

# **Analysing gossip to reveal and understand power relationships, political action and reaction to change inside organisations**

**Kathryn Waddington**

Institute of Health Sciences  
City University  
24 Chiswell St  
London EC1Y 4TY  
United Kingdom  
[k.waddington@city.ac.uk](mailto:k.waddington@city.ac.uk)

**Grant Michelson**

Faculty of Economics and Business  
University of Sydney  
Sydney NSW 2006  
Australia  
[g.michelson@econ.usyd.edu.au](mailto:g.michelson@econ.usyd.edu.au)

**Stream:** "Talk, Power and Organisational Change" at CMS conference, Manchester, July 2007

## **Abstract**

*Gossip is historically and stereotypically seen as pejorative women's talk, and from an organisational perspective it is often viewed as an unreliable and even 'dangerous' form of communication. There is a prevailing assumption that gossip is a 'problem' that managers should actively discourage, if not eliminate. This paper aims to challenge the assumptions, stereotypes and myths associated with gossip as a neglected organisational discourse. Drawing upon empirical research into gossip conducted in Australia and the U.K., the paper will illustrate how analysis of gossip inside organisations affords a greater understanding of power relationships, political action and reaction to change. The consequences of gossip for individuals are varied and include: (i) reduction of uncertainty and anxiety; (ii) knowledge power and sensemaking; (iii) social exclusion and victimisation; (iv) distress and harm. Organisational consequences of gossip include: (i) a means of developing and maintaining networks; (ii) dissemination of information and misinformation; (iii) resistance to change and sabotage; (iv) the masking or distortion of issues and problems. Rather than viewing gossip as a problem to be 'managed', we argue that gossip is a potentially rich source of informal narrative knowledge and management information that can illuminate understanding about a range of organisational issues. In adopting such a position, the 'problem' then shifts to one of how to capture gossip as data that can be analysed, interpreted and used in organisational research and management practice. The paper will conclude by outlining new approaches and avenues for exploring the organisational realities experienced and exposed through the study of gossip. For example, does it make sense to suggest that organisational change and power are in fact constituted through gossip?*

## Introduction

An overarching purpose of this paper is to provide a platform for advancing research into an ostensibly ubiquitous yet ephemeral form of informal organisational talk – gossip. In doing so, it aims to challenge the assumptions, stereotypes and myths associated with gossip as a neglected organisational discourse. Gossip is an emerging area of interdisciplinary scholarship within the organisational sciences and much of what is known about gossip is diffused across social history, communication studies, anthropology, psychology and sociology. Gossip has received attention in relation to its role for individuals and for groups, including issues of social comparison, identity and reputation (e.g. Dunbar 1996, 2004; Emler 1994; Gluckman 1963; Wert & Salovey 2004). In addition to its diffusion across different disciplinary areas, gossip also permeates into extant theoretical perspectives. For example, social exchange theory, attribution theory, cognitive dissonance theory and uncertainty reduction theory (Berger 2005; Bradac 2001; Festinger 1957; Heider 1958; Zafirovski 2005) can all be invoked to explain why and how individuals might engage in gossip as well as deal with internal anguish about participating in gossip. The underlying assumptions of gossip in the workplace are broadly consistent with Goffman's (1961) concept of the 'organisational underlife' and Gabriel's (1995) 'unmanaged organisation' thesis.

Within the organisational and management literature, gossip is seen as a potentially important, but under researched area of inquiry (Noon & Delbridge 1993). Thus far, gossip has predominantly featured as coincidental to the mainstream disciplines and domains. It surfaces as a by-product of inquiry into, for example, organisational culture, storytelling and conflict, rather than as a topic worthy of theoretical and research interest in its own right (e.g. Farrow 2005; Gabriel 1991, 1995; Kolb & Putnam 1992; Ybema 1996). Gossip can also be found in the 'popular management' literature, where it is treated as a 'problem'; it is detrimental to work, is not to be encouraged or condoned, and is something to be 'managed' (e.g. Baker & Jones 1996; Therrien 2004). To some extent, this popular management perspective exemplifies a view of gossip associated with negative, pejorative and trivial assumptions, something seen as gendered or more specifically 'women's talk', inauthentic discourse, and a phenomenon to be discouraged or banned (Emler 1990; 1994 Heidegger 1962; Jones 1980). Whilst acknowledging this gendered, historical and philosophical context, in the absence of empirical evidence, such unsupported claims regarding the management of gossip in organisations are open to challenge.

Rather than viewing gossip as a problem and/or something that is trivial and unworthy of investigation in organisational research, we argue that gossip is a potentially rich source of informal narrative knowledge and management information that can illuminate understanding about a range of organisational issues. These include, for example, power relationships, political action and reaction to change. In adopting such a position, the 'problem' then shifts to one of how to capture gossip as data that can be analysed, interpreted and used in organisational research and management practice. The paper draws upon research conducted separately in the U.K and Australia in the organisational contexts of health and business, respectively. The data is used to illustrate the consequences of gossip at the micro/macro, individual/organisational levels of analysis, and also to highlight challenges and tensions in the scholarship of gossip-in-organisations. We then outline more novel approaches and avenues for exploring the organisational realities experienced and exposed through the analysis of gossip. The paper concludes by considering the argument that gossip plays a wider role in the constitution of organisations, and that the processes of change and power are enacted, in part, through gossip.

## Gossip-in-organisations

The scholarship of gossip-in-organisations provides scope for innovation in the development of new interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, as well as contributing fresh understandings to existing theoretical perspectives. Such innovations will require integration of potentially disparate disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, and it is not necessarily helpful to consider gossip as *either* a commodity (individual level of analysis) *or* as a system of control (group level of analysis). Nor is it helpful to position gossip solely as an aspect of organisational communication at the micro level of interpersonal and inter-group relationships. In organisations, gossip is a particular type of informal communication and evaluative talk between at least two people. Jones *et al.* (2004) note the challenges for organisational communication researchers to take account of macro level issues relating to the organisation as a whole, as well as its relationship to its external environment. Therefore, we need to consider gossip-in-organisations in relation to:

- the process/es of negotiated interaction between individuals and groups; and
- the consequences in relation to wider organisational processes of culture, power, identity, reputation and corporate discourse.

The management-oriented discourse surrounding gossip and rumour in organisations is based largely upon assumptions that gossip is detrimental to work productivity, creates a climate of mistrust, innuendo and results in low morale (e.g. Akande & Funmilayo 1994; Baker & Jones 1996; Burke & Wise 2003; Esposito & Rosnow 1993; Greengard 2001). The outcomes of gossip-in-organisations (both positive and negative as well as intended and unintended) relate to the way it communicates norms and expectations, helps shape and re-shape meaning and enables cultural and organisational learning (Baumeister *et al.* 2004; Kniffin & Wilson 2005; Kurland & Pelled 2000). Gossip has been viewed as a form of 'social cement' holding organisations together, with significant benefits and consequences:

[I]t allows employees to understand and predict their bosses' behaviour; it can be used to ruin competitors' reputations; and the casual context encourages the development of social networks between workmates (Doyle 2000: 8).

Jaeger *et al.* (1998) used communication network methods in research into the characteristics of gossipers and the people they gossip about, and social network models and approaches are seen as pertinent to the development of theory and research into organisational gossip (Brass *et al.* 2004; Foster 2004; Foster & Rosnow 2006). Different types of formal and informal communication systems evolve and exist within and between organisations, including clique and personal networks, professional, interprofessional, and virtual networks. However, network theory and research has largely ignored gossip as a topic worthy of detailed empirical attention. One reason suggested for this omission is that the involvement of active third parties creates 'enormous complexity' for theoretical analysis (Burt & Knez 1996: 72). However, complexity is not necessarily a valid reason for ignoring a potentially important aspect of this type of networked organisational communication.

'The grapevine' has emerged as a particular type of communication network through which rumour and gossip flow (Davis 1973), yet subsequent literature relating to the grapevine and its management is largely unsubstantiated by systematic research (e.g. Boehle *et al.* 2000; Karathanos & Auriemmo 1999; Mishra 1990). The grapevine is undocumented in formal organisational systems (unless subject to research), unstructured, yet is periodically regarded as the only way to find out 'what is really going on' inside organisations. Cognisance of informal networks, which are

supported and sustained by gossip, is a source of power based upon exchange of information and support, enabling managers to: (i) identify where and how coalitions are functioning, (ii) anticipate resistance to change; or (iii) identify and access support for action or change. Baumeister *et al.* (2004) argue that managers who are left out or outside of gossip networks have considerably less power and control than those inside such networks, and often do not remain too long in their roles.

The relationship between gossip (networks) and power have recently been explored by some scholars. Kurland & Pelled (2000) proposed a conceptual model of gossip and power (subsequently revised by Noon, 2001) that identifies specific predictions relating to the linkages between positive and negative gossip and the gossiper's coercive, reward, expert and referent power over gossip recipients. Influenced by French and Raven's construction of power, the model also predicts that the effects of gossip on different types of power will be moderated by gossip credibility, quality of interpersonal relationship and organisational culture. This model reflects a precise, yet questionably narrow conceptual framework that fails to take into account or acknowledge a Foucauldian power/knowledge connection. This connection is based upon the assumption that it is impossible to separate power from knowledge, and that power is conceptualised as a relationship that is localised, diffused, dispersed and disguised throughout a social system (Danaher *et al.* 2000; Foucault 1982).

### **Gossip in business and healthcare organisations**

Our own research findings, drawn from separate studies conducted in higher education, business, non-governmental and health care organisations in Australia and the UK, point to a number of consequences of gossip at the individual and organisational levels of analysis, summarised below in Table 1. These broad findings are drawn from multi-method research studies that used semi-structured interviews, repertory grids, participant observation, structured and unstructured diary records, and critical incident technique. The data has been collected since 2000. Approaches to data analysis included quasi-statistical analysis, use of pre-determined coding frameworks and template analysis, co-researcher validity checks and immersion/crystallisation organising styles (see Michelson & Mouly 2000; 2002; 2004; Waddington 2005a; 2005b; Waddington & Fletcher 2005).

*Table 1: Consequences of Gossip*

---

#### *For the individual*

- expressing and communicating emotion
- gaining support and reassurance from others
- reducing uncertainty and anxiety
- problem solving and sensemaking
- inclusion and acceptance by others
- exclusion and victimisation
- distress and damage to self esteem and reputation

#### *For the organisation*

- expression of care and concern about people or the organisation
- sharing of information and knowledge
- development of inter/intra-organisational networks
- establishment of work/team relationships
- dissemination of organisational culture

- resistance to change
  - misinformation and misunderstanding
  - masking or distortion of issues/problems within the organisation
- 

For present purposes, the next section considers in more detail selected findings from both authors research into the characteristics and function of gossip in healthcare, higher education and business organisations. In particular it draws upon findings relating to organisational change, power and the micropolitics of everyday conversations. This serves as an illustrative case study against which we develop our thesis beyond 'gossip-in-organisations'. In order to consider the wider issues, challenges and implications for the understanding of gossip we propose a broader 'gossip-and-organisations' framework.

### **Gossip and organisational change**

Gossip can act as informal feedback, and may be useful in ascertaining reaction to change, as the following interview extracts illustrates:

*Gossip can be a good early warning system, especially if you're looking at implementing change. You're not going to please everyone with change – some will be very vocal, but maybe not to you, and then you'll find out about it through a certain number of people and you'll know what to expect.*

*Sometimes I (a manager) will test an idea by giving it to a person I know loves to talk and usually I let them spread this information...and then she comes back and tell me what people think. I find this information really invaluable and I don't have to do much to actually collect it.*

Unsurprisingly, analysis of structured diary records, critical incidents and interview data has revealed that 'organisational change and uncertainty' acts as triggers for gossip in healthcare and nursing (see Waddington 2005b, Waddington & Fletcher 2005 for a fuller account). For example:

*Most gossip where I work is as a result of high levels of uncertainty and change, which causes people to behave in a particular way which then triggers gossip.*

*Change creates instability and lack of self-confidence and belief in the organisation. People build on the lack of understanding by creating their own mythical bubble. It makes as much sense as the organisation but at least for the moment they have real control.*

The underlying reasons appear to relate to an individual need to reduce uncertainty and anxiety about the future, intertwined with organisational issues relating to power, role and job security:

*There is a tremendous effect [of organisational uncertainty and change] - in nursing and in the public sector the pay is not good, but you do have job security. When that gets threatened people tend to talk about the uncertainty and their anxieties about the future.*

*Gossip increases with the amount of change - people discuss change and speculate about change, but I think it's more the people who are most vulnerable to change. Nurses and doctors will always be able to find jobs and are often in a more powerful*

*position than receptionists say. [Say more?] Well the receptionists will often tell you salacious gossip, but they are usually last in a long line of power.*

In business settings the same also applies as the following comment notes:

*We operate here in an environment which is really changeable and competitive and so I think gossip is much more prevalent here than in my last role [in a manufacturing organisation] as that was much more predictable in many ways. I think people here gossip to find out what is going is. And this level seemed to increase when we were restructured recently. People didn't know whether they were staying or leaving and so I think the gossip helped some to deal with the change.*

Another trigger for gossip relates to changes occurring, or anticipated, when people leave or join an organisation. In one case a woman in her thirties had recently joined a large construction company as the human resource manager. She recognised that:

*I was the new person and some of the gossip was about me because I was a younger person who had come from an agency promoting womens' interests and most of the other managers were all men who had been around a while. I don't know if I posed a threat to them or not. But I wasn't that happy there and I left after three months.*

In healthcare, we found similar trends:

*Well like if there's a high turnover of staff, when people leave there's a 'doorway to gossip' - it happens more because they don't need to worry about the consequences*

Interviewer: Do you mean that when people are leaving the organisation they gossip more, or that they get gossiped about more?

*Both really - people wonder why they are leaving, and you get to hear what people think of them.....but also like I said the doorway to gossip is opened if you are leaving because you don't have to think about the consequences.*

The 'doorway to gossip' is a powerful metaphor, illustrative of a phenomenon that happens behind closed doors, and also reflecting concepts of privacy and danger. If this metaphorical door needs a key to open it, does this represent something which is either potentially dangerous, to be locked up, or something potentially valuable and private to which only key holders have access? The above quote appears to suggest the former, and the implied consequences are negative, illustrating the 'dark side' of gossip and organisational relationships. This is consistent with the popular management view of gossip noted above in the literature.

### **(Re)analysing gossip to reveal power relationships and micropolitics**

The research findings were re-interpreted and challenged reflexively, in a conscious and systematic attempt to (re)view the data and research process from different positions (e.g. Alvesson 2002; Finlay & Gough 2003). Foucault's conceptualisation of power/knowledge as a pervasive component of all social relationships provided a background to this analysis (Foucault 1982). Put simply, Foucault suggested that power is found in all social relationships, and gossip - which is an important aspect of social relationships and informal communication - should not be overlooked in this context. Power is manifest in the informal and unofficial discourse of gossip, and also in the interpersonal and managerial relationships and networks it sustains. An

example of this is found in the following 'disclaimer' that one participant put as a preface to their diary records:

*I don't generally approve of gossip as in my experience it is generally negative, and can, if not balanced by external sources, get out of control – that is, one person's slightly different working practices or habits can be so reinforced in peoples' minds after successive gossip sessions amongst a small number of mostly senior staff that it can lead to victimisation - trial without independent jury.*

The reluctance to challenge the gossip of 'mostly senior staff' illustrates the power associated with occupying a particular position and role in a communication network. It also illustrates the 'micropolitics' of everyday talk at work, which relates to the decisions people make regarding the extent to which they do, or do not, participate in gossip. As one manager in the finance industry noted, "*There is a fine line between information seeking and gossip and I guess I do both*". But even this and the previous example highlights that managers do not seem to eschew gossip themselves, even as they might attempt to minimise and 'control' it among their subordinates. In particular, individuals who have relatively little power in organisations, for example students, administrative and unqualified staff, might be perceived to gossip more than others. While this could be ascribed to attribution bias (Heider 1958), it could also be a factor relating to occupying a position that is relatively less powerful, and therefore power is exercised through gossip (Jones 1980). Exercise of this type of power through gossip can be interpreted as a form of sabotage - the hindering or slowing down of work - and also as an expression of resistance to change (Gabriel *et al.* 2000).

Gossip then is a potentially powerful influence in organisations, but paradoxically, as long as it remains (and because of its nature it must remain) in the informal and 'unmanaged' spaces of the organisational 'underlife', it serves to maintain the status quo. Systematic analyses of gossip-in-organisations afford the opportunity to reveal, and then challenge, the hegemonic practices that maintain the 'dark side' of organisations. That is, the experience of work characterised by poor communication, limited choice and participation, bullying, stress, discourteous treatment, management incompetence, and racial and gender discrimination (e.g. Bowles 1991; Butcher & Clark 2001; Holder 2003; Huffington *et al.* 2004; Randle 2003; Waddington 2005a).

This is potentially difficult territory for organisational and management scholars to transverse, and numerous research difficulties abound. However, this should not discourage such endeavours, although perhaps it may have in the past. Therefore we now turn to some of the challenges and tensions in the field in order to foreground more novel approaches to capturing and analysing gossip-in-organisations, and to consider some of the wider issues relating to gossip-and-organisations.

### **Challenges and tensions**

In the context of this paper, these can be summarised as: (i) ethical and moral issues; (ii) the issue of forced versus unforced gossip; and (iii) the tensions that arise when gossip is 'formalised' as data and knowledge. Gossip is still generally discredited or condemned in the public domain as being a corrosive and pejorative discourse, at least where it is considered 'excessive' or 'inappropriate'. This may result in difficulties negotiating access to, and also in, research sites. However, the reality is that there is widespread interest and participation in gossip, but there is a discrepancy between the collective public condemnation and the collective private practising of gossip (see Bergmann 1993).

The ethical and moral issues are complex, and relate predominantly to human rights, freedom of speech, privacy, confidentiality, and harm. Researchers (and research ethics committees) need to carefully consider the rights and privacy of third parties who are the subject/targets of gossip, and may be unaware that they are - indirectly - participating in research. The ethics of 'eavesdropping' and covert data collection methods, such as recording overheard conversations in public arenas (e.g. Dunbar *et al.* 1997) is questionable. As Noon (2001: 174) has previously enquired: 'What is the most appropriate method of exploring gossip within the bounds of ethical research?' Gossip is potentially a sensitive, and in some instances taboo topic, and researchers will need to carefully negotiate their way through issues of privacy, secrecy and confidentiality. Confidential gossipy conversations may be 'private' amongst work colleagues and friends, but 'secret' to enemies, managers and researchers. Trust is an important factor, and researchers need to establish and demonstrate their integrity and credibility, neither of which is necessarily achieved quickly. Thus, in cases where there might not be an established relationship between the researcher and informant, we contend that ensuring anonymity in reporting practices can at the very least protect the confidences of all involved. While minimum details about the interviewee can be supplied (e.g. gender, age and industry sector), their identity is nonetheless preserved.

The issue of forced versus unforced gossip relates to the potential difficulties associated with capturing and accurately describing such a transient, ephemeral and 'slippery' organisational phenomenon (Jaeger *et al.* 1994: 154). The challenges here relate to the tensions between using approaches and methods of capturing gossip 'in situ', and using retrospective methods, such as interviews and diary records. For example, asking the question 'tell me about a time when...' could yield forced gossip, whereas a naturally occurring conversation might elicit an unprompted example of unforced gossip. Clearly these issues go beyond the field of gossip-in-organisations, and are relevant in many other areas of social science and management inquiry. Researchers need to be mindful of the potential for creating or manufacturing, in this instance, 'false gossip'. There are also issues relating to tracking gossip over time, and capturing the changing nature of the phenomenon when it becomes formalised as data and knowledge.

This changing nature of gossip leads to crucially important consequences that need to be considered with regard to the rehabilitation and legitimisation of gossip as a form of 'approved knowledge'. In other words its transformation from discreet and even taboo talk to 'formal' knowledge and theory generated using empirical materials and systematic methods. Referring again to Foucault's power/knowledge connection, Hatch & Cunliffe (2006: 51) note 'approved knowledge is a primary tool for the exercise of power over those branded as deviant within the discourse that knowledge produces and creates'. This raises questions such as: What are the implications of a shift from gossip as 'deviant discourse' to gossip as 'approved knowledge'? Who and what might become the 'new deviants'? And what happens when that which has been a 'disapproved discourse' becomes centred?

### **New approaches to analysing gossip**

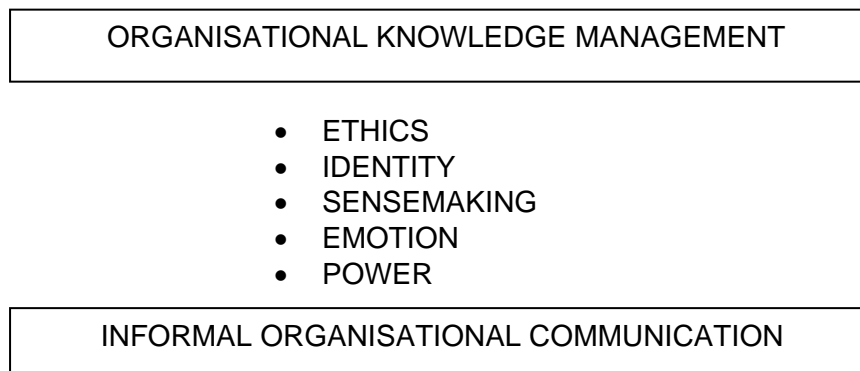
This section of the paper seeks to advance some potential solutions to the challenges and tensions outlined above. Gossip is a notoriously 'messy and ambiguous' phenomenon, and before it can be analysed it needs to be 'seen and heard'. Multiple methods, embracing micro and macro levels of analysis and imaginative approaches are necessary to capture its many facets. Looking to a future based on innovative scholarship, which demands a 'dialectic attention to, and



understanding of, what is visible and *invisible*, spoken and *unspoken*, and present and *absent* (May & Mumby 2005b: 280, authors' emphasis) new avenues and methods of inquiry begin to open up. This suggests that research on gossip could begin to include the non-verbal and written dimensions of this informal communication as well as the more conventional definition of gossip as verbal and unwritten discourse.

In a globalized managerial world of increasing complexity, social science methods and models need to be 're-imagined' if they are to work productively (e.g. Law & Urry 2004: 490). Consequently, we make three inter-related recommendations. The first is to create and develop theoretical models to guide future research; the second is to explore methods of capturing and analysing gossip 'in situ'; and the third is to use visual methods of data collection. To date, there is a dearth of guiding theoretical models, and while Kurland & Pelled's (2000) conceptual model is an important milestone in the field, there appear to have been remarkably few published empirical studies of its use and application. In Michelson & Waddington (2007, forthcoming) we outline an emergent theoretical model that includes power as one of five core components, framed within the boundary conditions of informal organisational communication and knowledge management. The other components we contend are essential to a wider understanding of gossip-and-organisations are ethics, identity, sensemaking and emotion, as illustrated below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An Emergent Model of Organisational Gossip - Core Components and Boundary Conditions (adapted from Michelson & Waddington [2007, forthcoming]; Van de Ven [2007, forthcoming])



This emergent model will clearly need further iteration, and is presented here as a prototype of work in progress. We believe that context is important, and it will be essential to expose the model to a range of different environments, but this is potentially problematic. For example, as Noon (2001) has argued, to what extent can we test theoretical models of gossip in real life organisational settings without resorting to covert methods? In addition, Gabriel (2000) notes the ethical, practical and methodological challenges of collecting organisational stories 'in situ', and the dangers of pursuing hidden agendas. One proposed solution is to make the research 'relevant to the interests or requirements of the organization' (Gabriel 2000: 142). Adopting the boundary conditions of informal organisational communication and knowledge management is one way of achieving this, although great care must be taken to avoid deception. There are also potential benefits from empirical investigation into how gossip operates in different organisational contexts, particularly in relation to the role of gossip in emotion work and in unravelling the causes of tragedy and failure in organisations.

Empirical inquiry into gossip-in-organisations and the collection of gossip as data-in-context suggests the need for longitudinal case study designs and auto/ethnographic approaches (Hartley 2004; Richardson & St. Pierre 2005; Stake 2005). Case study research affords the opportunity to provide an analysis of the context and processes that illuminate the issues being studied. This is particularly applicable where 'exploration is being made of organisational behaviour which is informal, unusual, secret or even illicit' (Hartley 2004: 325). Longitudinal designs enable establishment of trust and credibility, which are important factors for both researchers and co-researchers/participants. Stake (2005: 449) notes that while much work in case study research is observational, 'more critically, it is *reflective*' (original emphasis). Therefore we further advance the methodological concept of 'reflexive gossip', which involves, in the first instance paying mindful attention to informal talk. This attention may reveal insights into other informal communicative and conversational phenomena, such as rumour, myths and storytelling.

However, there are associated risks and challenges. 'Attending mindfully' may destroy or distort the essentially elusive nature of gossip. There is also a risk of engaging in or encouraging gossip that may not have otherwise occurred – forced or false gossip as noted above. Alternatively, reflexive attention to informal talk may sharpen sensemaking and interpretation, enhancing the quality of the research findings and theoretical insights. Reflexive strategies and practices, such as reflective writing and framing 'difficult' questions relating to self and data (e.g. Ballinger, 2003) are pertinent to the construction of researcher as both observer of, and subject of, gossip. A reflexively rigorous approach to the collection of gossip as data-in-context affords the opportunity for the triangulation of gossip with other sources of organisational knowledge.

Turning to the use of visual methods of data collection and analysis, this may at first glance appear unusual in the understanding and scholarship of gossip. Exploration and use of tools and techniques from the arts and humanities in the production and dissemination of social science data is a growing area of interest in qualitative research (e.g. Banks 2001; Law & Urry 2004). Arguably, the use of visual imagery and what might be seen as 'non-traditional' techniques is not necessarily new. Rather, it is more a case of developing new ideas and insights using methods from other fields and disciplines. One new approach is the creation of an organisational genogram, which is a visual representation of roles, relationships and critical incidents relating to participants' networks and communities of practice (see McIlvain *et al.* 1998). Organisational genograms provide dynamic, relational models that can be analysed and evaluated in order to identify, for example, circuits of power and knowledge. Rather than replicating or replacing computer generated sociometric approaches to social network analysis and gossip (e.g. Foster 2004; Foster & Rosnow 2006; Rosnow & Foster 2005) this method provides another way of diagramming issues in context. Social relationships can be represented graphically using software packages (e.g. 'GenoPro'), and visually using pictorial representation (see Stiles 2004). The question arises as to whether such methods reveal truly latent organisational constructs, and Stiles suggests that such techniques may reveal new data after more 'orthodox' data have been collected (p. 138). These techniques may also facilitate (re)analysis of data to reveal new insights into aspects of power, politics and organisational change.

## **Conclusion**

One of our major intentions in this paper was to provide a platform for advancing research into the phenomenon of gossip in organisations as it gains interest and credibility as a topic of academic inquiry and debate. By positioning gossip as a

central, rather than peripheral or co-incidental theme, we contend that it has contributed to the intellectual reputation of gossip as a phenomenon worthy of further research and scholarship. However, we also acknowledge that the paper has probably raised more questions than it has addressed. We began with a focus on gossip-in-organisations, as reflected in the title of the paper, yet this is to potentially ignore the significance of gossip-and-organisations, a perspective we believe more accurately captures the wider project of analysing and understanding gossip. It is evident that gossip is intertwined in the relationships and processes of power and the micropolitics of everyday talk at work. This was illustrated by the brief presentation of selective data from different organisational settings in Australia and the UK. Organisational change in its many manifestations provides a trigger for gossip. Gossip is used as a sensemaking strategy, a way of communicating and managing emotion, a mechanism for coping with uncertainty, and a means of sabotage and resistance. These themes are explored in more detail in a further paper. However, this raises an important question: To what extent is organisational change and power constituted and enacted through gossip? We have argued that gossip could, and indeed should, also be seen and heard as a form of informal organisational communication and narrative knowledge, which act as boundary conditions in an emergent theoretical model of organisational gossip. This shifts the position of gossip from that which has been largely invisible, neglected and which merely reflects organisations, to that which is a more visible and valued process constitutive of organisations.

## REFERENCES

- Akande, A. and Funmilayo, O. (1994) 'One more time- how to stop company rumours', *Leadership and Organisation Development Journal*, 15(4): 27-30.
- Alvesson, M. (2002) *Postmodernism and Social Research*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Baker, J.S. and Jones, M.A. (1996) 'The poison grapevine: how destructive are gossip and rumor in the workplace', *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 7(1): 75-86.
- Ballinger, C. (2003) 'Navigating multiple research identities: reflexivity in discourse analytic research', in L. Finlay and B. Gough (eds) *Reflexivity: a practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*, 66-77, Oxford: Blackwell Science.
- Banks, M. (2001), *Visual Methods in Social Research*, London: Sage.
- Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., and Vohs, K. D. (2004) 'Gossip as cultural learning', *Review of General Psychology*, 8(2): 111-121.
- Berger, C. R. (2005) 'Interpersonal communication: theoretical perspectives, future prospects. *Journal of Communication*, 55(3): 415-447.
- Bergmann, J.R. (1993) *Discreet Indiscretions: the Social Organisation of Gossip*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Boehle, S., Dobbs, K., and Stamps, D. (2000) 'Patrolling the online rumor mill', *Training*, 37(6): 6-7.
- Bowles, M. L. (1991) 'The organizational shadow', *Organization Studies* 12(3): 387-404.
- Bradac, J. J. (2001) 'Theory comparison: uncertainty reduction, problematic integration, uncertainty management, and other curious constructions,' *Journal of Communication*, 51(3): 456-476.
- Brass, D.J., Galaskiewicz, J., Greve, H.R., and Tsai W. (2004) 'Taking stock of networks and organisations: a multilevel perspective', *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(6): 795-817.
- Burke, L.A. and Wise, J.M. (2003) 'The effective care, handling, and pruning of the office grapevine', *Business Horizons*, 46(3): 71-76.
- Burt, R. S. and Knez, M. (1996) 'Trust and third party gossip', in R. M. Kramer and T. R. Tyler (eds), *Trust in Organisations: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, 68-89, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Butcher, D. and Martin, M. (2001) *Smart Management: Using Politics in Organisations*, Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Danaher, G., Schirato, T. and Webb, J. (2000) *Understanding Foucault*, London: Sage.

- Davis, K. (1973) 'The care and cultivation of the corporate grapevine', *Management Review*, 62: 308-315.
- Doyle, J. (2000) *New Community or New Slavery? the Emotional Division of Labour*, London: The Industrial Society.
- Dunbar, R. (1994) *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Dunbar, R. (2004) 'Gossip in evolutionary perspective', *Review of General Psychology*, 8(2): 100-110.
- Dunbar, R., Duncan, N., and Marriott, A. (1997) 'Human conversational behaviour', *Human Nature*, 8: 231-246.
- Emler, N. (1990) 'A social psychology of reputation', *European Review of Social Psychology*, 1: 171-193.
- Emler, N. (1994) 'Gossip, reputation, and social adaptation', in R. F. Goodman and A. Ben-Ze'ev (eds), *Good Gossip*, 117-138. Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
- Esposito, J.L. and Rosnow, R.L. (1993) 'Corporate rumors: how they start and how to stop them', *Management Review*, 72: 44-49.
- Farrow, J. (2005) 'Workplace culture, folklore, and adaptation', *Journal of Occupational Science*, 12(1): 4-8.
- Festinger, L. (1957) *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson & Co.
- Finlay, L and Gough, B. (eds) (2003) *Reflexivity: a Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences*, Oxford: Blackwell Science.
- Foster, E. K. (2004) 'Research on gossip: taxonomy, methods and future directions', *Review of General Psychology*, 8(2): 78-99.
- Foster, E. K. and Rosnow, R, L. (2006) 'Gossip and network relationships', in D.C. Kirkpatrick, S. Duck and Foley, M. K. (eds) *Relating Difficulty: the Processes of Constructing and Managing Difficult Interaction*, 161-180, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Foucault, M. (1982) 'The subject and power', in H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208-226, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (1991) 'Turning facts into stories and stories into facts: a hermeneutic exploration of organisational folklore', *Human Relations*, 44(8): 857-875.
- Gabriel, Y. (1995) 'The unmanaged organisation: stories, fantasies and subjectivity', *Organisation Studies*, 16(3): 477-501.
- Gabriel, Y. (2000) *Storytelling in Organisations: Facts, Fictions and Fantasies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Gabriel, Y., Fineman, S. and Sims, D. (2000) *Organising and Organisations*, London: Sage.
- Gluckman, M. (1963) 'Gossip and scandal', *Current Anthropology*, 4(3): 307-316.
- Goffman, E. (1961) 'The underlife of a public institution: a study of ways of making out in a mental hospital', in E. Goffman, *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*, 171-320, New York: Doubleday Anchor.
- Greengard, S. (2001) 'Gossip poisons business: HR can stop it', *Workforce*, 80(7): 24-28.
- Hartley, J. (2004) 'Case study research' in C. Cassell and G. Symon (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*, 323-333 London: Sage.
- Hatch, M-J. with Cunliffe, A. L. (2006) *Organizational Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Heider, F. (1958) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Holder, I. (2003) 'The search for gold in the shadow of organisations', *Self and Society*, 31(2): 15-24.
- Huffington, C., Armstrong, D., Halton, W., Hoyle, L. and Pooley, L. (eds) (2004) *Working Below the Surface: the Emotional Life of Contemporary Organizations*, London: Karnac.
- Jaeger, M. E., Skleder, A. A. Rind, B. and Rosnow, R. (1998) 'Gossip, gossipers, gossipers' in R. F. Goodman and A. Ben-Ze'ev (eds), *Good Gossip*, 154-168, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
- Jones, D. (1980) 'Gossip: notes on women's oral culture', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3(2/3): 193-198.
- Jones, E., Watson, B., Gardner, B. and Gallois, C. (2004) 'Organisational communication: challenges for the new century', *Journal of Communication*, 54(4): 722-750.
- Karathanos, P. and Auriemmo, A. (1999) 'Care and feeding of the organisational grapevine', *Industrial Management*, 41(2): 26-30.
- Kolb, D.M., and Putnam, L.L. (1992) 'The multiple faces of conflict in organisations', *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 13: 311-324.
- Kniffin, K. M. and Wilson, D. S. (2005) 'Utilities of gossip across organisational levels: Multilevel selection, free-riders, and teams', *Human Nature*, 16(3): 278-292.
- Kurland, N. B., and Pelled, L. H. (2000) 'Passing the word: toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace', *Academy of Management Review*, 25(2): 428-438.
- Law, J. and Urry, J. (2004), 'Enacting the social', *Economy and Society*, 33(3): 390-410.

- May, S. and Mumby, D. K. (2005) 'Conclusion: engaging the future of organizational communication research', in S. May and D. K. Mumby (eds) *Engaging Organizational Communication Theory & Research: multiple perspectives*, 263-281, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mcllvain, H., Crabtree, B., Medder, J., Stange, K. C. & Miller, W. L. (1998) 'Using practice genograms to understand and describe practice configurations', *Family Medicine*, 30 (7): 490-496,
- Michelson, G. and Mouly, S. (2000) 'Rumour and gossip in organisations: a conceptual overview', *Management Decision*, 38(5): 339-346.
- Michelson, G., and Mouly, S. (2002) 'You didn't hear it from us but...': towards an understanding of rumour and gossip in organisations. *Australian Journal of Management*. Special Issue, 2: 57-65.
- Michelson, G., and Mouly, S. (2004) 'Do loose lips sink ships? the meaning, antecedents and consequences of rumour and gossip in organisations', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 9(3): 189-201.
- Michelson, G. and Waddington, K (2007, forthcoming) *Gossip and Organizations*, London & New York: Routledge.
- Mishra, J. (1990) 'Managing the grapevine', *Public Personnel Management*, 19(2): 213-228.
- Noon, M. (2001) 'Suggested revisions to Kurland and Pelled's model of gossip and power', *Academy of Management Review*, 26:173-174.
- Noon, M. and Delbridge, R. (1993) 'News from behind my hand: gossip in organisations', *Organisation Studies*, 14: 23-36.
- Randle, J. (2003) 'Bullying in the workplace', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 43(4): 395-401.
- Richardson, L. and St. Pierre, E. A. (2005) 'Writing: a method of inquiry', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.*, 959-978, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rosnow, R and Foster, E. K. (2005) 'Rumor and gossip research', *Psychological Science Agenda*, 19(4). Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.apo.org/science/psa/apr05gossip.html>> (accessed 29 July 2006).
- Stake, R. E. (2005) 'Qualitative case studies', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.*, 443-466, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stiles, D. R. (2004), 'Pictorial representation', in C. Cassell and G. Symon (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*, 127-139, London: Sage.
- Therrien, D. (2004) 'Rid your office of back-stabbers', *Canadian Business*, 77(23): 109-110.

- Van de Ven, A. H. (2007, forthcoming) *Engaged Scholarship: a guide for organizational and social research*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Waddington, K. (2005a) 'Behind closed doors: the role of gossip in the emotion work of nursing', *International Journal of Work, Organisation and Emotion* 1(1): 35-47.
- Waddington, K. (2005b) 'Using diaries to explore the characteristics of work-related gossip: methodological considerations from exploratory, multimethod research', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 78: 221-236.
- Waddington, K. and Fletcher, C. (2005) 'Gossip and emotion in nursing and health-care organizations', *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 19(4/5): 378-394.
- Wert, S. R., and Salovey, P. (2004) 'A social comparison account of gossip', *Review of General Psychology*, 8(2): 122-137.
- Ybema, S. (1996) 'The duck-billed platypus in the theory and analysis of organisations: combinations of consensus and dissensus', in W. Koot, I. Sabelis and S. Ybema (eds), *Contradictions in Context: puzzling over paradoxes in contemporary organisations*, 39–61, Amsterdam: VU Press.
- Zafirovski, M. 2005. Social exchange theory under scrutiny: A positive critique of its economic-behaviorist formulations. *Electronic Journal of Sociology*. Online. Available HTTP: < <http://www.sociology.org/contents/2005/tier2/SETtheory.pdf>> (accessed 28 July 2006).