

CHAPTER 21

*Breaking the Silence**The Role of Gossip in Organizational Culture*

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From the early 1980s, the number of studies pertaining to organizational culture (OC) expanded tremendously. In the first decade of the corporate culture boom, researchers emphasized cultural values and focused on culture as an instrument by which managers could secure employee loyalty and facilitate strategic change. More recently, however, researchers identified new directions for research, such as the relationship between OC and organizational discourse (e.g., Alvesson, 2004). One of the most promising avenues in this second wave of OC research is the question of how, and to what extent, the personal use of cultural elements in organizations is strategic in nature as well as strongly filtered by human cognition (DiMaggio, 1997). Despite the trends toward the analysis of discourse in OC and of individual members' strategic use of cultural elements, relatively few OC scholars have explicitly examined the topic of gossip. This neglect seems surprising given the long-standing interest in gossip in the social sciences, as exemplified by numerous anthropological field studies (e.g., Cox, 1970; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963;

Haviland, 1977; Herskovits, 1937; Paine, 1967; Yerkovich, 1977). Such studies have shown that gossip is a discursive practice—often strongly ritualized—through which social values are communicated to, and reproduced by, the members of that culture. Also, gossip serves as a segregator: It helps to define and maintain who is an insider or outsider and reinforces power differentials (e.g., Elias & Scotson, 1994; Gluckman, 1963; Hannerz, 1967; Suls, 1977). One can easily recognize the same functions of gossip on the work floor of present-day organizations.

The main issue addressed in this chapter is what role gossip plays in the emergence, transmission, enactment, and transgression (aspects) of an organization's culture. Gossip therefore needs to be differentiated from related culture-facilitating discursive devices such as myths, stories, folktales, rumors, and so on. To bring gossip to a more prominent place on the OC research and management agendas, this chapter first provides a definition of gossip and its main features, including its functions and participants. The discussion then proceeds with an exploration of the role of gossip in OC. In doing so, earlier

conceptualizations and studies of gossip in the social sciences literature as well as the OC literature from the early 1980s onward are reviewed. Next, the manageability of gossip in organizations, followed by methodological issues, are considered specifically: How can researchers study gossip? The conclusion maintains that gossip is a vital element of OC that should not be overlooked.

DEFINING GOSSIP: FUNCTIONS AND PARTICIPANTS

Gossip originated from the Old English word *godsibb*, meaning “kinsman” or “related,” and characterized someone who held a close relationship with the family. Middle English removed the *d* and *gossib* took on the meaning of godparent, drinking companion, or “being a friend of” (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994, p. 15). The term was also used to describe the woman who attended a birth with a midwife who was subsequently sent out following the birth to make the event known to others (Laing, 1993). According to Marianne Jaeger, Anne Skleder, and Ralph Rosnow (1998), the Middle Ages were a particularly gossipy time, and censure of gossip flourished. Sylvia Schein (1994) attributes this censure to the influence of biblical writings that warned against slander and the association of gossip with transgressions such as malice, envy, and deceit. Schein further suggests that the structure of medieval society,

with its dependence on oral communication for news and strict codes of conduct, was an important determining factor in both the prevalence and censure of gossip at that time.

There were well-documented punishments designed to discourage gossiping and to publicly chastise and humiliate the gossiper. Nicholas Emler (1994) describes how gossipers were both disapproved of and punished by public shaming, being forced to wear masks of torture with tongue spikes, and burning. These punishments were most often given to women, and accusations of witchcraft were not uncommon (Stewart & Strathern, 2004). Furthermore, the apparently idle nature of gossip aligned it with the deadly sin of sloth (Jaeger et al., 1998). There are also associations with the Protestant work ethic in that gossip was associated with “idle talk,” the assumption being that those who worked hard simply did not have time to gossip.

Providing a detached, scientific definition of gossip is difficult, not only because of its historically negative connotations, but also because it seems an ephemeral activity, difficult to catch in the act of being perpetrated. In addition, it is difficult to define gossip because it is closely related to other forms of organizational discourse, such as myths, stories, rumor, small talk, chitchat, urban legends, and so on. Gossip, like culture, has encouraged numerous definitions. An overview of the definitions of gossip over time and across disciplinary perspectives is provided in Table 21.1.

Table 21.1 Gossip Definitions Over Time

<i>Definition of Gossip</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Informal communication, a device that serves to protect individual interests	Paine (1967)	Anthropological perspective, individual rather than social function
News about the affairs of others, or those of one’s own, or any hearsay of a personal nature	Fine & Rosnow (1978)	Social psychology perspective, includes reference to self-disclosure

Table 21.1 (Continued)

<i>Definition of Gossip</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Evaluative talk about a person who is not present	Eder & Enke (1991)	Sociological perspective with narrow parameters
Verbal and written communication, no obvious conscious purpose regarding the personal matters of a third party	Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi (1993)	Psychological perspective, gossip as social action
Talk between two or more persons about the private life of another behind that person's back	Taylor (1994)	Emphasizes the secretive and potentially harmful nature of gossip
Idle relaxing activity, value lies in the activity itself, not the outcome	Ben-Ze'ev (1994)	Philosophical perspective, emphasis on process rather than outcome
The exchange of information about other people/social matters	Dunbar (1996, 2004)	Evolutionary psychology perspective, broad parameters
Informal communication transmitted to others irrespective of whether or not the content is factual	Michelson & Mouly (2000)	Conceptual study that uses gossip and rumor interchangeably
The act of sharing stories with others	Gabriel, Fineman, & Sims (2000)	Focus on organizational gossip and storytelling
Exchange of personal information in an evaluative way about absent third parties	Foster (2004)	Inclusive definition set in a context of congeniality, including both positive and negative aspects
Evaluative social talk about persons, usually not present, arising in the context of social networks	DiFonzo & Bordia (2007)	Social network perspective, essential functions relate to entertainment, group membership, solidarity, norms, and power structure
Evaluative talk between at least two persons that may be spoken (most common), written (less common), or visual	Waddington & Michelson (2010)	Multiperspective approach, draws attention to nonverbal aspects of gossip

A number of basic characteristics of gossip are apparent. Gossip is informal, everyday communication. It takes at least two people to engage in gossip. People gossip about a (usually absent) third party, such as an individual (Paine, 1967) or a group of people (Herskovits, 1937). The nature of gossip is evaluative; it is information with a positive or negative component. However, Sally Yerkovich (1977) states that no matter how scandalous the information may be, it is not gossip unless the participants know enough about the person or people involved to experience the thrill of revelation. Thus some intimate knowledge of the praised or blamed third party is essential. When the evaluative component is missing, it seems better to label the activity as small talk, or chitchat. It is also acknowledged that gossip can occur through different media and for a variety of purposes. The following composite definition has been adopted for this discussion: Gossip is evaluative talk between at least two persons about a third party that may be spoken (most common), written (less common), or seen (Waddington & Michelson, 2010) and that fulfills “a variety of essential social network functions including entertainment, maintaining group cohesiveness, establishing, changing and maintaining group norms, group power structure and group membership” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, p. 19).

The latter part of this definition echoes the conclusions of one influential anthropological study on gossip. Max Gluckman (1963) distinguishes three collective functions: (a) to create group morale, establishing and vindicating group norms and values; (b) to exert social control over newcomers and dissidents; and (c) to regulate conflicts with rival groups. Also, in sociology, it is acknowledged that gossip is about either private matters of newcomers and dissidents (e.g., talk of one’s appearance, family, friends, or significant others) or about frictions between

social groups such as established-outsiders gossip dynamics.

In contrast, Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia define *rumor*—the concept that is most often used interchangeably with gossip—as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (2007, p. 13). Urban legends—the second concept with which gossip is often confused—are mere entertaining narratives, not necessarily targeted at a third party, meant to entertain or to establish, maintain, or impart cultural mores or values. For an overview of differences in context, content, and functions of gossip, rumor, and urban legend, see Table 21.2. DiFonzo and Bordia’s differentiation of these discrete but related genres of communication may also be a helpful tool for OC scholars grappling with the other modes of transmission and maintenance of culture such as myths, stories, and folktales (see also Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006).

Most research on gossip is about spoken gossip (“talk”) in more private settings. Written forms of gossip, such as graffiti, anonymous memos, email technology, social networking sites, and telephone text messaging, tend to remain a largely underinvestigated aspect in studies of gossip (for a notable exception, see Harrington & Bielby, 1995). However, because written forms of gossip tend to occur in more public settings, such as the comments “wall” of social networking sites and the Internet, it may well be easier to study than spoken gossip, which is more ephemeral. Further, as the definition of gossip notes, it may also include nonverbal (e.g., visual) forms of information and influence. While the exchange may be more limiting, the importance of gestures and looks—including, for example, raised eyebrows, the rolling of eyes, feigning a yawn—between two or more people in an

Table 21.2 Contexts, Content, and Functions of Rumor, Gossip, and Urban Legend

	<i>Context</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Group Function</i>
Rumor	Ambiguous or threatening events or situations	Instrumentally relevant information statements that are unverified	To make sense of ambiguity To manage threat or potential threat
Gossip	Social network building, structuring, or maintaining	Evaluative statements about individuals' private lives	To entertain To supply social information To establish, change, or maintain group membership, group power structure, or group norms
Urban legend	Storytelling	Entertaining narratives	To entertain To establish, maintain, or impart cultural mores or values

SOURCE: Reproduced with permission from DiFonzo and Bordia (2007).

Note: Each genre of communication may exhibit all contexts, contents, and functions in this table (e.g., rumor also functions to impart cultural mores, and gossip also functions to help the group make sense of ambiguity), though each genre's quintessential contexts, contents, and functions are listed here.

organization can also represent “talk” of an evaluative nature. In any case, the different media through which gossip occurs can significantly shape the processes and outcomes of gossip.

Inspired by Simmelian analysis, Jörg Bergmann’s “triad of gossip” (1993) provides the basic social structure and process of gossip as an activity. In value-laden organizational gossip, three parties are involved: the gossiper, the recipient, and the target (or “gossipee”; see Jaeger, Skleder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994). As gossip is used to describe both one who chatters about others and such talk itself, this discussion refers to the person who gossips as the gossiper. In general, the gossiper knows about the private situation

of the individual or group being gossiped about, that is, the target. The gossiper transfers the knowledge-cum-moral judgment to a recipient. The recipient has the choice to withhold the gossip or to convey it to a fourth party, or even to the target. In the case of conveying the gossip, the recipient becomes a gossiper himself. The gossip chain can become quite long before it reaches the target, if it does at all. The factual and moral content can change significantly in the process. Often the gossip tends to become more extreme, far beyond the personal intentions of the subsequent gossipers. The advance of the gossip is, like all social interaction, characterized by unforeseen and unintended consequences.

The interaction between the gossiper and the recipient is worthy of further consideration. In choosing the recipient, the gossiper has to keep in mind that the recipient may already have heard the gossip from someone else, unless the gossiper can be sure that it is otherwise. Telling a piece of gossip that is already known can cause embarrassment, although a slight one. More crucial, however, is that the gossiper has to take into account that the recipient must be a willing partaker. "Is he or she on my side when I tell the gossip?" Support of the moral judgment, embedded in the gossip, is sought when the gossiper looks on the recipient as someone who concurs with the blaming or praising of the target. Disagreement with the moral judgment is sought when the gossiper regards the recipient as someone who is also to blame and/or does not deserve any praise either. In other words, gossiping can also be primarily interactive in terms of strengthening relations between gossiper and recipient.

Another aspect of the dyad is that the gossiper is aware that, through gossiping, he or she discloses himself or herself as a gossiper. The gossiper may not be bothered if the recipient knows this, or they may have a special objective. As a rule, the gossiper does not want the target, and other parties, to know that he or she is spreading the gossip. The combination of disclosure/closure adds to the morally ambivalent nature of gossiping. Gossiping, although enjoyable to participate in, often elicits feelings of shame and guilt in the gossiper and occasionally also in the recipient. Therefore the blaming and praising of nonpresent organizational members has to be done in a refined, sophisticated manner. Of course, this is not easy, even if there is an attempt to periodically distance oneself from the activity of gossip (see the article title by Michelson & Mouly, 2002). In terms of its functions, gossip can be fun. But it is

potentially dubious and dangerous entertainment. Because gossip also serves to establish, maintain, and alter the norms, power structure, and membership of the social network (see Table 21.2), the fun can occur at the cost of the gossip target's position and dignity. Gossiping is a risky form of staging (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009). In addition to the gossip functions of conveying cultural values, encouraging the development of social relationships and networks (Doyle, 2000; Emler, 1990, 1994), promoting closeness and friendship in general (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006), and keeping outsiders at a distance, there are also less obvious functions. Gossip may help shape and reshape meaning. Also it enables cultural and organizational learning (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). For example, gossip allows employees to better understand and predict their bosses' behavior. In this case, gossip is used to communicate and manage emotions, providing a cathartic means of releasing anger and frustration for individuals and groups, which may be restorative and beneficial (Foster, 2004; Medini & Rosenberg, 1976; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Finally, gossip can boost self-esteem (Radlow & Berger, 1959).

Thomas Luckmann (in Bergmann, 1993, p. x) contends that gossip is "a genre of moral communication in a twofold sense: it moralizes and is moralized about." The popular view of gossip as a typically destructive or mischievous social phenomenon and form of indirect aggression (Foster & Rosnow, 2006) that may also be accompanied by unsubstantiated rumors is reflected in the general management and human resource literature. Much of this literature tends to see gossip as a negative activity—quite simply as a problem to be managed. In this view, the consequences of organizational gossip are merely harmful. Gossip leads to a blame culture in the

organization, causes physical or psychological injury and distress to organizational members, or destruction of an organization's reputation. Such gossip, leading to "a culture of fear," is considered and managed as a form of workplace bullying and violence (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003) that represent an uncomfortable, distressing aspect of the "dark side" of an organization's culture. In the present discussion's perspective, this approach to gossip as a dismal and dangerous activity of "evil tongues" is one-sided. The next section looks at the more constructive roles gossip can play in organizations, and particularly in creating, maintaining, and changing OC.

INTRODUCING GOSSIP AS AN ELEMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Quite literally, gossip pervades human life. Robin Dunbar (1996) regards gossiping as the human version of primate grooming. When primates go over each other's skin and fur in a relaxed manner, their picking and pinching produces social bonding as well as pleasure. Dunbar theorizes that humans gossip to strengthen their social bond because they cannot groom each other.

In reality, however, humans cannot freely gossip about each other—not as freely as primates groom each other, in any case. In organizations, the activity mainly leads to an underground life, even though management generally encourages social bonding on the work floor and in teams. The underlying assumptions of organizational gossip are consistent with Erving Goffman's (1961) concept of the "organizational underlife" and Yiannis Gabriel's (1995) "unmanaged organization" thesis. Very briefly, the organizational underlife represents a convergence of social interaction, information games, and organizational

roles, while the landmarks of the unmanaged organization include stories, gossip, myths, and jokes. Gossip, then, can be seen as a type of storytelling discourse existing in the murky unmanaged spaces of organizations and also as a form of emergent story, occurring in the here and now (Boje, 2008; Gabriel, 1995, 2000). It is a way of talking that enables the communication of emotions, beliefs, and opinions about the experience of work and organizational life. As such, it is a discourse that exists as a "shadow theme," usually only expressed in small, trusted groups.

The discussion now turns to gossip as constitutive (the more manifest side) of OC. The first distinctive quality of gossip among the various other informal communication mechanisms for promulgating culture is that its target is typically an absent third party. In certain cases, however, the target may be present—for example, when the gossip can be put into words in such a way that the target does not realize that the talk is about him or her. As a rule, though, gossiping takes the figure of a dyadic activity against the ground of a triad, as discussed earlier. The positive or negative information about the third party will therefore be formulated differently from that in other communicative settings: more freely, more articulately, and it may also be more malicious or glorifying—in short, less constrained by certain standards of "civilized" organizational behavior. When gossip passes on organizational norms and values, *inter alia*, it can be exercised with significantly more potency, hence speeding up and intensifying the spread of these OC aspects.

The same can be said of gossip that fuels the change of organizational norms and values as well as group membership and power structure. With regard to communicating values through gossip, Harrison Trice and Janice Beyer (1993) refer to Gluckman (1963) when they argue that

gossip also helps to maintain group boundaries by asserting group values and marking those who are insiders from those who are outsiders. . . . The revelations of personal, intimate details that gossip often entails mark the objects, the sender, the receiver as part of a group of persons who care about what happens to one another. The evaluations of group members of these revelations also communicate shared group values about the behaviors in question. (p. 230)

In their classic study *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Deal and Kennedy (1982) note that

gossips are the troubadours of the culture. While priests will only talk in analogues—that is, tell you the scripture—gossips will know the names, dates, salaries and events that are taking place in the organization, *now*. The trivial day-to-day happenings are carried by gossips whom most people appreciate, even if they are wary of gossips' tongues. After all, without a steady diet of news about people one knows, life in most companies would be grim—and pretty dull. (p. 91)

But gossipers are not expected to be serious people, and they are not always expected to get the news right. As Deal and Kennedy observe, “They are expected simply to entertain. For this entertainment value alone they are tolerated, even liked” (1982, p. 91). The statement about gossipers not being expected to be serious can be challenged. Indeed, gossipers are often very serious and deliberate in their actions. Just as Trice and Beyer (1993) draw attention to the value enhancing quality of gossip, Deal and Kennedy argue that gossipers play a vital role in reinforcing a culture. Gossip, in this instance, can be reinterpreted as a form of nontrivial trivia. They further note, “Storytellers create the legends of the

company and its heroes, but the gossips help the hero-making process flourish by embellishing the heroes' past feats and spiffing up the news of their latest accomplishments” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 91). It is interesting to observe that the role of a gossip, in Deal and Kennedy's view, seems to be merely to reinforce a culture and not to help create it, or indeed to define and differentiate one organization's culture from another. “While storytellers and priests deal one-on-one with individuals, gossipers can spread their news more quickly because they talk to groups at the lunch table or during coffee break. They also have the unique ability to penetrate all levels of the organization” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 92). Here again we see the ability of gossip to circumvent the normal channels of communication, and to do so more rapidly. There is also an assumption here that gossip is seemingly more incidental, as it occurs at lunch or during break periods. But gossip is not limited to designated rest periods; gossip can occur throughout all periods of the workday. Gossip is continuous fuel for the organizational culture engine.

Researchers have also suggested that gossip plays a role in the socialization of organizational members (Bordia, DiFonzo, Haines, & Chaseling, 2005; Bordia, Jones, Gallois, Callan, & DiFonzo, 2006; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Guerin and Miyazaki, 2006; Laing, 1993) and thus, indirectly, in the maintenance of OC. From a cultural learning perspective, gossip is communication that can teach us about our social environment (Baumeister et al., 2004), about “how the things are done around here.” As Travis Grosser, Virginie Lopez-Kidwell, & Giuseppe Labianca (2010, p. 185) contend,

Learning about others' misfortunes indicates what behavior will fail in similar situations; hearing about others' successes helps us discern how to flourish in the

social system. Gossip can convey valuable information about the rules and boundaries of the culture. This cultural knowledge, in turn, can enhance individual performance.

Grosser and colleagues argue that, from a cultural learning perspective, listeners perceive that the gossipers deeply understand the rules and norms that exist in a given system (cf. Baumeister et al., 2004). This gives the gossipers increased social status and influence: The gossipers are portrayed as the experts on how to behave in a given environment.

The social exchange view portrays gossip as a transaction between two parties, whereby news is exchanged in return for a desired resource (Rosnow & Fine, 1976). Assuming that an individual who more actively engages in gossip can gain more hard-to-get information than one who is less engaged in gossip, it would follow that active gossipers have more “news” to exchange with others in the informal organizational marketplace. Thus peers should see those who gossip as more influential because of their rich information resources. Based on those arguments, peers will see as influential an individual who engages in positive or negative gossip. “Unlike whisperers, gossips have no proximity to power,” Deal and Kennedy (1982, p. 92) note. But on the same page they assert that “gossips can become the leaders of the pack when it comes to de-Stalinizing a hero. They are the ones to provide the ‘real’ story behind the official announcements and memos.” This clearly implies that gossipers do have power (see Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

In Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977), secretarial gossip is demonstrated to be a powerful weapon that can be deployed to considerable effect by those who have little power other than inside information and

the relational webs through which to spread it. In that study, cross-functional and cross-departmental gossiping occurred mainly through an informal network of female secretaries who communicated in this way to support each other in coping with common experiences. The network was so strong that the management frequently used it to get things done. Otherwise-closed channels could be opened with the help of the secretaries’ informal everyday communication patterns. A similar observation was made among female secretaries in Japan and their male managers, with the latter group particularly concerned about how their reputations could be manipulated through secretarial gossip (Ogasawara, 1998). Having a relational position of familiarity and access, often being the gatekeepers of important organizational information, secretaries (as one group in organizations) are close to power. They can use the apparent familiarity and lack of excessive power difference that attach to relations which are highly interdependent and symbiotic to affect an organization’s culture.

To summarize this section, it is important to study gossip as an element of organizational culture not only because gossip is a ubiquitous aspect of organizational and social life but also because gossip can affect OC in ways that differ from other forms of informal communication and storytelling. Unfortunately, most scholars in management and organization studies appear to have ignored gossip (for a notable exception, see Davis, 1953, 1969, 1973), or even trivialized and demonized the practice. It was only in the 1990s that serious scholarly studies of gossip in organizations began to emerge (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). The next section addresses the managerial question of what to do, if anything, when gossip is spreading or has been spread through the organization.

CONSEQUENCES OF GOSSIP FOR OC: TO BE MANAGED OR UNMANAGEABLE?

This section addresses the organizational consequences of gossip (cf. Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004) and those interventions that can be used in an attempt to manage gossip. As indicated earlier, on the one hand, much of the organizational and management discourse surrounding gossip in organizations is based on the assumption that gossip is detrimental to work productivity, which creates a climate of mistrust, innuendo, and poor morale (e.g., Baker & Jones, 1996; Burke & Wise, 2003; Greengard, 2001). On the other hand, gossip has also been viewed as a “social cement” holding organizations together, with significant benefits, such as encouraging the development of social networks and relationships (Doyle, 2000) as well as enabling cultural and organizational learning. Social and group norms, shared understandings, and trust are pertinent here for gossip to be acknowledged as an “accepted” form of organizational communication, and perhaps even encouraged by management or vilified as stigmatized discourse.

Awareness of organizational gossip is a source of power based on exchange of information and support, which enables managers to identify where coalitions are located, anticipate resistance to change, or identify and access support for action or change. Baumeister and colleagues (2004) argue that managers who are left out of gossip networks have considerably less power and control than those inside the networks and often do not stay at the top for long. Nancy Kurland and Lisa Pelled (2000) propose a conceptual model of gossip and power (subsequently revised by Noon, 2001) and make specific predictions relating to the linkages between positive and negative gossip and the gossipers’ coercive, reward, expert, and referent

power over gossip recipients. Influenced by French and Raven’s well-known 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 organizational culture.

The present discussion challenges the assumption that managers must always do something about the “problem” of gossip and the associated view that gossip is inherently detrimental (see also Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010). In examining the organizational consequences of gossip, and the managerial interventions advanced to remedy “the problem,” the crucial question is, “Exactly what is the problem?” Is it the activity and content of gossip per se, as some of the management literature would have us believe (e.g., Burke & Wise, 2003; Greengard, 2001)? This literature reflects a view of gossip as shallow, inconsequential organizational talk. In some circumstances, and for some people, this may indeed be the case. But gossip may also be constitutive of deeper, more far-reaching, and more disturbing organizational issues that need to surface and be managed. In these circumstances, gossip is a form of information that portends a potential disaster, yet its importance and value as an early warning system often only becomes apparent in retrospective investigations into organizational disasters and failure (e.g., Stein, 2004).

Gossip can affect organizations through its effect on corporate reputation. Organizations and professions are not immune from gossip about themselves in the public arena, as evidenced by formal inquiries, the media, and trade reports (Van Iterson & Clegg, 2008); hence they have a vested interest in reconstructing “gossip” about themselves in ways that portray them in a favorable light among external stakeholders and clients. Thus gossip can potentially conflict with information provided by formal channels

of communication and the various countermeasures employed to combat and manage erroneous information on the organizational “grapevine.”

As individual and organizational outcomes of gossip may be simultaneously positive and negative, intended and unintended, inconsequential and significant, gossip is “a nightmare to manage” on many levels of understanding, interpretation, and analysis. For example, how should the positive consequences and benefits of gossip be managed? What are the implications and consequences of *not* managing gossip? Can gossip be transformed into useful and actionable organizational knowledge and management information? These questions need to be answered before some guiding principles can be created to enable us to begin to analyze and understand the role of gossip in OC. When the consequences of organizational gossip are harmful (e.g., physical or psychological injury and distress to employees or destruction of an organization’s reputation), managerial action must be taken. In these circumstances, gossip may also be accompanied by unsubstantiated rumors and can take the form of workplace bullying and violence. The negative consequences of gossip that are associated with bullying and victimization are echoed in the dark side of gossip. The power of gossip is such that it has the potential to damage and destroy an individual’s self-esteem, reputation, and dignity.

This power is also associated with occupying a particular position and role in a communication network. Consequently, it has been argued that the analysis of gossip should move toward a more explicit acknowledgment of its role in social relationships (see Bergmann, 1993; Foster & Rosnow, 2006; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). Power is manifest in the informal and unofficial discourse of gossip and the interpersonal relationships and networks it sustains and can be

understood differently if it is examined from a micropolitical perspective. The term *micropolitics* is used here to refer to the understated and often unseen ways that power circulates in everyday organizational practices (Morley, 1999). It is suggestive of a shift in attention away from a macro-organizational analysis of power and politics to one that is more subtle. As Morley acknowledges, “Conflicts, tensions, resentments, competing interests and power imbalances influence everyday transactions in institutions” (1999, p. 45). The issues involved in micropolitics relate to the choices people make in accepting, challenging, or colluding with hegemonic practices that maintain rather than challenge the status quo (Morss, 2000, pp. 23–26). The crucial point, again, is that gossip is a potentially powerful influence in organizations, but the argument is complicated and paradoxical. Put simply, as long as gossip remains hidden in the informal and unmanaged spaces, it serves to maintain the status quo.

HOW SHOULD GOSSIP BE STUDIED IN ORGANIZATIONS?

A famous quote from the American writer E. B. White says that “analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” Something similar may be said of gossip. Academic analysis of the gossip activity often results in feelings of estrangement on the part of the readers. Taking the elements of the gossip act apart for the sake of scrutinizing the phenomenon can lead to disillusionment. The uniqueness and authenticity of the stories can easily get lost, and one could be left with rather meaningless abstraction. The dangers of alienation and dissatisfaction are higher in quantitative gossip analysis than in qualitative analysis. Nevertheless, survey instruments such as the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire

(TGQ) developed by Nevo and colleagues (1993) may prove valuable in the exploratory phase of gossip research. The TGQ comprises 20 items, and factor analysis has revealed four subscales: achievement (e.g., “I like talking to friends about the salaries of our mutual friends”); physical appearance (e.g., “I like talking to friends about other people’s clothes”); social information (about others’ personal lives; e.g., “I tend to talk with friends about the love affairs of people we know”); and sublimated gossip (which is described as “intellectual” gossip; e.g., “I like reading biographies of famous people”). As the example items demonstrate, the TGQ is a self-reporting Likert-scale instrument that measures a psychological disposition. The authors warn against social desirability effects when surveying gossip tendency, noting, “Because gossip is generally regarded as a socially undesirable activity, people do not report their own gossiping conduct accurately” (Nevo et al., 1993, p. 232).

The use of semistructured interviews—widespread in OC research—is another way to capture gossip, although social desirability may be an even larger problem here. The periodic request by interviewees for the researcher to turn off the (tape) recorder is a case in point that indicates that some participants have a conscious tendency to report gossip. How often do scholars ignore such comments as irrelevant side issues? It is suggested that researchers should consider how such off-the-record remarks could provide important insights or clues to generate further lines of inquiry. If some OC researchers are periodically prepared to allow such details to inform their particular studies, how should researchers who are explicitly interested in capturing the meanings and processes of gossip in an organization approach their investigations? This question involves trying to make public what is an essentially private talk. The relevant methodological characteristics might include

the ethics of “eavesdropping” (see Kniffin & Wilson, 2010, for their discussion about third parties hearing the gossip) and other covert data collection methods (see Noon, 2001). Confidential “gossipy” conversations may be private among work colleagues and friends but secret to enemies, nonallies, and researchers because gossip is also a means of distancing and exclusion. Securing the consent of informants for their participation in a study on gossip might be difficult when one is seeking to create a more naturalistic setting vis-à-vis a participant observation study (Michelson & Mouly, 2002). In such scenarios, the researcher becomes part of the situation they are investigating, and covert and nonconsensual research, while not normally condoned by university ethics committees, could nonetheless still be possible in exceptional cases. One such case, as argued by Marco Marzano (2007, p. 422), is the study of gossip.

In addition to participant observation, overhearing naturally occurring conversations (e.g., in public spaces) seems a promising method (Dunbar, 1992, 1996; Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1985). For example, Dunbar (1992) recorded overheard conversations in a university refectory, scoring the topic at 30-second intervals, and found that 70% of conversation time was spent talking about social relationships and experiences. About half of this was devoted to the relationships of third parties not present. In this public arena, both men and women gossiped equally, but men tended to talk about their own experiences, while women tended to talk mostly about other people’s experiences. Only 5% of the conversations were devoted to criticism and negative evaluation of others, although this could be anticipated in a public setting. The ethics of such covert research methods could be called into question, yet it is difficult to envisage other ways of capturing the essence of what people

gossip about. There may be a problem of bias in categorizing and recording what was heard, and the reliability of data collecting instruments is clearly important (Nason & Golding, 1998). To date, few researchers have adopted such techniques. This chapter contends that they would allow for further investigation of gossip over time.

Diaries provide an excellent opportunity for organizational members to record—soon after the gossip exchange—their contributions and reactions to the exchange (Waddington, 2005), which then can also be used for longitudinal research. Of course, the present study recognizes the possibility that organizational members could censure their own diary entries, but this would be insufficient reason a priori to not consider using such techniques. Another methodological possibility includes secondary analysis of published data.

The beginning and end points of gossip are difficult to identify because gossip can be temporarily forgotten but then resurface within the same or even a different context at a future date. The temporal and processual aspects of gossip call for methods that can connect the past, the present, and future, which is the same general challenge facing the study of OC. To investigate such complex and recurring patterns both across time and within different organizational spaces requires openness to a variety of methodological techniques that particularly allow for longitudinal data to be collected.

Given the proliferation of different communication technologies including email, mobile telephone texting, social networking, and other electronic bulletin boards, the task of collecting relevant data is increasingly possible. On a related note, it would be interesting to evaluate the extent to which these technologies complement face-to-face gossip or substitute for it. An important difference to note, however, given this chapter's earlier definition of gossip, is that with

online or “e-gossip” there may be an absence of visual cues. There are very few studies in this area (for an exception, see Harrington & Bielby, 1995), but this chapter argues that research into the consequences of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook is necessary because such sites duplicate many of the functions of gossip as a form of “social grooming” (Dunbar, 1996). Seen in this sense, gossip establishes and maintains relationships and is a way of understanding alliances and hierarchies. Similarly, users of SNSs display their own profiles and networks of “friends” and observe the profiles of others, presenting a public self for their community. As Tufecki (2008) notes, status verification, relationship confirmation, and mutual acknowledgment are publicly displayed features of SNSs.

CONCLUSION

This chapter sought to explore in depth the role of gossip in the emergence, transmission, enactment, and transgression of (aspects of) an organization's culture. It is by now widely accepted that language helps constitute organizations. Gossip is one vehicle through which one can identify a firm's emerging culture. This study's exploration suggests that gossip is not only a vital force in the creation and emergence of OC, but equally in its transmission, and that, above all, it is the speed with which news and moral judgments are transmitted that typifies the gossip activity. In addition to being rapid, gossip, which usually originates in the “underlife” of organizations, also penetrates deeply into all levels of the organization, as Deal and Kennedy (1982, p. 92) have already recognized. Further, gossip is one possibility, among many others, to enact OC. The organizational “underlife” enacted in and through gossip represents elements of OC that members of an organization, including

its leaders, should pay attention to, and to ignore this can be fatal. The crucial question is how organizational information enacted in gossip can be transformed into practices of everyday knowledge work. It is not safe to assume that organizational knowledge sharing will occur unless it is a recognized norm or expectation of an organization's culture (Balthazard, Cooke, & Potter, 2006). Repeated gossips are also one vehicle through which OC is maintained. Such discourse seems particularly helpful in the socialization of newcomers and cultural learning in general. But it can also help to maintain boundaries between groups in organizations; in that respect, gossip about other groups is consistent with the organizational subculture and counterculture literature (Martin & Siehl, 1983). Countercultures, one form of subcultures, are places where especially critical and negative gossip resides. This chapter has noted that the factual and moral content of gossip can alter significantly during the process of diffusion. Gossip tends to become more extreme the more it is transferred, often far beyond the gossipers' intentions. That is one reason why gossip more often than not leads to OC transgressions such as malice, envy, deceit, and sabotage, which are manifestations of dysfunctional cultures (Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006). The task ahead, then, for organizational scholars and practitioners is to simultaneously capture the positive consequences that arise from a deeper understanding of the role of gossip in OC while also acknowledging the potential negative and harmful consequences of gossip.

The multidisciplinary focus of the field of gossip is well understood. Gossip has been studied in anthropology, (urban) sociology,

social psychology, linguistics, communication studies, and gender studies, although often as a phenomenon that is considered as marginal to a "larger," recognized issue, such as insider/outsider dynamics (e.g., Elias & Scotson, 1994). The investigation of gossip in management and organization studies is a more recent development (Noon & Delbridge, 1993), whereas the study of gossip in the subfield of OC studies is still in a relatively early stage of development. Gossip is a form of distributed cultural knowledge, with an evaluative component, and is marked by the gossip-recipient-target triad, the latter of which is typically not present during the gossip act. Despite this consistent social structure, gossip's distribution and diffusion within and between organizations follows many paths. Again, there is little doubt that gossip plays a vital role in the emergence, transmission, enactment, and transgression of (aspects of) OC. The empirical question is, how precisely does this occur?

The scarce writings in organization and management about gossip are polarized around arguments that regard gossip as problematic for managers and their organizations, and those that are a little more circumspect, if not positive, in their conclusions. In a number of these studies, however, the argument has been based on assertion or hearsay, a characteristic not inconsistent with the topic of focus. As a consequence, there have been relatively few empirical studies that focus explicitly on gossip, and this issue deserves future attention. It is time to break the silence around gossip on the work floor in general and in research on organizational culture in particular.

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