat less concerned about the appropriateness and truthfulness of gossip.

Although both SV and MV appeared to be conceptually meaningful aspects of ATG, and were consistent with the major theories of gossip (Dunbar, 1996; Oakley, 1972; Rosnow, 2001; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Suls, 1977), the fact that most of the MV items were reverse scored (see Table 1.1), raised questions about the emergence of the corresponding (second) factor, which might have been due, at least in part, to correlated measurement error (c.f., Jarvis & Petty, 1996). Moreover, the first principal factor accounted for most of the variance, which also suggested that the second factor might have been methodological. Thus, further analysis was required to verify that the SV and MV subscales assessed psychometrically discriminable ATG dimensions.

2. Study 2

The major goal of Study 2 was to evaluate the factor structure of the newly developed 12-item ATG scale using a novel sample. We also wanted to investigate whether the formation of the MV dimension, which was assessed primarily by reverse scored items, was influenced by correlated measurement error.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

One hundred-seventy undergraduate psychology students (87 women, 83 men) were recruited from the same university as in Study 1, who received extra credit for their participation.

2.1.2. Measures and procedure

Attitudes Towards Gossip (ATG) scale. The 12-item ATG scale (developed in Study 1) consists of two six-item subscales that assess attitudes about the social and moral value of gossip. Participants responded to each item using a five-point scale, anchored by “Disagree Strongly” and “Agree Strongly”. Similar to Study 1, the ATG scale was administered in large testing groups; fewer than 5 min were required by most participants to respond to the ATG scale.

2.2. Study 2 results

To evaluate the factor structure of the 12 items that comprised the ATG scale and subscales, responses to these items were submitted to confirmatory factor analyses using maximum likelihood estimation. Based on the item selection procedures outlined in Study 1, the factor pattern of the ATG items was assumed to be highly similar for both women and men; for this reason, the responses of the combined sample were analyzed.

In keeping with the rationale and procedures outlined by [Jarvis and Petty \(1996\)](#),³ four structural models (A, B, C, and D) were compared against each other and against a null (no factors) model. Model A was a single factor model, which had paths to all 12 items; Model B was the same as Model A, but also included a measurement error factor with paths for the 12 items; Model C was comprised of an SV and MV factor with paths leading to each set of six items hypothesized to load on that factor; Model D was the same as C, but also included an error factor, similar to the one in Model B.

If the MV factor was merely an artifact of correlated method variance, then a single factor model either with or without error extracted would provide a superior fit as compared to a two-factor model. However, even if the two-factor model provided a relatively better fit, method variance might still make the two factors more distinct than they actually are. In this case, a two-factor model with error extracted would provide a much better fit.

In comparing the four models, five fit indices were considered: Chi-square, the Goodness-of-Fit-Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Non-Normed Index (NNI), and the Root Mean Standard Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Adequate model fit was evidenced by small (ideally, non-significant) chi-squares, and a value approaching .90 for GFI, close to .95 for CFI, and NNI, and one close to .06 for RMSEA. Superiority between similar models was determined by statistically significant and substantial reductions in chi-square, higher GFIs, CFIs, and NNIs, and lower RMSEAs ([Hu & Bentler, 1999](#); [Schumaker & Lomax, 1996](#)). Fit indices for each model are reported in [Table 2.1](#).

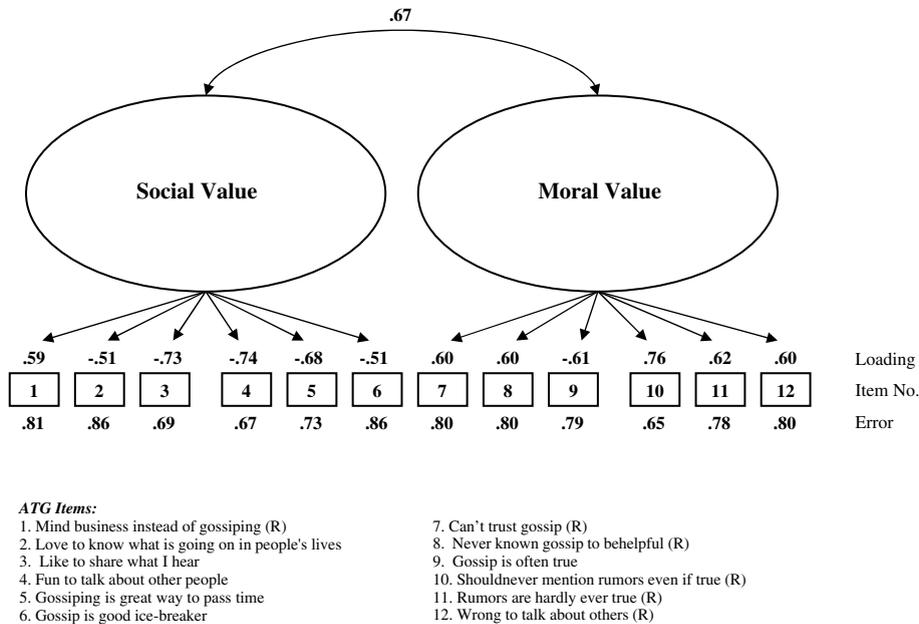
Model A (one factor) was found superior to the null model ($\chi^2(12) = 495.37, p < .01$) as indicated by a chi-square difference test; however, the other four statistics were indicative of a very poor fit. Model B (one factor + method error) provided an improved fit over Model A ($\chi^2(2) = 71.59, p < .01$), but poor fit was again suggested by the other indices. These results suggested that a single ATG factor, both with and without method variance extracted, was

³ To determine the extent to which correlated measurement error was responsible for inter-item relatedness all analyses were conducted on the ATG items prior to reverse scoring. For analyses that included measurement error, the “error” factor was assumed to influence each of the 12 ATG items equally. Thus, all estimated path coefficients for “error” factors were constrained to be equal.

Table 2.1
Goodness-of-Fit Indices for each structural model of the 12 Attitudes Towards Gossip Items ($n = 170$)

GOF index	Null model	A 1-factor	B 1-factor + method	C 2-factor	D 2-factor + method
$\chi^2(df)$	668.71 (66)**	173.34 (54)**	148.58 (52)**	101.75 (53)**	94.79 (50)**
GFI	–	.83	.86	.91	.91
CFI	–	.80	.84	.92	.93
NNI	–	.76	.80	.90	.90
RMSEA	–	.11	.10	.07	.07

unsatisfactory. Both of the two-factor models fit the data better than their one-factor counterparts (χ^2 Model A – χ^2 Model B = 71.59, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; χ^2 Model B – χ^2 Model D = 53.79, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). The fit indices for Model C (two factors) were not far from the cutoff criteria, indicating a reasonably acceptable fit. Model D (two factors + method error) had only a marginally better fit, with a significant but relatively small change in chi-square ($\chi^2(3) = 6.96$, $p < .01$), and indices that were roughly equivalent to those of Model C. As extracting method error from the two-factor model did not result in much improvement, these findings were interpreted as providing evidence of discriminability between the two ATG factors. The two-factor model is graphically displayed in Fig. 1; all factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$).



Notes:
 Items were analyzed prior to reverse scoring
 All factor loadings are significant, $p < .001$

Fig. 1. Path diagram of the two-factor (Social value and Moral value) structural ATG model ($n = 170$).

Table 2.2

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and *t*-tests of gender differences for the 12-item Attitudes Towards Gossip Scale and its six-item Subscales

Scale		Women (<i>n</i> = 87)	Men (<i>n</i> = 83)	<i>t</i>
ATG Total	M	33.17	36.04	2.30*
	SD	7.95	8.23	
	α	.84	.85	
ATG-SV	M	16.85	18.34	2.09*
	SD	4.48	4.78	
	α	.79	.81	
ATG-MV	M	16.32	17.70	1.91
	SD	4.64	4.74	
	α	.78	.81	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Means, standard deviations, alphas, and *t*-tests of gender differences for the ATG scales are reported in Table 2.2. Alphas were .79 or greater for the ATG scales, which was satisfactory. The *t*-tests indicated that men scored significantly higher than women on the ATG scale, for which the effect was relatively small ($d = .32$).

2.3. Study 2 discussion

Of several ATG models evaluated with confirmatory factor analysis, the hypothesized two-factor model was found to have, overall, the best fit and most meaning. Although the fit for this model was somewhat better when methodological error was extracted, the improvement was quite minimal, suggesting that error variance was not contributing greatly to the structure of the two-factor model. Men scored higher than women on the SV subscale, which was inconsistent with the findings of Study 1, suggesting that gossip attitudes may vary across samples even within the same population of respondents. As in Study 1, the ATG scales had acceptable internal consistency.

3. Study 3

In Study 3 we evaluated the criterion validity of the ATG scales, by examining whether ATG scores were associated with ratings of interest in and intentions to transmit gossip to others. Because in previous research people's reactions to gossip were influenced by its valence (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002), we manipulated whether the gossiper reported positive or negative information about the gossipee. We also examined the relationship between interest and transmission-intentions with TGQ scores, in order to compare its ability to predict these outcomes with the ATG scales.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Four hundred-forty two students (342 women, 100 men), who ranged in age from 18 to 40, were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at a large southeastern university. All students received extra credit for taking part in this study.

3.1.2. Instruments and procedures

Attitudes towards gossip (ATG) scale. The 12-item ATG scale is comprised of six-item Social Value (SV) and Moral Value (MV) subscales, as described previously.

Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ). The 20-item TGQ (Nevo et al., 1994) assesses tendencies to talk about other people in relation to a variety of different topics such as romantic involvement and appearance. Each TGQ item is rated on a seven-point frequency scale ranging from “Never” to “Always”. Alphas of .80 or higher were reported by Nevo et al. (1994) for the TGQ.

Gossip Scenarios. Participants were asked to read a short scenario about two individuals identified as “Student A” and “Student B”. Before reading the scenario, participants were told to assume that both Students A and B were real people at their school, were acquaintances, but not close friends, and were not in any of the same classes with the participant. Participants were also informed that A and B were the same sex, age, and ethnicity as the participant. These instructions were provided in order to minimize the potential effects of actor characteristics, which may influence interest in and intentions to share gossip (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002).

The scenarios described Student B transmitting gossip about Student A receiving either an “academic commendation” (positive gossip) or “academic probation” (negative gossip).⁴ Participants were then asked to respond to the following two questions using a five-point Likert-type scale: (1) “How interesting is the news about Student A to you?” and (2) “Would you share this news about Student A with others?” The questionnaire scales and gossip scenarios were administered to the participants in group-testing sessions, for which order was counterbalanced. Once the participants completed responding, more information about the study was provided.

3.2. Results

Participants who received positive gossip about Student A’s academic commendation reported more interest ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.14$, $n = 218$) as compared to those who were given the negative news of his academic probation ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.17$, $n = 224$). Similarly, stronger intentions to transmit gossip were associated with the positive gossip ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.14$, $n = 218$) than with the negative gossip ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.19$, $n = 224$). For both scenario variables, mean differences due to gossip-valence were significant (interest: $t = 3.34$, $p < .01$, $d = .32$; intent: $t = 5.68$; $p < .01$, $d = .54$); no gender differences were found for either variable.

⁴ Positive and negative instances of “academic” gossip were selected because we felt that this topic was (a) something to which all of the participants (who were students) could relate; and (b) both the positive and negative instances were “gossip-worthy”. The scenarios developed for the present study are available from the first author upon request.

Table 3.1

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and *t*-tests of gender differences for the Attitudes Towards Gossip Scale and Subscales Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire

Scale		Women (<i>n</i> = 342)	Men (<i>n</i> = 100)	<i>t</i>
ATG total	M	31.26	32.56	.83
	SD	7.78	7.01	
	α	.79	.75	
ATG-SV	M	15.48	15.73	.66
	SD	4.97	4.67	
	α	.78	.75	
ATG-MV	M	14.99	15.44	.34
	SD	4.05	3.48	
	α	.63	.47	
TGQ	M	54.29	46.48	-5.13**
	SD	12.99	12.78	
	α	.89	.89	

** $p < .01$.

Means, standard deviations, alphas, and *t*-tests of gender differences for the ATG scales and the TGQ are reported in Table 3.1. Alphas for the ATG scale and SV subscale were satisfactory, but were very low for the MV subscale ($\alpha < .70$). Although no significant gender differences were found for the ATG scales, TGQ scores were significantly higher for women ($d = .61$). No differences were found due to order of administration or gossip valence.

Correlations among the ATG measures and the TGQ for the combined sample are reported in Table 3.2. It is interesting to note that after correcting for attenuation due to low reliability,⁵ the correlation between the two subscales was very close to that found between the latent ATG factors in the confirmatory factor analysis from Study 2 ($r_c = .69$). The ATG scales were positively correlated with the TGQ, especially the SV subscale. Even after disattenuation, the TGQ was much more highly related to SV ($r_c = .60$) than to MV ($r_c = .37$). While the positive correlations between the ATG scales and TGQ are consistent with the fact that these scales all explicitly inquire about gossip, the magnitude of these associations suggested that the ATG scales and TGQ assessed different constructs, as would be expected given the conceptual differences between these instruments. The correlations among these four measures were essentially the same across administration order and valence.

Correlations of the ATG scales and the TGQ with the scenario variables are reported in Table 3.3, separately for the positive and negative gossip. For positive gossip, none of the scales correlated significantly with interest. However, a small but significant correlation was found between

⁵

$$r_c = \frac{r_{12}}{\sqrt{\alpha_1 \alpha_2}}$$

where, r_c = the corrected correlation; r_{12} = the observed correlation; α_1 = the reliability of the first variable; α_2 = the reliability of the second variable.

Table 3.2

Pearson product-moment correlations of the Attitudes Towards Gossip Total Scale and Subscales with the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire ($n = 442$)

	ATG total	ATG-SV	ATG-MV
ATG-SV	.89**	–	–
ATG-MV	.82**	.47**	–
TGQ	.46**	.50**	.27**

ATG = Attitudes Towards Gossip (SV = Social Value, MV = Moral Value); TGQ = Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3.3

Pearson product-moment correlations of the Attitudes Towards Gossip Total Scale and Subscales and the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire with Gossip Scenario Variables ($n = 442$)

	Interest		Intent to transmit	
	+	–	+	–
ATG total	.08	.37**	.08	.43**
ATG-SV	.12	.40**	.11	.50**
ATG-MV	.03	.19**	.02	.20**
TGQ	.15	.37**	.23**	.33**

+/- indicates the valence of the gossip; + = “academic commendation”, – = “academic probation”.

** $p < .01$.

the TGQ and transmission-intentions. When gossip was negative, significant small to moderately strong correlations were found for all four gossip scales with both interest and intent to transmit. Because of the overlapping variance between the ATG scales and the TGQ, multiple regression analyses were computed in order to evaluate their unique relationships with the two scenario variables for the negative gossip. Given that the ATG scale is a linear combination of its subscales, the SV and MV measures were included in these analyses, whereas the full ATG scale was not. Regression analyses indicated that interest in negative gossip ($adj. R^2 = .19$) was predicted by both the SV subscale ($\beta = .078$; $SE = .019$; $partial r^2 = .18$; $t = 3.90$; $p > .001$) and the TGQ ($\beta = .017$; $SE = .006$; $partial r^2 = .03$; $t = 2.58$; $p > .05$). However, intention to transmit negative gossip ($adj. R^2 = .25$) was only significantly predicted by the SV subscale ($\beta = .12$; $SE = .019$; $r^2 = .26$; $t = 6.40$; $p > .001$).

3.3. Study 3 discussion

Overall, participants tended to report more interest in and more willingness to transmit gossip that was positive. When considering previous theory and research, which suggests that gossiping is socially undesirable (Wert & Salovey, 2004; Nevo et al., 1994), it makes perfect sense that participants would be especially biased against sharing gossip that might damage someone’s reputation. However, those who had stronger, positive feelings about the social value of gossip (i.e., higher SV subscale scores) were more likely to find the negative gossip interesting and to want to share it. These findings suggest that individuals with higher SV scores may have found that the gossip’s value as a potential facilitator of socialization (i.e., something to talk about with others) compen-

sated for its negativity. After controlling for the ATG scales, the TGQ had small, positive relations with intentions to transmit positive gossip, but not negative gossip. The small or negligible relationships between TGQ scores and intentions to transmit may have been due to the fact that most of the TGQ items measure tendencies to share very specific topics of gossip, which were unrelated to the instances used in the present study.

4. Study 4

The goal of Study 4 was to evaluate the construct validity of the ATG scale by examining its relationships with measures of constructs related to gossiping, such as scales that measure interests in social interaction (e.g., extraversion), traits that may inhibit socialization (e.g., anxiety), and needs for social approval. We also examined the relationships of these measures with the TGQ in order to draw comparisons to the ATG scales.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Two hundred-sixty eight students (192 women, 76 men), ranging in age from 18 to 43, were recruited from the same university in Study 3. All students received extra credit for participating in this study.

4.1.2. Instruments and procedures

Attitudes Towards Gossip (ATG) scale and Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ). As previously described, the 12-item ATG scale consists of six-item social moral value subscales; the 20-item TGQ (Nevo et al., 1994) assesses tendencies to talk about other people in relation to a number of different specific topics.

The Interpersonal Curiosity Scale (IPCS). The IPCS is a 10-item scale of the Imaginal Processes Inventory (Singer & Antrobus, 1970) that assesses interest in learning about others. Participants indicated the extent to which each IPCS item was true for them using a five-point scale anchored by “Definitely not true for me” and “Very true for me”. Alphas of .80 or greater are reported for the IPCS (Singer & Antrobus, 1970).

International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) Extraversion Scale. This 10-item measure was developed by Goldberg (1999) as part of the IPIP project, for which the purpose is to develop measures of “broad bandwidth” personality constructs, such as the Big Five. Participants indicated how well each extraversion item described themselves using a five-point scale that ranged from “Very Inaccurate” to “Very Accurate”. Goldberg (1999) reports an alpha of .86 for the 10-item extraversion scale.

Social Desirability Scale (SDS). The 20-item SDS was developed by Strahan and Gerbasi (1972) to assess differential concerns about behaving appropriately and being viewed in a favorable light. Respondents indicate whether each item statement is either “true” or “false” for them. Strahan and Gerbasi (1972) report Kuder–Richardson coefficients ranging from .73 to .83 for the SDS.

Trait Anxiety and Trait Depression Scales of the State Trait Personality Inventory (STPI). The 10-item STPI Trait Anxiety and Trait Depression scales assess individual differences in anxiety

and depression, by asking respondents to report how frequently corresponding emotional states are generally experienced (Spielberger, 1979). Participants responded to the STPI trait items by rating themselves on a four-point frequency scale anchored by “Almost Never” and “Almost Always”. Spielberger (1979) reports alphas for the two scales ranging from .80 to .96.

The instruments described above were administered to the participants in group testing sessions; approximately 25–30min were required to respond to the six questionnaires, after which additional information was provided.

Table 4.1

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and *t*-tests of gender differences for the Attitudes Towards Gossip Scale and Subscales and other Personality Traits

Scale		Women (<i>n</i> = 192)	Men (<i>n</i> = 76)	<i>t</i>
ATG Total	M	31.68	30.38	1.31
	SD	7.15	7.56	
	α	.77	.78	
ATG-SV	M	16.30	14.86	2.36*
	SD	4.50	4.49	
	α	.72	.72	
ATG-MV	M	15.42	15.50	.88
	SD	3.61	4.23	
	α	.54	.64	
TGQ	M	48.49	53.58	3.10**
	SD	13.34	11.36	
	α	.85	.90	
IPCS	M	36.07	38.35	2.57*
	SD	5.99	6.80	
	α	.78	.67	
IPIP-Extra	M	33.71	33.94	.84
	SD	5.88	6.94	
	α	.84	.77	
SDS	M	9.21	9.15	.93
	SD	3.90	3.98	
	α	.80	.78	
STPI T-Anx	M	21.89	20.58	.15
	SD	5.94	4.40	
	α	.85	.71	
STPI T-Dep	M	19.63	19.15	.59
	SD	5.02	5.60	
	α	.89	.83	

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

4.2. Study 4 results

Means, standard deviations, alphas, and *t*-tests of gender differences for the measures of ATG and other personality traits are reported in Table 4.1. Alphas for the ATG and SV scales were adequate, but, as in Study 3, were low for the MV subscale. Alphas for the other measures were acceptable, ranging from .71 to .90, with the exception of IPCS for men. Small but significant gender differences were found for the SV subscale ($d = .32$), the TGQ ($d = .41$) and the IPCS ($d = .35$); men scored higher than women on all three of these measures.

Correlations between the ATG scales and all other instruments are reported in Table 4.2. The ATG scales were positively correlated with the TGQ; the pattern of these relationships was quite similar to those found in Study 3. Small positive correlations were found between the ATG scales and the IPCS; correction for attenuation indicated that the MV subscale correlated about the same as the ATG and SV scales with the IPCS ($r_c = .21$). These findings suggested that gossip-attitudes involve only a small degree of curiosity. By contrast, gossip-sharing tendencies, as measured by the TGQ, correlated about twice as highly with the IPCS, indicating that transmitting gossip involves a moderate amount of curiosity.

The ATG scales were not significantly correlated with the IPIP Extraversion scale, even when corrected for low reliability, whereas both the TGQ and IPCS had small positive correlations with extraversion. These findings suggested that ATG are independent of tendencies to engage in socialization behavior, whereas both the frequency that one transmits gossip and interpersonal curiosity overlap with extraverted behavior, at least to some extent.

Small to moderate negative correlations were found for the ATG scales, the TGQ, and the IPCS with the SDS, indicating that positive gossip-attitudes, gossip sharing, and interpersonal curiosity are all somewhat inhibited by social approval needs. By contrast, the correlation between the IPIP Extraversion scale and SDS was essentially zero, indicating that socialization tendencies are unrelated to social desirability. The ATG scales, TGQ, and IPCS all had very minimal

Table 4.2

Pearson product-moment correlations of the Attitudes Towards Gossip Total Scale and Subscales with Measures of Social Interaction and other Personality Traits ($n = 268$)

	ATG Total	ATG-SV	ATG-MV	TGQ	IPCS	IPIP-Extra
ATG-SV	.90**	–	–	–	–	–
ATG-MV	.85**	.53**	–	–	–	–
TGQ	.52**	.55**	.36**	–	–	–
IPCS	.22**	.24**	.14*	.42**	–	–
IPIP-Extra	.11	.10	.08	.23**	.29**	–
SDS	–.30**	–.30**	–.22*	–.33**	–.14*	–.03
STPI T-Anx	.13	.13	.11	.13	.07	–.20*
STPI T-Dep	.09	.06	.11	–.03	–.09	–.31**

ATG = Attitudes Towards Gossip (SV = Social value, MV = Value/Truth); TGQ = Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire; IPCS = Interpersonal Curiosity Scale; IPIP-Extra = International Personality Item Pool-Extraversion Scale; SDS = Social Desirability scale (short form); STPI = State Trait Personality Inventory (T-Dep = Trait Depression, T-Anx = Trait Anxiety).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

correlations with the STPI trait anxiety and depression scales. However, small to moderate negative correlations were found between the IPIP Extraversion scale and these two STPI measures. These findings indicated that while negative affectivity does not have much influence over gossip-related interests or interpersonal inquisitiveness, it does appear to be involved in the inhibition of socialization behavior.

4.3. Study 4 discussion

The pattern of correlations between the ATG scale and the other trait measures indicate that one's interest in social interaction can be somewhat differentiated from one's attitudes about the information that may be acquired through such interactions. These findings provide evidence that the ATG scale primarily reflects thoughts and feelings associated with gossip itself, while the TGQ is more closely related to socialization behavior and interpersonal curiosity, which is consistent with the hypothesized distinction between the constructs assessed by these measures.

5. General discussion

Four studies were conducted, for which the major goals were to develop and validate a measure of individual differences in ATG. In Study 1, factor analyses of responses to 29 ATG items identified two dimensions that reflected feelings about the social (SV) and moral (MV) value of gossip. Based on factor loadings and item content, the six best SV and MV items were selected to form a 12-item ATG scale with two six-item subscales. In Study 2, the two gossip-attitude dimensions were verified with confirmatory factor analysis, and found to be the most meaningful of several alternate models tested.

In Study 3 SV subscale scores were found to strongly predict feelings of interest and intentions to transmit negative gossip, suggesting that SV might differentiate between those who are more or less likely to respond favorably to and share gossip that has the potential to harm others; by contrast the TGQ was only weakly related to transmission-intentions. In Study 4, the ATG scales and TGQ correlated positively with each other, and were both negatively correlated with social desirability. However, the ATG scales were unrelated to extraversion while TGQ correlated positively with this construct. Taken together, the results of Studies 3 and 4 generally supported the hypothesized distinction between the constructs assessed by the ATG scales and the TGQ: The ATG scales appear to assess thoughts and feelings associated with how gossip is construed, whereas the TGQ primarily measures attitudes about engaging in gossiping as a behavior and interacting with others. The conceptual distinction between an individual's tendency to transmit gossip and their views about its value will need to be further explored in future research. For example, it is quite likely that some people engage in gossip sharing even though they may generally disapprove of the practice and find it a distasteful behavior when committed by others. Although dissociation between gossiping and gossip-attitudes could not be adequately addressed with the TGQ, it can (and should) be investigated using the ATG scales.

Overall, the findings of Studies 3 and 4 provided evidence of criterion and construct validity for the ATG scales. However, given that SV was almost always more highly correlated than MV with the other measured variables (even when corrections for low reliability could be made), it remains

unclear as to what the MV subscale uniquely predicts over the SV scale. One possibility is that MV scores may correspond with tendencies to treat the content of gossip as either believable fact or dismissible hearsay. This intriguing possibility will be important to explore in future research.

Although gender differences were found for the ATG scales in three studies, these differences had no consistent trend, and were always small in magnitude ($d < .50$). The ATG scale and subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha \geq .72$), with the exception of the MV subscale in two of the four studies conducted. Streiner (2003) noted that reliability is, to a certain extent, a characteristic of the sample as much as it is of the scale. With that in mind, it is interesting to note that alphas were stronger for the MV subscale when the sample was drawn from a small school, where the potentially greater familiarity among students may have resulted in more consistent attitudes about the moral nature of gossip.

In summary, the results of four studies provided evidence that gossip attitudes are multidimensional, and reflect thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about gossip's social and moral value. Evidence that individual differences in ATG can be reliably assessed, was provided by generally satisfactory internal consistency coefficients obtained from four samples at two different universities. Construct validity was evidenced in the ability of the SV subscale to predict interest in and intentions to transmit negative gossip, positive correlations with the TGQ, and negative correlations with social desirability.

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