

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Morally Elevating or Deflating? Investigating When and Why Acts of Oppositional Courage for Social Equity Elicit Positive and Negative Gossip from Majority Group Observers

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Morally Elevating or Deflating? Investigating When and Why Acts of Oppositional Courage for Social Equity Elicit Positive and Negative Gossip from Majority Group Observers

Courageous behavior on the part of majority group employees is vital to creating inclusive work environments. Thoroughgood et al. (2021) referred to such behavior as *oppositional courage* (OC) - defined as “behavior that challenges powerful organizational members and/or the status quo in order to remedy situations of unfairness, disrespect, or harm toward members of a stigmatized identity group and, in so doing, poses significant risks or threats to the actor at work” (p. 10) (e.g., advocating for inclusive policies for marginalized groups, defending them from judgment or hostility, educating others on group issues). OC represents morally virtuous behavior given it centers on the morally worthy goals of promoting equity, showing respect, and preventing harm to members of marginalized groups in the face of perceived risks (Thoroughgood et al., 2021).

Research suggests acts of OC serve a vital symbolic function for members of marginalized groups given they send a public message regarding their value at work. Yet, we know little about the reactions that majority group observers may have to such acts. Drawing on the social comparison literature, we argue that when majority group employees take initiative to challenge the status quo in support of social equity, despite risks, they will engage in upward moral social comparisons with the actor (Monin, 2007). To the extent that observers feel confident in their own ability to engage in OC (i.e., *OC self-efficacy*), such acts may cause observers to derogate (i.e., *negative gossip*) or praise (i.e., *positive gossip*) the actor in workplace conversations. We focus on positive and negative gossip as behavioral responses to third-party reactions to OC because gossip reflects a natural outgrowth of social comparison processes (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

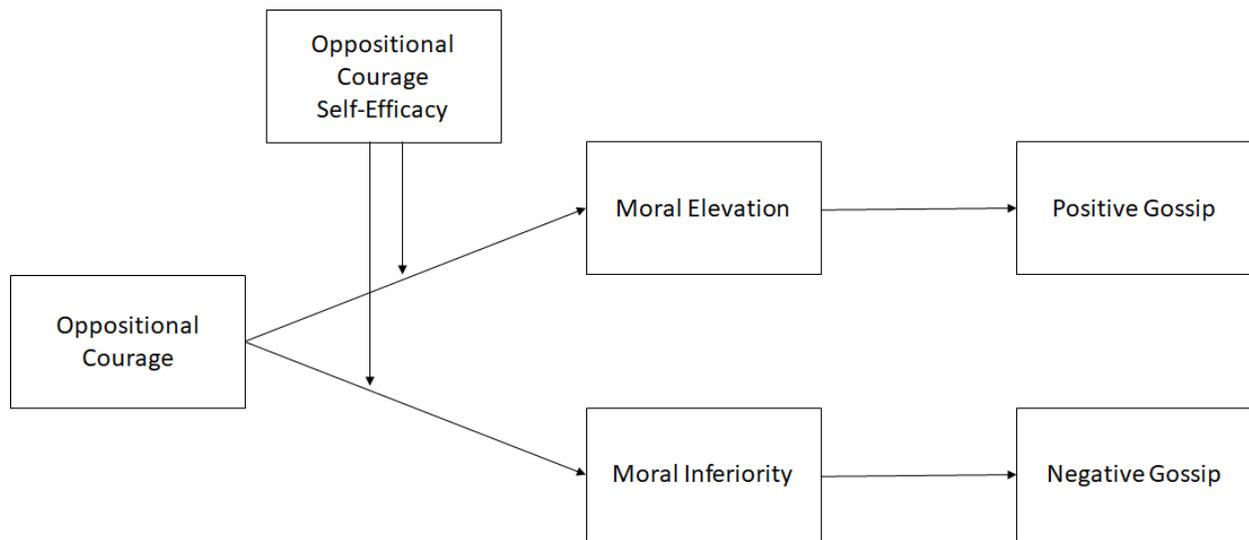
Upward social comparisons can be either deflating, due to a “contrast” effect, or inspiring, due to an “assimilation” effect, depending on the extent to which a person believes performance in the domain of comparison is attainable or under their control (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Accordingly, we argue that when majority group employees witness a coworker engage in OC, they will either experience *moral inferiority* (i.e., a negative emotional response stemming from a sense of not measuring up morally to the actor; Monin, 2007) or *moral elevation* (i.e., a positive emotional response to witnessing moral virtue, which includes feelings of warmth, uplift, and admiration for the actor; Haidt, 2000). Whether moral inferiority or elevation are experienced upon witnessing OC will depend on the perceiver’s self-efficacy to engage in OC at work. When individuals lack OC self-efficacy, the comparison person’s behavior will threaten their moral self given they believe they are unable to achieve similar moral excellence. In contrast, when individuals possess OC self-efficacy, the comparison person’s behavior will be interpreted as elevating. In turn, while moral inferiority will motivate negative gossip about the target as a self-protective response that boosts their own perceived status, feelings of moral elevation will motivate the comparer to engage in positive gossip as a prosocial response that praises the actor’s moral excellence to others (Figure 1).

In our first study, using a time-lagged survey and employing a sample of Caucasian employees, we find that a coworker’s engagement in OC toward racial or ethnic minority employees (Time 1) is related to positive gossip about the coworker (Time 3) via moral elevation

(Time 2) when OC self-efficacy (Time 2) is higher. In contrast, OC on the part of a coworker (Time 1) is related to negative gossip (Time 3) via moral inferiority (Time 2) when OC self-efficacy is lower. Results hold when controlling for social dominance orientation.

We first contribute to the workplace inclusion literature by illuminating when and why majority group employees stand up for social equity may elicit mixed responses from majority group observers. We find that positive and negative reactions to these courageous acts are a function of whether they are interpreted as morally uplifting or deflating depending on perceivers' own self-efficacy to behave similarly. We also contribute to calls to understand the dynamics surrounding the various ways in which majority group "allies" take action to address inequity. Second, we contribute to the workplace courage literature by underscoring how courageous acts can activate upward social comparisons. To date, researchers have traditionally studied courage from the actor's perspective, overlooking how observers react to such behaviors. We find OC can elicit positive *and* negative reactions depending on observer characteristics. Third, we contribute to the workplace gossip literature by highlighting how positive and negative gossip may be countervailing responses to upward moral social comparisons.

Figure 1. Theoretical model.



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