EFFECT OF WORKPLACE NEGATIVE GOSSIP ON PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' JOB PERFORMANCE: COPING STRATEGIES AS MODERATING VARIABLE

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ABSTRACT

The main purposes of this study are to explore the effect of workplace negative gossip on preschool teachers' job performance, and the moderating effect of coping strategies on the relationship between workplace negative gossip and preschool teachers' job performance. A sample of 384 preschool teachers from Taiwan completed self-report measures of workplace negative gossip, job performance, and coping strategies. The carried out data analysis by structural equation modeling (SEM). The results show that there is significantly negative correlation between workplace negative gossip and preschool teachers' job performance. Besides, moderating effect of coping strategies on the relationship between workplace negative gossip and preschool teachers' job performance is significant. Based on these results, implication for preschool teachers to reduce workplace negative gossip and future research has been discussed.

Keywords: Coping strategies; job performance; preschool teachers; workplace negative gossip.

INTRODUCTION

Gossip exists everywhere in reality (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Just go to s convenient store to look at the magazine's cover and the headline of the newspaper, or browse the Internet forums, it is not difficult to find that gossip exists not only in the public forums but also face-to-face interpersonal interaction. In a series of daily life conversation analysis, Dunbar (2004) found that 65% of people's talk relates to gossip, while Emler (1994) discovered that 70% of conversation invoves gossip. Moreover, the research results of Grosser, Lopez–Kidwell, Labianca and Ellwardt(2012) even show that 95% of the work personnel talk about gossip in workplace. All demonstrates the prevalence of gossip in social interaction. In such sense, so-called workplace gossip can be regarded as chatting in workplace, usually includes talking about in the employees' break time about things like the supervisors' policy making, change of job position, customers' reaction, and so on. As defined by Foster (2004), workplace gossip refers to a group of people of the same kind to communicate with message interaction of positive or negative evaluation on the gossip target person not present there. It will be positive gossip when delivering positive evaluation messages; in contrast, it is considered as negative gossip (de Gouveia, Van Vuuren, & Crafford, 2005).

Nevertheless, as spread by the media like newspaper and magazines in real life, what actually has power of attraction and destruction is negative gossip (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Grosser, Lopez–Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). As far as the individual is concerned, negative gossip does play a significantly important role (Chandra & Robinson, 2009; Greengard, 2001; Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Chandr and Robinson (2009) indicated definitely that workplace negative

gossip implies the employee's perception of the negative news about him/her being spread by others behind his/her back. Therefore, so-called workplace negative gossip is actually rumors harmful to the employee as the protagonist or the victim of the gossip target. Anyhow, simply chatting on other's gossip is merely another kind of informal message communication that can be regarded as interpersonal interaction and social activities. However, when one becomes the protagonist in the negative gossip, it can constitute certain social bonding or workplace bullying. Ultimately, workplace negative gossip has to show its negative behavioral effect on the gossip targets (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

As demonstrated by relative studies, like other workplace aggression, workplace negative gossip will harm the intruded employee's dignity as well as reputation, and form a distorted kind of job stress, all of which can lead to negative job performance such as absence from work without asking for leave, asking for leave, loaf on the work, and so on (Cox, 1970). Otherwise, it will result in declination of work satisfaction, loss of work motivation, decrease of work efficiency, or even resignation from job (Greengard, 2001; Michelson & Mouly, 2004). However, some studies point out the positive effect of workplace negative gossip on job performance, as McAndrew, Bell and Garcia(2007), and Van Iterson and Clegg (2008) found in their research. Whether such divergence in research results relates to the moderating effect of the coping strategies has not been further explored by any studies yet. From the social exchange theory angle, workplace negative gossip is a distorted form of job stress, or social pressure, which will absolutely cause the employee's poor job performance or turnover behavior without taking positive coping strategies. Fortunately, with positive coping strategies, it can lesson the destructive power of job stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Moreover, along with problem solving in practical workplace experience, stress can be converted to a kind of aid (McAndrew et al, 2007), such that the negative gossip in the organization can function as the opportunity for the employee to make self improvement, understand the job's potential rules, and further raise competitiveness for success in work (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Since the kindergarten teachers take the responsibility of educating the masters in the future, how their job performance is results in direct impact on the cornerstone of children's lifetime learning and healthy mental and physical development. Therefore, it is necessary to probe into the influence of workplace negative gossip on kindergarten teachers' job performance. As the workplace of kindergarten is different from that of the general companies, it is likely for the workplace negative gossip to involve with the parents unlike customers in the common service industry. Parents who engage themselves in kindergarten activities and school affairs, and serve as a volunteer have already become another kind of organization members. Consequently, how workplace negative gossip influences on kindergarten teachers, and whether positive coping strategies can alter the workplace negative gossip's influence on the teachers' job performance are all issues worthy of our further exploration.

As a result, this research will discuss workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance, and clarify the coping strategies' moderating effect on this influential relationship.

LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESIS
Workplace negative gossip

As we learn from literature of workplace negative gossip, the workplace gossip is considered as workplace negative gossip referring to some impressive negative messages (Ben-Ze'ev,

1994; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). For such prejudice, Rosnow and Fine (1976) proposed that workplace gossips are not always negative, some are positive rumors. Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs's (2004) and Foster's (2004) arguments are consistent with such point-of-view that workplace gossip is not limited to negative destruction; rather, the organization gossip can be characterized with positive function.

Therefore, currently, one of the acceptable viewpoints is to regard workplace gossip as a kind of evaluation messages communicating and spreading evaluative news of specific person. If the gossip involves positive evaluation, it is taken as positive workplace gossip, but if it is relative to negative evaluation, it is regarded as workplace negative gossip (Foster, 2004; Grosser et al, 2010; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). Nevertheless, such definition is originated from the angle of gossip creators and listeners without stressing on the perspective of the involved party. Actually, to present the negative implication, workplace negative gossip has to be recognized by the gossip target's subjective perception (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Otherwise, whether negative gossip provided by the gossip maker is the correct messages from informal channel, superficial and groundless rumors, or malicious negative speech can not be clarify, while it is difficult to distinguish workplace negative gossip from organizational attack, uncivilized behaviors, and even rumors. To cut in from the angle of gossip listeners, workplace negative gossip is merely chatting in the break time in workplace with the effect of entertainment and communication of friendship, so how to define its negative dimension remains uncertain. The more confusing is that it is difficult to distinguish the gossip maker from the gossip listeners, since workplace negative gossip has traceability difficulty, and no one present in gossip talk will admit they are gossip creators (Foster, 2004; Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012). Therefore, from the angle of the gossip target, Chandr and Robinson (2009) definitely defined workplace negative gossip as the employee's perception of negative news spread by others maliciously in workplace.

Such definition points out straightforwardly that whether workplace negative gossip exists is judged by the victim employee. If the involved party feels easy about it or is not aware of it at all, then it is no workplace negative gossip. More importantly, workplace negative gossip perceived by the employees contains malicious evaluation messages have the property of linguistic attack, and have caused a kind of psychological harm similar to job stress or social pressure (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Consequently, with definition made from the angle of the gossip target, the measurement of workplace negative gossip has to adopt the form of self-report inventory. In addition, the items are no negative news that one hears or takes part in spreading; rather, it is negative news that one perceives he/she is attacked verbally.

Workplace negative gossip's influence on job performance

From the view of social exchange theory, when the employee senses social pressure from organizational attacks, it is possible for him/her to evade or leave the condition to avoid the public's verbal punishment. From the view of personal dignity and reputation, employee is very sensitive to the verbal attack in workplace negative gossip. Such embarrassment will force the employee to feel rejected, and lead to the employee's mental and physical stress, which further influences job performance (Chandra & Robinson, 2009; Emler, 1994; Grosser et al, 2010). As far as conservation of resources theory is concerned, when the sensitive workplace negative gossip appears, it takes great efforts for the employee to persuade the public that he/she is no such people; and, under the condition of restricted personal resources,

the resources will be consumed at last, and influence his/her job performance (Chandra & Robinson, 2009; Shirom, 1989). From the angle of workplace aggression, workplace negative gossip is also a kind of verbal attack in workplace, so frustration will cause the employee's negative emotions and job stress, and worsen his/her job performance (Spector & Fox, 2002; Wittek & Wielers, 1998).

Anyway, from the position of the supervisor, the gossip creators, the gossip listeners, and the gossip target, the influence of workplace negative gossip on job performance has different implications. In this research, it is limited to the viewing angle of gossip target, and discusses workplace negative gossip's influence on job performance from the personal level. According to the empirical studies of Cox (1970), Greengard (2001), Michelson, and Mouly (2004), poor job performance is in fact the passive reaction of the employee attacked verbally. Consequently, this research proposed that:

H1: Workplace negative gossip has negative influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance.

The moderating effect of coping strategy on influence of workplace negative gossip on job performance

The meaning of coping strategy varies with different research subjects and research fields. If we consider workplace negative gossip as a kind of job stress from verbal attack, then we can say that stress coping strategy is the process of adopting certain reactive behaviors to avoid threat from stress and harm. In this process, in order to prevent from threat and harm, the individual will employ adaptation and solution approaches in level of cognitive treatment, emotional moderation, and behaviors to seek for balance of personal body and mind (Charles & Jennifer, 2010).

As for classification of coping strategies, in accordance with Collins and Mowbray (1999), coping strategies can be divided into three-- one is positive strategies concerning efficient problem solving and rational analysis, one is the neutral position that maintains internal emotional balance, and the last one is the passive strategies that avoid and withdraw from the problem. Generally speaking, positive coping strategies can reduce threat and harm of stress, while passive coping strategies can evade the harm of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

For positive coping strategies concerning the research subject and the research field, coping strategy of emotional adaptation was exerted. For kindergarten teachers, this can lessen their emotional harm. By adopting problem solving or rational analysis strategies, the negative influence of workplace negative gossip on job performance can be eliminated thoroughly. Besides, based on Abbajay's (2014) practical suggestion, the feasible positive coping strategies for organizational negative gossip involve concentrating on the professional work or highlighting one's own strengths to crash the unreal accusation by negative gossip, and express such negative gossip is so boring, so just stop spreading it. In addition, be careful for the talking object in private, because most negative gossip comes from those who are closest to you (Ferrari, 2015). Moreover, one can explain what is really true to the victims of gossip or the supervisor, and show the position that one is willing to defeat negative gossip. Undoubtedly, it is also necessary to analyze the correctness of the negative gossip. If it is true, then one must make self retrospection without destroying the organization's function. Instead, one can take the negative gossip as valuable feedback messages to serve as the foundation of self-promotion.

To sum up, this research regards coping strategies as positive emotional adaptation, problem solving, and rational analysis, so that it proposed:

H2: Coping strategies play the role of moderating variable in influence of workplace negative gossip on job performance.

Methods
Research participants

This research invited 384 kindergarten teachers who verbally agree to take part in the research, and the formal sample structure is listed in Table 1.

Table 1 The structure of the sample in this research

Variables	*n*	Percentage%	Variables	*n*	Percentage%
Age			Service year		
(1) under 30	134	34.90	(1) Under 5 years	104	27.08
(2)31 to 40	182	47.40	(2)6-10 years	179	46.61
(3)Above 41	68	17.71	(3)More than 11 years	101	26.30
Education					
(1)Senior/Vocational high school	46	9.50			
(2) College	83	17.15			
(3) Above university	355	73.35			

Measuring instruments
Workplace Negative Gossip Scale

This scale was developed according to literature discussion and interviews with the kindergarten teachers. It exerted Likert four point scale design, and the reliability and validity test results are categorized into two factors: 1. Interpersonal-related gossip (4 items): λ ranges between .76-.83, and α=.88. The items are like: "People spread the rumor of my inharmonious relationship with the parents". 2. Competence-related gossip (4 items): λ ranges between .71-.90, and α=.85. The items are like "People spread the rumor that something's wrong with my teaching method". The total variance of the 8 items is 66.39%, and the total reliability is α=.89.

Job Performance Scale

This scale was developed according to literature discussion and interviews with the kindergarten teachers. It exerted Likert four point scale design, and the reliability and validity test results are categorized into two factors: 1. in-role behavior (4 items): λ ranges between .86-.89, and α=.93. The items are like: "I follow the work norms in the kindergarten." 2. Extra-role behavior (4 items): λ ranges between .81-.89, and α=.92. The items are like "I often engage myself in some extra administrative work". The total variance of the 8 items is 78.87%, and the total reliability is α=.90.

Coping Strategies Scale

This scale was developed according to literature discussion, consulted Carver's (1997) Brief COPE Scale, and interviews with the kindergarten teachers. It exerted Likert four point scale design, and the reliability and validity test results are categorized into three factors: 1 Emotional adaptation (4 items): λ is between .78-.87, α=.83, and items are as "When I hear negative gossip about myself, I will try to release the unhappy emotions". 2. problem solving (4 items): λ is between .78-.87, α=.83, and items are as "I will actively explain to other people about the false accusation of myself". 3. Rational analysis (4 items): λ is between .78-.87, α=.83, and items are as "If the negative gossip about myself is true, I will make retrospection". The three factors can explain the 12 items in the scale. The total variation is 73.13%, and the total α is .87.

Procedure and Data Analysis

1. Set up research team
   The researcher invited 5 kindergarten teachers with master degree to work as the subject matter experts (SME) to assist the researcher to proceed review of the scale items, so that the content validity can be enhanced.
2. Develop research tools
   Regarding scale development, the scale was developed through interviews and SMEs were invited to review to achieve content validity. As for purposive sampling, the 100 kindergarten teachers who were willing to collaborate with this research were the testees. After collecting data, the researcher used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and internal consistency to test validity and reliability.
3. Formal tests
   Through two stages' sampling, the researcher took 384 kindergarten teachers as the testees. During the test, EMSs helped practical test. In addition, to avoid common method variance (CMV), separation approach of data collecting was adopted.
4. Data analysis

With SEM analysis, workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance and coping strategies' moderating effect on workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance were explored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance

According to literature, this research proposed workplace negative gossip's negative influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance. With the SEM analysis results, the evaluation indicators all achieved the ideal threshold (see Table 2), signifying that the model's structure fit is good. As the path coefficient is -.66 ($p < .001$.), achieving the significant level, so it meets the direction of the hypothesis's direction. Therefore, H1 is supported.

Table 2: Workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance SEM's fit assessment

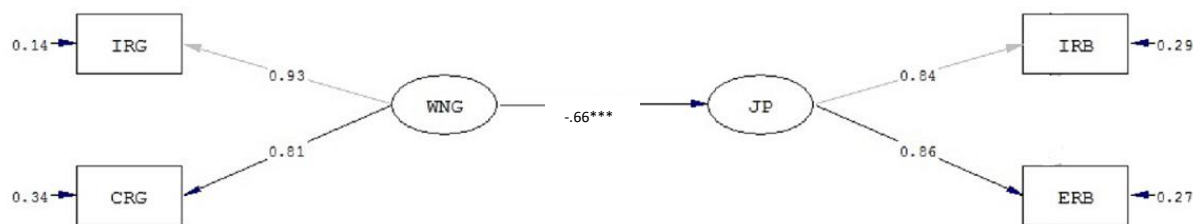|	χ^2	p	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	NNFI	CFI
Hypothesis mode	2.51	.201	1	2.51	.06	.99	.98	.99
Ideal value	The smaller the better	Not significant		<3	<.08	>.90	>.90	>.90

Fig. 1 Workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance (the standard solution)
Note. IRG = interpersonal-related gossip, CRG= competence-related gossip, WNG=workplace negative gossip, JP=job performance, IRB= in-role behavior, ERB= extra-role behavior
*** *p<.001.*

Coping strategies' moderating effect on workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance

According to the above-mentioned literature discussion, this research proposed the hypothesis that coping strategies have moderating effect on workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance. To test this hypothesis, the researcher proceeded route analysis of the latent variables though SEM. On observation indicator of interactive variable, it is the product of coping strategies and workplace negative gossip. To avoid the problem of multicollinearity, the standard score was employed (the average is 0, and deviation is 1) to replace the raw score, and then the paired cross product was exerted (Chin, Marcolin, & Newsted, 2003). The analysis results are shown in Fig. 2, while the assessment results of the model's fit is listed in Table 3.

Table 3 The assessment of the structural equation model's fit of workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance (*N*=384)

	χ^2	p	*df*	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	NNFI	CFI
Hypothesis model	99.74	.002	59	1.69	.05	.94	.94	.99
Ideal value	The small the better	Not significant		<3	<.08	>.90	>.90	>.90

According to Table 3, the assessment of the structural equation model's fit of workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance, except the chi square estimated parameters and the sample number fluctuate significantly, the other assessed indicators all reach the ideal threshold, and the hypothesis model and the observation data fit is fair.
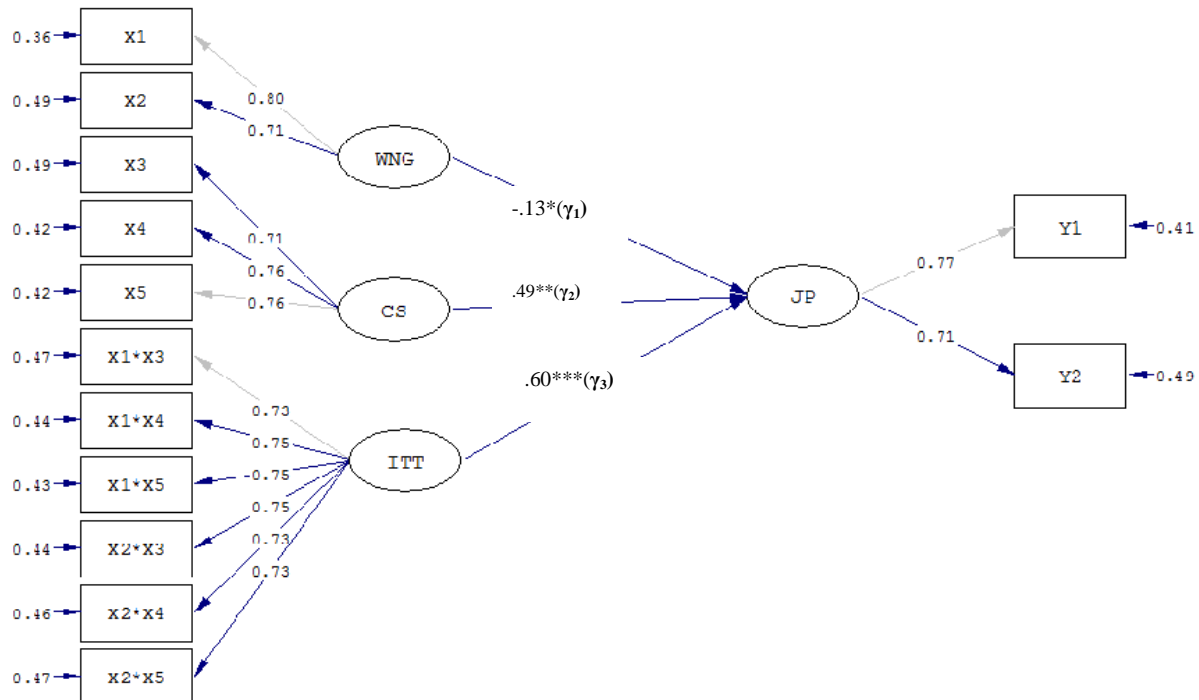

Fig. 2
Coping strategies' moderating effect on workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance (standardized solution)
Note: X1= interpersonal-related gossip, X2= competence-related gossip, X3=emotional adaptation,
X4= problem solving, X5= rational analysis, Y1= in-role behavior, Y2= extra-role behavior
WNG=workplace negative gossip, CS= coping strategies, ITT=interaction variable, JP= job performance.
* $p<.05$. **$p<.01$. *** $p<.001$.

In accordance with Fig. 3, the path coefficient from ITT to JP is .60, reaching the significant level. We further set γ_3 as 0 to use Chi-square difference test. The restricted model's $\chi^2=115.41$, $df=60$, $\Delta\chi^2_{(1)}=15.67$, and $p<.001$. We assumed that the quality of the restricted model with no effect of the interaction term became worse significantly. The original model fits the data well, is treated as the final model. That is to say, coping strategies indeed moderate workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance. This research has proved that Hypothesis 2 is supported.

To concretely present the moderating effect, the median of the score in coping strategy scale was used to categorize the strategies into two parts, high level and low level coping strategy groups. Regression analysis was conducted for the two groups' workplace negative gossip and job performance, and the analytical results show that the predicted formula of high level coping strategy group is job performance=-.18×workplace negative gossip, while low level coping strategy group is job performance=-.30×workplace negative gossip. The gradients of high and low level coping strategy groups' influence of workplace negative gossip on job performance differ significantly. That is, for the kindergarten teachers who used high level

coping strategies, they underwent less negative influence on job performance when they were threatened by workplace negative gossip. As for the teachers who used low level coping strategies, they underwent more influence on job performance when threatened by workplace negative gossip.
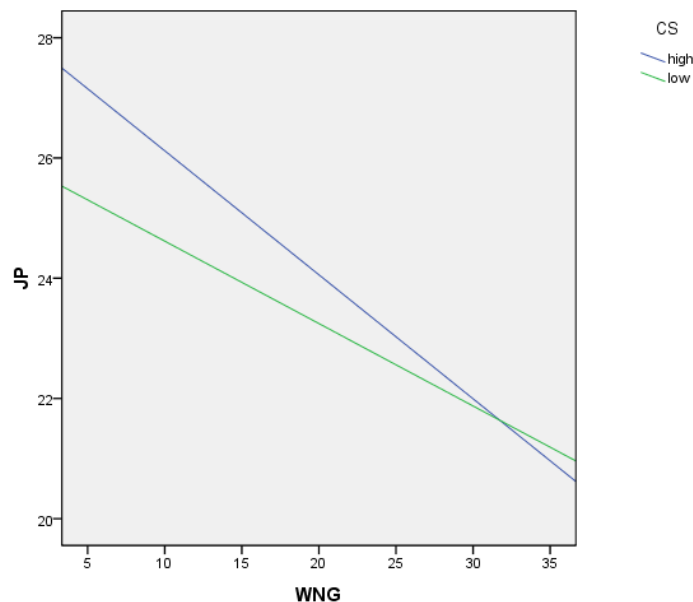

Fig. 3 multiple regression analysis
Note: JP= job performance, CS= coping strategies, WNG=workplace negative gossip.

DISCUSSION

This research has found that workplace negative gossip's negative influence on job performance, and stated that workplace negative gossip belongs to a kind of verbal attacks on kindergarten teachers. Such attacks are very sensitive, not only destroying kindergarten teachers' personal reputation and dignity, but also constituting invisible job stress. As far as damage on personal reputation and dignity is concerned, as analyzed by Chandra & Robinson (2009) and Emler (1994), such workplace attacks make people feel rejected by others, so that work engagement and job performance become worse. In accordance with Einarsen's (2000) recounting, workplace attacks like workplace gossip not only harm the victim's psychological health, but also destroy the victim's job performance. In regard of job stress, work is originally the important channel for personal self identification (Tracy, Myer, & Scott, 2006), as well as the "necessity" for the individual to maintain mental health (Kelly, 2007). However, once the individual becomes the victim of the organization's gossip, a current of distorted job stress will be formed, and the initially wonderful work and life quality will be destroyed, and cause harm to the individual as well as his/her job performance.

It is found in this research that coping strategies plays the role of moderating effect in influence of workplace negative gossip on kindergarten teachers' job performance, which explains that when kindergarten teachers are the target of workplace negative gossip, they bear a current of distorted job stress, so positive and effective coping strategies are demanded to alleviate psychological harm, and lessen its negative impact on job performance. Coping strategies like emotional adaptation, problem solving, rational analysis, and the like are traits of the research subject and the source of stress taken into considerations in order to ascertain the feasibility. After all, so-called coping strategies in this research came from interviews with kindergarten teachers' opinions, and compiled those viewpoints to form the effective

coping strategies for workplace negative gossip. Consequently, this research has found that why coping strategies can moderate the harm of workplace negative gossip to job performance primarily lies in adopting positive coping strategies, along with practical suggestions and compliance with the kindergarten teachers' characteristics.

To sum up, the most important contribution made by this research is that through coping strategies, it verifies the effectiveness of moderating the ill influence of workplace negative gossip on job performance. From the angle of gossip target orientation, it is unlike the past studies that consider the negative news of people's laziness, playfulness, theft, corruption, and disobedience against the organizational norms as workplace negative gossip (de Gouveia et al., 2005). Instead, this research cuts in from the subject perception of the gossip target, and definitely defines workplace negative gossip as the employee's being aware of other people's maliciously spreading his/her personal negative news. It is through such research orientation that the dispute of "negative" gossip can be avoided. Anyway, sometimes various negative messages unrelated to us are just like communication and recreational activities at meals (Foster, 2004), and they are no "negative" gossip for the gossip target. Only through the gossip target's perception to paste the negative label to workplace gossip can negativity of workplace negative gossip be proven (Aquino & Thau, 2009). In the mean time, regarding the coping strategies in this study, the researcher particularly emphasized on adoption of effective and positive strategies when we encounter workplace negative gossip, such waste of resource, equivalent as organizational attacks and distorted job stress source. As a result, when kindergarten teachers encounter attacks by workplace negative gossip, it is necessary for them to make good use of coping strategies such as emotional adaptation, problem solving, rational analysis, and so on.

Research limitation

The issue in this research is innovative, and the empirical analysis in this research is preliminary. The theoretical foundation comes from recounting of stress coping strategies. In practice, we selected people with practical suggestions as the measuring indicator of coping strategies, with color of practical intelligence. However, all are merely theory borrowing. In the future, the studies can try to cut in from deviant workplace behaviors, workplace bullying, and so on to find out the latest explanatory framework to illustrate the empirical research's theoretical foundation. Anyway, so-called coping strategies in this research can be probed into from the angle of the victim's reaction.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the analysis above, this research has generalized two conclusions, one is workplace negative gossip has negative influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance, and the other is coping strategies has moderating effect on workplace negative gossip's influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance.

On the basis of the two findings, in practical application, it is suggested to make good use of coping strategies to moderate workplace negative gossip's negative influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance, since it is found in this research that workplace negative gossip indeed has negative influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance. It is uneasy and unpractical to reduce workplace negative gossip from the source, since anyway, gossip culture has taken root in the kindergartens in Taiwan. In addition, the elements related to workplace negative gossip in the kindergarten, such as organizational structure, parent

participation, communication technology, and etc. cannot be changed. Moreover, it is also found in this research that in the negative relationship between workplace negative gossip and job performance, coping strategies has moderating effect. Consequently, kindergarten teachers had better adopt coping strategies proposed by this research like emotional adaptation, problem solving, rational analysis, and etc. to alleviate the emotional harm done by workplace negative gossip, and solve the tough issue practically in order to lessen workplace negative gossip's negative influence on kindergarten teachers' job performance.

In regard of suggestions in the future, it is recommended to expand the sampling range to broaden the deduction level with the research results, since this research is preliminary. Additionally, from the angle of the above-mentioned workplace deviation behaviors and workplace bullying, the researchers can conduct qualitative study the diverse factors resulting in negative gossip in the organization and the solution-based strategies.

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