

# UNIVERSITY *of York*

This is a repository copy of *Gossip as evaluative sensemaking and the concealment of confidential gossip in the everyday life of organizations*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/178878/>

Version: Published Version

---

## **Article:**

Fan, Ziyun and Dawson, Patrick (2021) Gossip as evaluative sensemaking and the concealment of confidential gossip in the everyday life of organizations. *Management Learning*. ISSN 1461-7307

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507620979366>

---

## **Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

## **Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



# Gossip as evaluative sensemaking and the concealment of confidential gossip in the everyday life of organizations

Management Learning

1–21

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/1350507620979366

[journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq)**Ziyun Fan and Patrick Dawson** 

University of Northumbria at Newcastle, UK

## Abstract

Gossip is pervasive at the workplace, yet receives scant attention in the sensemaking literature and stands on the periphery of organization studies. We seek to reveal the non-triviality of gossip in processes of sensemaking. In drawing on empirical data from an observational study of a British Media firm, we adopt a processual perspective in showing how people produce, understand, and enact their sense of what is occurring through gossip as an evaluative and distinct form of informal communication. Our research draws attention to the importance of gossip in the routines of daily practice and the need to differentiate general from confidential gossip. We discuss how gossip continuously informs learning as evaluative sensemaking processes that encourages critiques and evaluation to shape future action and behavior. Within this, we argue how confidential gossip can challenge power relations while remaining part of formal authority structures, constituting forms of pragmatic and micro-resistance. This shadowland resistance provides terrain for learning that both criticizes and preserves espoused values and cultural norms. We conclude that confidential gossip as an evaluative and secretive process provokes a learning paradox that both enables and constrains forms of resistance in reinforcing and simultaneously questioning power relations at work.

## Keywords

Confidential gossip, gossip, learning, power, resistance, sensemaking

## Introduction

The process of sensemaking occurs through verbal and non-verbal means involving social practices and conversations (Balogun and Johnson, 2005: 1576). There is emphasis on the role of language (Maclean et al., 2011), narratives and stories (Boje, 2008; Brown et al., 2008) in making sense of situations and giving sense to others (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Such communicative “translations” of uncertainty and ambiguity, embedded in regulative institutional influences (e.g. Patriotta and Lanzara, 2006), play a central role in the ongoing

---

### Corresponding author:

Patrick Dawson, Newcastle Business School, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK.

Email: [p.dawson@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:p.dawson@abdn.ac.uk)

reinterpretation and reproduction of organizational practices. Despite this, there are “only a few sensemaking studies that focus specifically on communication” and more specifically, “in a way that allows the interaction between different forms of communication to be examined” (Mills, 2010: 217). Gossip is one such area in providing a communicative space for employees to evaluate dominant narratives that legitimize workplace practices in developing alternative sensemaking perspectives. It is central to processes of sensemaking in our everyday life of organizations and yet, remains an area that receives little research attention.

One reason for this absence of inquiry might be that these social interactions are often viewed as activities on the periphery of organizational life that have little import or influence (Fan et al., 2020), even though gossip is claimed to be “at the core of human social relationships” (Waddington, 2016: 811). From this perspective, a small corpus of work shows the “non-triviality” of gossip on organizational processes through being a learning mechanism (Baumeister et al., 2004), which is largely investigated through correlations between gossip and performance-related factors (e.g. Bai et al., 2020; Ellwardt et al., 2012). While such attempts are noble in enhancing understanding of workplace gossip, what remains unclear is *how* such learning occurs beyond a simple linear comprehension that equates sharing with sensemaking. In adopting a processual perspective (Dawson, 2019), our examination reveals a learning paradox that arises from the processes by which sense is produced, understood, and enacted, through and within gossip as a form of evaluative sensemaking.

The concept of sensegiving, in which sensegivers seek to purposefully shape the sensemaking of others (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), is seen as a useful concept for explaining management’s attempt to influence the meaning construction of employees (Catasús et al., 2009). Drawing on data from a participant observation study of a UK media firm, we further challenge existing non-critical accounts that assume sensegiving predominates among leaders and senior managers of organizations (Mills et al., 2010). Our findings illustrate how the sensegiving that occurs among employees in daily gossip, which attempts to delegitimize official narratives, operates as normative and evaluative sensemaking processes that are able to challenge the status quo and question the espoused values of managers. In exploring these issues of power through the lens of gossip (Brown et al., 2015; Whittle et al., 2016), we show how processes of evaluative sensemaking both support and counter accepted views and provide platforms for learning and opportunities for resistance (e.g. Mumby et al., 2017). It offers alternative sites enabling and constraining quotidian accounts of recalcitrance (Mikkelsen and Wåhlin, 2020) in reshaping and simultaneously reinforcing the meaning making of power relations at work (Buchanan and Badham, 2020), in questioning and simultaneously maintaining the status quo (Hernes and Irgens, 2013) as forms of pragmatic (McCabe et al., 2020) and micro-resistance (Merry, 1995). Reinforcement of this process arises through awareness that others may gossip about oneself, inducing self-disciplining behaviors that counter possibilities for resistance, especially around issues of physical presence and perceived commitment.

In substantiating gossip as evaluative sensemaking in the daily life of organizations, we structure the paper into five main sections. In the first part, we position our focus on sensemaking as processual rather than episodic, on routine daily practice rather than disruptive events, and the role that gossip plays in challenging and giving sense to relations of power. In then examining the literature on gossip, we offer a working definition on general gossip and differentiate this from confidential forms. We argue that the former is more open with an evaluative playfulness while the latter in tackling more sensitive and controversial issues involves elements of concealment that in turn, extends our exploration into the significance of power. The method section outlines the qualitative nature of the study and reflects upon the researcher’s role in the field as a participant observer. We use two illustrative examples in analyzing our findings on the importance of gossip and confidential gossip for processes of sensemaking. Attention is on the transition between different forms and

in particular, how confidential gossip provides a forum for people to learn about and question existing power and authority relations while also reinforcing their engagement in expected workplace practices and behaviors. Our discussion section draws out four important insights from our research and in our conclusion, we argue that gossip and confidential gossip as an evaluative sensemaking process continuously and subtly reveals, educates, informs, and in some instances challenges organizational rules and workplace practices.

## **The process of sensemaking and the unequal distribution of power in organizations**

The research on sensemaking is large and significant (see e.g. Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Holt and Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). In a review, Glynn and Watkiss (2020) identify a movement in emphasis from a linear focus on action (“sensemaking in organizing”) towards a more dynamic focus on the interaction of meaning and action (“sensemaking as organizing”). In building on Weick’s foundational work, there is now a considerable body of work on a variety of issues (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, 2020). This includes sensemaking and storytelling (e.g. Colville et al., 2016; Dawson and McLean, 2013), the sensemaking of leaders (Combe and Carrington, 2015), middle managers (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Teulier and Roulea, 2013) and shop floor workers (Patriotta, 2003). There is also a range of attempts to make sense of sensemaking (Brown et al., 2015) and the different but related concepts of sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), sensebreaking (Giuliani, 2016), temporal sensemaking (Dawson and Sykes, 2019), and prospective sensemaking (Konlechner et al., 2019). The studies are extensive, with a turn towards process perspectives in which sensemaking practices are “fundamentally decentred” (Introna, 2019: 745) and connected with organizing (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020).

In line with this growing number of studies that take a stronger process view (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020), we also take the position that the flux and flow of sensemaking is not episodic but characterized by continuous change (Guetter and Vandenbempt, 2016; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010). From this perspective, processes of sensemaking are ongoing and multi-directional, existing in relation to each other and not as a series of distinct sequences (Dwyer and Hardy, 2016; Weick, 2010). They continuously occur at all levels among the full range of employees (individually and collectively), arising in dynamic temporal contexts forming part of sociomaterial practices (Dawson, 2020). These ongoing processes, which can form and be in the form of narratives and stories (Boje, 2008; Brown et al., 2008), do not just communicate but act as power-political devices servicing ways of interpreting and making sense of their own and others’ actions and behaviors (Zaher, 2019). As Balogun and Johnson (2004) state:

Individuals exchange gossip, stories, rumours and accounts of experiences, and they take note of symbolic behaviours and actions. Through these social processes, recipients of change develop new understanding and interpretive frameworks (Balogun and Johnson, 2004: 524).

Our empirical data examines the place of gossip in sensemaking processes. The focus is not on disruptions but on the day-to-day of gossiping—what Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) refer to as the “mundane” of organizational life—an area largely unexplored in the extant literature. We explore how people emotionally experience the workplace and through gossiping make and give sense (Giuliani, 2016) to the routines of daily practice. Although writers, such as Maitlis (2005: 29), recognize gossip as a sensegiving activity, her data does not reveal the influence of gossip on the observable processes she classifies. Mainstream attention is on processes that are open rather than on more covert and hidden processes of sensemaking (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) that may be serendipitous, purposeful

and secretive, occurring in corridors, corners and kitchens, such as confidential gossip. In part, this absence arises from the methodological difficulties of collecting this type of data, but their significance to sensemaking processes is not in question (Gephart, 1993). In addressing this gap, we examine the activities associated with general and confidential gossip in the workplace and in so doing, we uncover the ways in which these evaluative processes of sensemaking enable employees to resist and criticize dominant sensemaking frames and question workplace expectations and practices.

In exploring the issue of sensemaking and power (Brown et al., 2015; Whittle et al., 2016), our attention is on gossip as a sensemaking process that also involves purposeful attempts to influence the interpretations of others in certain preferred directions (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). On this count, Whittle et al. (2016) examine the process by which local managers purposefully censor (“sense-censoring”) sensemaking accounts from global headquarters, potentially transforming strategic change into strategic inaction. While the focus of our inquiry is not on management and leader sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), it is nevertheless on forms of evaluative sensemaking that arise in the gossiping among employees. These processes continuously inform the changing sense made and given to relations of power and hierarchy in the context of daily work practices.

Mikkelsen and Wählin (2020) highlight the importance of power and hierarchy in their study of the political processes by which some forms of sensemaking dominate while others remain hidden and forbidden. They argue that any sensemaking perspective needs to “take into account the unequal distribution of power within an organisation and particularly more covert systemic forms of influence in terms of organizational rule systems” (Mikkelsen and Wählin, 2020: 561). The authors identify *hidden* forms of sensemaking that arise from overt tensions and conflicts among team leaders and employees working in a diverse environment. Although there is workplace sharing, this sensemaking remains hidden from senior management. Using the concept of *forbidden* sensemaking they classify a hidden type of sensemaking that is characterized by secrecy among minority groups. In their Danish example, they illustrate how foreign-born employees at the bottom of the hierarchy do not openly express their concerns but keep their grievances to themselves “driven by fear of experiencing negative consequences” (Mikkelsen and Wählin, 2020: 571).

In our research on gossip, we also illustrate how employees at lower levels in the organizational hierarchy draw on different experiences in processes of collective meaning construction that enables forms of critical evaluative sensemaking that counter the dominant managerial narrative. Our concern is with gossip as an evaluative sensemaking process and with the secrecy of confidential gossip in allowing for more radical interpretations and expressions of sensitive ideas that employees would not openly discuss. This element of concealment overlaps with aspects of forbidden sensemaking but as we show later, there are some noticeable differences, in for example, the nature of critique and evaluation in the formation of self-selecting groups that engage in confidential gossip. In our examination, we aim to show how different forms of gossip contribute to our understanding of sensemaking—as well as the behavioral responses to the sensegiving of significant others—and the influence of these processes on power, resistance, and learning. We also discuss the paradox of pragmatic resistance (McCabe et al., 2020) in which gossip may promote scrutiny of values espoused by senior managers through giving an alternative sense to people, events and issues that opens up opportunities for resistance while conversely, concerns over hierarchical relations can induce self-disciplining behaviors that counter these possibilities.

## **Gossip and confidential gossip in processes of sensemaking**

Gossip occurs at various times and in various places. It is an activity that can range from shared social banter about an absent third party to more hidden and secretive forms of dialogue open to a

select few. Physical proximity and closeness in a common corner, coffee spot or simply passing in a corridor, can offer opportunities for gossiping. These corridor conversations are ubiquitous forms of communication that pervade organizational processes (Noon and Delbridge, 1993: 35; Waddington, 2012). Gossip that discusses colleagues in their absence is rarely limited to the mere relating of facts without embellishing opinions and commentary from the communicative parties (e.g. Wert and Salovey, 2004). According to Gluckman (1963: 307), these forms of informal communication are central to the development of close group associations and the formation of collective views of the world. He claims that these are “among the most important societal and cultural phenomena we are called upon to analyze” (1963: 307), and yet they receive little attention and remain under-researched (Van Iterson and Clegg, 2008; Waddington, 2012).

### *The normative and evaluative nature of forms of gossip in organizations*

Gossip presents challenges to researchers because it is hard to define: “different authors within each discipline rarely [agree] on what gossip is” (Noon and Delbridge, 1993: 23). The relationships between gossip and related communicative phenomena such as rumor and hearsay, in addition to the various distinctions between different types of gossip such as positive and negative gossip (Michelson et al., 2010) all compound these definitional difficulties. Hence, there are limitations to any definition of gossip, as it might not be able to encompass all perspectives and instances of gossip. We draw on a working definition of gossip adopted by many gossip studies. As Michelson et al. (2010) suggest, first, a working definition is able to capture identifiable dimensions of gossip; and second, partaking in the gradual development of agreement for the otherwise unresolvable definitional issue allows some accumulation of research findings to occur across studies.

Gossip is therefore defined as a “process of informally communicating value-laden information” (Noon and Delbridge, 1993: 25) selected by members “as alternative to the available official or open ones” (Paine, 1967: 293, see also Michelson and Mouly, 2000), which is linked to “informal communication networks” (Noon and Delbridge, 1993: 23) and “informal structures of organizations” (1993: 24). Engagement and development in gossip occurs between at least two people. It “may be spoken (most common), written (less common), or visual” (Van Iterson et al., 2011: 377, see also Taylor, 1994) and includes evaluative talk about someone who is not present (Eder and Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004; Taylor, 1994) as well as other issues or things (Waddington, 2012), such as organizational change.

Gossip in the sharing of information within a small group is selective; for example, participants need to evaluate whether it is appropriate to mention a specific issue, event or person within a group, whether others are going to be interested in their evaluative comments, and/or whether they will be on the same side (Van Iterson et al., 2011). Choosing the particular people to talk to is a selection process, contributing to (re)formation of a gossip circle and (re)actualization of social relations. As Gluckman (1963: 313) indicates, the right to gossip “is a privilege which is only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group. . . it is a hallmark of membership”.

Given the evaluative and selective nature of gossip, it is inherently normative. As Hannerz (1967: 36) remarks: “The same information may be gossip or non-gossip depending on who gives it to whom; the communication that Mrs A’s child is illegitimate is not gossip if it is occurring between two social workers acting in that capacity, while it is gossip if Mrs A’s neighbors talk about it”. Therefore, it is not merely the content, but more importantly the context in which gossip emerges that plays an essential role in identifying gossip.

Contexts of gossip are themselves products of accumulated communication, memories, and relations, that sediment into patterns of interpretations and presuppositions that people use to make sense of events in the world (e.g. Stewart and Strathern, 2004: 30). These contexts are not simply past and



present but temporal and processual drawing on prospective and emerging futures (Dawson, 2019). Gossip thereby emerges, circulates, and re-emerges in changing temporal contexts with shifting opportunities, tensions and circumstances, and is simultaneously colored by such opportunities, tensions and circumstances (Fan, 2018). It may offer interpretative ambiguity where possibilities of positive and negative influences of gossip can co-exist and may be mutually implicated as a “positive” influence for some can be “negative” for others (Stewart and Strathern, 2004).

In our concern with gossip as a sensemaking process our interest is with the contextual and evaluative nature of gossip in shaping meaning constructions and in breaking down or challenging a dominant discourse for making sense of organizational life that are often taken-for-granted in reaffirming behavioral expectations (see also Giuliani, 2016). In offering evaluative critique, gossip offers alternative plausible explanations and is able to question conventional workplace practices, the behavior of others and power relations. New interpretative frames and processes of sensemaking emerge through verbal and non-verbal means. In this way, gossip enables individuals to engage in negotiations about workplace practices and power relations in forms of informal communication that infer and give meaning. As Sheehan et al. (2014: 196) show in exploring the power dimensions of the human resource function, the management of meaning through language, symbols and rituals is a sophisticated and important dimension of power and “effective in altering underlying values and norms.” The capacity of gossip as a sensemaking process that employees use to resist organizational expectations and question power relations forms part of our analysis presented later.

### *Defining and differentiating confidential gossip*

In differentiating forms of organizational gossip, we distinguish between forms of gossip that are more open and playful in corridor conversations and those that are more guarded and secretive in terms of confidentiality where secrecy plays a central role. Signals of this secretive element are produced by and produce ways of intentional concealment as the core trait of secrecy (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2014). They often arise through private channels in verbal interaction, such as, “keep this between us” or “within these four walls,” nonverbal cues through bodily and facial expressions. Although some studies on gossip touch upon these aspects (e.g. Kurland and Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010), they do not specifically focus on gossip as a form of secrecy. While Fan et al. (2020) bring forward the concept of confidential gossip; they do not provide a specific definition for it. Yet their arguments shed light on an important distinction in drawing attention to the way the conceptualization of gossip largely centers on the dimension of “evaluation,” while confidential gossip also emphasizes the intentionality of concealment (Fan and Grey, 2020). For example, managing space for private conversations with verbal and nonverbal cues draws attention to the sensitivity of the content under discussion and the need for concealment. This is particularly evident in the context of material that is known to be provocative, potentially embarrassing or conflictual. Participants, especially producers of confidential gossip, therefore can “manage topics—topics which have meaning to them” (Fine, 1986: 406). It requires the consideration of “what *should* be talked about,” rather than solely “what *can* be talked about.” Soundings for such decisions are achievable through narratives that remain open to interpretation.

As a form of “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984), this indirectness of communication implicitly conceals certain meanings in order to leave room for further adjustment, interpretation, evaluation, or even avoidance of communication (e.g. Hallett et al., 2009). Confidential gossip provides an opportunity for participants to consider and debate sensitive and controversial views about people, issues and events that they would not otherwise discuss. We define confidential gossip as: *A particular form of gossip involving a few selective individuals who engage in highly sensitive and*

*confidential evaluations about absent parties, events or issues that are important to conceal and keep secret from particular others in their potential to influence outlier thinking and meaning making.*

This definition draws out some important distinctions missed in current conceptions. First, the centrality of concealment in forms of confidential gossip: gossip about absent third parties might be confidential not only to the third party, but to a fourth party. Second, confidential gossip forms a dynamic relationship with power, one that emerges from repression yet simultaneously is a powerful condition of empowerment. The exclusive and concealed group narration has the potential to influence (e.g. Kurland and Pelled, 2000) that enables members to voice radical views and controversial opinions within a secluded and safe environment. It invites people to more intensely question and reassess dominant narratives, to criticize current ways of doing things, to unguard further evaluations of colleagues, the immediate boss and senior management, as well as events and issues. These might be taken especially seriously, as what is shared with an imprecation to confidentiality is more likely to be considered as “the ‘truth’ behind the ‘truth’” (Stewart and Strathern, 2004: 38). Concealment from a wider audience enables greater freedom in countering and opposing commonly held assumptions in discussing and formulating alternative views and positions. It enables sensemaking in a forum that is both expressive and self-contained, but from which members may re-enter into a wider debate in which they can actively resist conventional ways of doing things in attempting to steer the sensemaking of others in certain preferred directions (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

## Method

Our study is a single exploratory case study focused on informal communication with particular attention on examples of (confidential) gossip. In viewing (confidential) gossip as a social process, there are two important empirical considerations. First, attention is paid not just to the communication content, but also to the social contexts and relations that produce the content. Second, confidential gossip embeds in, rather than being isolated from, wider forms of informal communication and interaction at work. In accommodating these considerations, the research sets out to observe and engage with chance happenings, with the informal conversations and interactions of people at work (Whyte, 1984). Particular concern is with capturing the narratives and actors’ interpretations of situations and people (Filstead, 1970), in order to achieve this we use a participant observation method. This enables intensive observational fieldwork with a focus on the interactions and conversations of people at work as they occur (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). As Morse (2012) argues, persistent observation and prolonged engagement enables the qualitative researcher to ensure rigor in the thick descriptions of organizational life that they are able to uncover. This was the approach taken here, which comprised a three-month intensive ethnographic participant observation of the interpersonal relations and social contexts in which informal communication, that included confidential gossip, took place.

### *Access to fieldwork*

Although by the standards of classical anthropological ethnography this was a relatively short period, it followed closely the lives of people in organizations and was able to capture the process by which people routinely engage in gossip. It recognizes that the researcher—who started as an intern in the organization—is a part of the world being studied—demanding that the researcher reflects on how they shape data collection and analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The collection of the more secretive and confidential forms of gossip did raise ethical tensions. Ethics dictated that the gatekeeper (senior manager) was fully aware of what the project was hoping to



achieve. However, after considerable discussion, the decision of key stakeholders was not to make explicit to all employees that confidential gossip was a particular focus as this was likely to restrict opportunities to study the phenomenon in question. Importantly, confidential gossip would not be reported to senior management (or to anyone else), and it was agreed that anything published that included confidential gossip would rigorously suppress the identity of the organization and the participants of the study. The Ethics Committee of a UK university provided support and endorsement for the final iteration of the research design of the study.

### *The organizational context of Quinza*

Fieldwork took place inside a British media firm, given the pseudonym Quinza, during the winter of 2015–2016. Quinza is located in a modern building in a lively part of a city in Britain. To most of its employees, Quinza is recognized as a leading company with high-quality work with its commitment to knowledge innovation and provides an open environment that supports such commitment. It has established a clear division of departments with different responsibilities, such as Marketing, Production, and IT, which are organized in different parts of the organization based on the space needed for a particular function. Almost everyone works in large open-plan offices, with meetings taking place in bookable spaces. The offices are very quiet (many wear headphones), with people sitting at individual workstations. This was significant for the study as it means that little in the way of communication of any sort, including general and confidential gossip, occurs in the main workspace. Instead, locations such as toilets, corridors, the communal kitchen and dining area, as well as out of office locations like the Christmas party, are the main sites of interaction. The main method for collecting data was participant observation.

### *Fieldnote taking*

Working as an intern, the researcher undertook a wide range of relatively mundane office tasks. The role enabled her to work with a variety of people and departments within the organization. As she did so, she inevitably interacted both formally and informally with these people, making occasional notes during the day if her intern work permitted it and at the end of each day updated a detailed field diary. As a tool of note taking, the mobile version of Word was used, as it does not raise questions to carry mobile phones around in the organization, and typing was a quicker option for the researcher than pen-and-paper writing. During the day, some notes were taken in an empty stairway or toilet shortly after informal conversations and interactions occurred. The latter was less used after the third week of fieldwork when one colleague indicated his worry about the researcher's health. In some cases where the researcher overheard some conversations (e.g. when queuing to use microwave for lunch in the kitchen), she was able to note it down when they were happening. This diary recorded the day's events including social interactions, informal conversations, and examples of confidential gossip. To accumulate insights in understanding what was taking place of the organizational life, the researcher added a section, "feeling of the day," at the end of the fieldnote to record her daily reflection that goes beyond issues that could hint at informal communication and gossip and informed the meaning making of her daily encounters at Quinza. After the fieldwork was complete, the diary was a major resource for deep contextual analysis of the conversations and interactions of the people studied.

Reflecting upon the researcher's role in the field, one methodological complexity was that participating in confidential gossip might require the researcher herself actually passing on such gossip, which might violate the ethical limits of the project. Accordingly, she avoided doing so and was in this sense not a full participant (Gold, 1958: 219–220). However, this was

aided by the relatively short period of fieldwork: as a newcomer she was not expected to know anything to gossip about and in fact as a person who was not just new but junior she was perhaps perceived as relatively insignificant and in this sense unthreatening and so possibly more likely to be confided in.

### *Data analysis*

The analysis of the field diary was undertaken in an inductive thematic manner. A particular challenge of this research was that the shift from general conversation to more secretive gossip was not especially dramatic, nor was it announced with any great fanfare (as the vast majority of the time people were not engaging in gossip, confidential, or otherwise). As a social process, it was subtly embedded within interactions, and sometimes only quite fleetingly glimpsed (e.g. in a half-overheard remark). Therefore, in order to characterize examples of confidential gossip, the field diary was firstly analyzed to extract examples of general gossip from informal communication. Such examples were then re-read to distinguish between general and confidential gossip. To do so, the examples were coded through themes of locations, including workplace (e.g. kitchen, open-plan offices, closed meeting rooms) and outside workplace (e.g. pubs, cat café, public transports, taxi); and types of communicative markers, including verbal (e.g. “bitch,” “ridiculous,” “boring”) and nonverbal ones (e.g. lowering volume, door closing, eye exchange) that indicate the components of evaluation and confidentiality.

With the original research focusing on the constitution of confidential gossip in organizations, attention is not only on the contexts that gave rise to confidential gossip, but also on the contextual impact of confidential gossip. To explore such impact, connections among examples of confidential gossip were highlighted and summarized to generate first-order themes. Certain first-order themes were then summarized to generate second-order themes. For example, some examples of confidential gossip share certain elements/processes of boundary-drawing mechanism, which were summarized as “the physicality of boundaries,” “the negotiation of boundaries,” and “the enactment of boundaries.” Such first-order themes were brought together and summarized as the construction of social boundary of confidential gossip as a second-order theme. Other second-order themes include the construction of hierarchy and of time. Such influence of confidential gossip was then further developed into more general theoretical frameworks as the third-order themes where sensemaking emerged.

### **Findings**

In presenting our data, we use selective examples that start to uncover and shed light on the relationship between gossip and confidential gossip and processes of sensemaking. In reporting the data, we denote extracts from the field diary in italics, suppressed text from the diary in square brackets and explanations of things, such as contextual events, word tone, or bodily gesture in curly brackets.

The first example recounts observations on the process of transition from general to confidential gossip, highlighting the physical and vocal movements of participants as they speak in hushed tones and create a confidential space in an open workplace area. The words unspoken and the nonverbal signals and physical movements shape and reshape ongoing social relations during these dynamic sensemaking processes.

Our second illustration examines the constraints of perceived authority relationships on open communication and the emotional outrage experienced from a manager’s unilateral decision. It spotlights the development of counter narratives that are able to reconsider the oppressive

implications of the commonly accepted culture of Quinza and question conventional workplace practices. Notions of power and resistance come to the fore as participants seek to make and give sense to their work experiences at Quinza in their evaluations of how these differ from the managerial discourse of an open, innovative, easy-going culture.

### *Physical and vocal shifts of gossip transition*

In observing a conversation occurring in the office kitchen, there is a sudden change in attentiveness by the gossipers. Attention turns to their immediate surroundings as they both begin to scan the room searching out a space for greater privacy. After a short head-to-head, they move away from the central kitchen area in seeking a safe arena for engaging in a more private dialogue. Below is a short extract from the observational notes of the encounter.

*During my breakfast, two colleagues walk into the kitchen, chatting and standing next to the kitchen door. With more people coming into the kitchen, they stop talking and gradually move to the water cooler that is relatively far away from the door. When people are standing next to a round table preparing breakfast, they move from the water cooler that is next to the round table to the couch that is the furthest area from the door and table. I hear their voices getting lower when others come nearer and slightly increase when they are walking away.*

The kitchen in Quinza is an accessible space where interactions are open for all to observe, but there are also places more removed from the central areas of activity. Although the content of this conversation is unknown, its confidentiality is evident through changes in physical gestures and forms of communication. Acts, such as, when they stop talking, they look around their immediate vicinity in moving away to another location, brings to the fore interruptions and discontinuities in the conversation, especially as it moves from what appears to be more general to confidential forms of gossip. Their behavior subtly sends a message to the interlocutors that this conversation is private and exclusive to them, and recurrently to the others around that there is no open invitation for engagement. The vocal and physical movements are seen as examples of the “secret-sharing moves” assumed by Costas and Grey (2016: 94) to signal that “the information about to be communicated was supposed to be kept”—literally, in this sense—“on the quiet” (2016: 94). The lowering and increasing of voice signify a borderline of the “representational space” (Low, 2003: 12) for secret sharing, and the “moving away” creates physical distance as social detachment from people nearby, categorizing and transforming part of the kitchen into a space for confidential gossip. In short, while the kitchen in general might be considered as a site of general gossip, the “move away” creates a site for more private conversations.

Although the content of these interactions remains unknown, their importance to sensemaking and establishing and reshaping social relations within organizations is clearly observable. In moving from general to confidential gossip, boundaries arise both *in* the physical, vocal and facial expressions of the participants, and *through* the expressions with a symbolic dimension for sensitivity and confidentiality. The body categorizes and socializes space (Witz et al., 1996) and by so doing, generates differentiation of “us” from “them.” Through the exchange of bodily signals that modify interactions and (re)construct social atmosphere and dynamics surrounding a particular space, it creates a place for confidential gossip within a particular group. In this sense, space is not a container of social interactions; rather, it is part of the social processes and production of interactions around and of confidential gossip. To put it slightly differently, interactions between space and body are processes of generation, encryption and decryption of social positions, producing inclusion and exclusion, making “us” meaningful via being relational and comparative. Although this observational example enables us to identify a shift from general to confidential gossip and their occurrence in organizations, the

content and import of these secretive conversations remain unknown. In the example that follows, we draw on content in examining gossip and confidential gossip as a form of resistance to workplace regulation and the rhetoric of an open and inclusive culture.

### *Making sense of workplace resistance*

There are many examples of the use of stories to counter power and authority relations in engaging in forms of resistance in organizations (see Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Dawson and McLean, 2013). Quinza boasts an open culture that encourages staff opinions, but within the shadows of corridor conversations questions arise about such openness and the freedom to express views. In snippets of conversation employees regularly refer to the culture of Quinza and whether it is really so inclusive and different to other organizations. Comments such as “I might think, but I won’t say” frequently emerge in which the intangible sense of hierarchy and power relations becomes tangible through expressing the way of acting as a process of self-regulation. General gossip observed in small groups reveals comments, such as, “you can talk” but only “to some extent.” This awareness underlines a sense of prudence and frustration in maintaining the expectations of authority figures. Gossip enables a forum for participants to make and give sense to what is occurring, evaluating and differentiating espoused and practiced values. Through gossip and confidential gossip, employees are able to unravel a more complex sense of what is occurring, revealing a deeper understanding of the rhetoric of openness and the knowledge that far more caution occurs in practice as people are aware and careful about what is said and what is not said.

Ryan provides an example of his work concerns, expressing his perceived inability to talk openly to his boss about growing work pressures and the difficulties of working with freelance operators and customer service.

*Ryan: . . .because my job is the first point of contact for my boss and for some freelancers.*

*Researcher: For freelancers as well?*

*Ryan: Yes. So freelancers will contact me if anything happens. But the thing is, sometimes I don’t have control over EVERYTHING [emphasizes]. So it doesn’t help even if they get angry with me. For example, a leaflet sample was finished, but the freelancer didn’t get enough copies of it. I submitted the request to customer service, but they didn’t deliver. So it’s customer service’s problem. But then the freelancer emailed me saying angrily that she didn’t get it. Well, not angry, but in a harsh tone. I emailed customer service about that. But I can’t MAKE [emphasizes] customer service send her the copies. It’s out of my range. But I can’t tell her that! If this kind of things reaches my boss, I can’t say to her, look, it’s not my problem. I will still be the one who couldn’t get the job done. So you get all the blame for something that’s not your fault.*

For Ryan as “I,” his work encompasses conflicts between “don’t have control over everything” and “get all the blame for something that’s not your fault.” The conflict was not one he was comfortable to explain to his manager, but he was able to vent his frustration to the researcher. The researcher lends a sympathetic ear that allows Ryan to make sense of his position through constructing a narrative of the situation to an interested but powerless (unthreatening) observer. Ryan explains how his manager is his “boss.” As his superior he is aware that she watches over his shoulder and believes that if he was to tell her “that is not part of my job” or simply “I can’t,” then this would present an impression of himself as lacking commitment and competence. Hence, without testing the response of his boss, he engages in self-disciplinary conduct. Such frustration, embedded in the

sense of what *not* to do as “I can’t say to her,” is a connotation and ramification of the power order and differences that are made and given sense to in the context of the hierarchical authority structures present at Quinza.

This evaluative sensegiving of the actions and responses of other that seeks to influence the sensemaking of the researcher also engages in prospective sensemaking of how Ryan’s boss is likely to make sense and attribute blame (inappropriately in Ryan’s assessment) if action is taken to try to resolve the issue. There is a dilemma facing Ryan which he feels powerless to resolve. He is able to make sense of what is occurring but is also aware that given his position in Quinza he is unable to shape the sensemaking of his boss. In short, Ryan’s understanding of power relations enables him to give sense to the researcher through gossip while constraining such activity with the boss. There is a clear frustration in not being able to get the job done while presenting to management that there is not a problem and the job can be done. When the researcher and a small group of colleagues were having lunch, Aaron, as part of the small group, looked around before venting similar frustrations as Ryan and denoted certain changes of what to do, rather than what not to do:

*Aaron:* So now I have CC Jacky [Aaron’s manager] a lot in my emails.

*Jason:* Really? Did she say anything again? And did she think she gets too many emails from you?

*Aaron:* I don’t know. But I don’t want her to think that I never work on anything. . . So I just CC her the emails I send out. Most of them. Just to let her know I’m doing work.

*Jason:* Yes, just in case.

*Aaron:* Yes. I don’t care whether she gets too many emails from me as long as she gets them.

Aaron *wanting* to let Jacky know indicates the importance for him to not only *get* the job done, but also *show* the job is being done. The emails, derived from frustrations and resistance, are a representation of work progression, a measurement of job engagement, and a production of a “correct” perception to the manager. Furthermore, the emailing scheme is not only a way of reporting to the managers, but also a monitoring system for the work behavior of Aaron.

Both examples above indicate how gossip holds a paradoxical relationship to learning that influences behavior through sensemaking and sensegiving processes. On the one hand, gossip constructs a free space for expressing frustrations that derogate, diagnose, and depreciate the power order. It voices grievances about particular managerial practices and gives informal accounts of right and wrong that evaluate such practices. On the other hand, in making sense of his current predicament, Ryan gives an account for the researcher to learn “what to do here” through and reinforcing what not to do. Similarly, by constantly reminding Jacky of his work progress, Aaron reminds himself of who he is in the context of Quinza and what he should do in order to sustain who he is. These indicate that the free space of expression created by gossip reproduces the positions of subordination and reinforces or perhaps even naturalizes the diagnosed and depreciated practices of power. Gossip, in this sense, serves as attempts for “resistance as escape” (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) that unwittingly preserves, rather than subverts, the status quo. The ambiguity of organizational life is event in the contextual experience of disorder and irrationality that questions the managerially espoused system of order and rationality. McCabe et al. (2020: 954) refer to this form of resistance that “hampers and enables change, while fostering and hindering relationships among staff” as *pragmatic resistance*. It is seen to “reside in the shadowland of organizational life” (2020: 955) and like the evaluative sensemaking of gossip “can be simultaneously productive, consenting and oppositional” (2020: 972). For example, while Ryan and Aaron complain about or criticize the roles they play, they further incorporate themselves into the relationships of power that they seek to escape (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Kunda, 1992).

This points to another paradox that because of the very possibility of engaging in gossip and confidential gossip to challenge a particular anti-openness cultural logic and managerial practices, such resistance becomes an evidence of Quinza's commitment to an open culture. Despite that, gossip and confidential gossip is one way to distance oneself, however momentarily, from the structuring of power for possible, although temporary, emotional emancipation.

In observing gossip and confidential gossip, a number of examples emerge highlighting employee awareness of the need to hide views that counter the espoused culture of Quinza. This awareness in the need to "keep schtum" does not constrain but actively promotes gossip that enables emotional resistance to powerful others further up the hierarchy. We illustrate this below in a short snippet from a lunchtime conversation.

- Erin:*        *Did you hear what he said in the meeting? I can't believe he said that! If he wants us to do it in that way, then why don't we join that team altogether?! [in an angry tone]*
- Lavinia:*    *Yeah, exactly!*
- Erin:*        *This just shouldn't be the way! I'm not going to do it! What was he thinking!*
- Lavinia:*    *[nods]*

In this example, Erin expresses her emotional outrage at a manager's decision. The gossip is discrete but heated, enabling Erin to express her vexation at the decision: "I can't believe he said that." This feeling of vexation acts as a catalyst for engaging in confidential gossip that can be seen as a "cathartic process, enabling the release of emotion and . . . of gaining support and reassurance" (Waddington, 2012: 63). By turning up the volume of what was silent during the meeting, Erin directly indicates her opinion regarding what was said in the meeting as a bad decision by saying "this just shouldn't be the way," and her (emotional) resistance to the decision as "I'm not going to do it." Through the emotional revelation of saying what was not said, Erin develops a sense of autonomy outside the meeting as a step out of the constraints of the hierarchical structure. As another lunch conversation also illustrates:

- Brenda:*    *[unlocks her phone and shows it to Carly and Holly] Look at this, I got texts at 6:50am, 6:55am, 7am, and more. She asked me to do this, do that, OH MY GOD [emphasizes]! See?! "IT staff booked at 11:30am," and there's another one like "12:30 to leave." I mean - I get it, it's a big event. But this is just, TOO MUCH [emphasizes].*
- Carly:*       *I feel she's just like - bitch, do this.*
- Holly:*       *She should just chill. So what she's the boss? You're not a puppet.*

Collective sensemaking occurs in generating and sharing a consistent moral criterion that the boss was behaving inappropriately by treating Brenda as a "bitch". Talking about how they feel regarding the boss indicates the freedom they feel to speak their mind in the space of confidential gossip. They endorse individual sensegiving in the collective sensemaking that they make of the situation but this is contained within the group. The conversation is informal, confidential, between three people on a sensitive topic, and it projects a negative evaluation on the "target" who holds a more senior position within the organization. It fits nicely into our definition of confidential gossip and usefully illustrates the evaluative sensegiving that occurs within small groups that can have wider implications for the sensemaking arising from other forms of communication from the "boss." In this, Brenda gains a sense of justice in expressing her negative evaluation and stating that this behavior "was not right." Voicing her views while remaining silent within the formal power hierarchy, opens up possibilities for shaping future processes of sensemaking. As Holly expresses it, "so what she's the boss? There are options as we are not puppets".



Our selective examples highlight how the sensegiving and sensemaking that occurs through gossip and especially confidential gossip, enables participants to develop a sense of group identity and togetherness that enables participants to justifiably reject and emotionally resist the imposition of powerful others. However, the “autonomy” is relative and not absolute, as the rules and norms developed in and through confidential gossip are not parallel from the existing hierarchical structure. For example, participants that co-construct the free space of confidential gossip work at the same levels in the Quinza hierarchy. Erin and Lavinia are both assistants who form a social group, and Brenda, Carly, and Holly occupy similar levels. In talking about their managers in a directly evaluative and relatively liberal way, they are able to challenge and strip hierarchical power relations within the protective concealment of the group. While such talk enables them to offset hierarchy, the need for concealment also serves to reinforce these hierarchical relationships. They are able to openly influence the sensemaking of group members through the evaluative sensegiving of significant others but they do not directly engage in actions to influence the sensemaking and behaviors of those at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy. Hence, such autonomy, at least emotionally, is fragile, constructed through the unity and the division of power positions.

Holding an important place in processes of sensemaking, gossip and confidential gossip allow employees to evaluate, discuss, and air their values and views among participants about managerial practices and the espoused culture at Quinza. Confidential gossip, due to the explicit and/or implicit expectations of confidentiality and protection it affords to members of the small group, provides free space that empowers participants to challenge the rules that prevail and dominate. In this sense, confidential gossip not only allows communication and discussion that depreciates particular managerial practices, but also is itself a sanction of such practices through negative evaluations. Notwithstanding that, expressing what to both do and what not to do in order to deal with the realm of hierarchy leaves the realm largely untouched. This process in turn enables participants (e.g. the researcher) to learn such “what (not) to do” as a way to make sense of “how things are done here” and to give sense to “how to present ourselves as getting things done”. Through such learning processes, there is a more consistent form of reinforcement and regulation of self-governing behavior at work. We argue that gossip and confidential gossip generate forms of *pragmatic* (McCabe et al., 2020: 956–960) and therefore *micro-resistance* (Merry, 1995: 15) that does not target revolutionary behavior but nevertheless enables subordinates to form counter-spheres within forms of domination that subtly shape the trajectory of control and quietly challenges power relations without radically changing them (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Gossip and confidential gossip are therefore alternative sites that enable and simultaneously constrain quotidian accounts of recalcitrance.

## Discussion

The contribution of the paper is in uncovering the place of gossip as an evaluative sensemaking process that reveals how to make sense of gossip and how to gossip to make sense, an area absent from mainstream studies and reviews (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, 2020). We explain this absence by the methodological difficulties of researching sensemaking processes associated with gossip. In tackling this research challenge through a participant observation study, our data reveals the processes by which sense is produced, understood, and enacted through forms of gossip, thereby extending our processual understanding of *how* learning occurs within and through gossip as a sensemaking process.

Two further underexplored areas our study sheds light on are first, how from a process perspective gossip is ongoing and an essential part of “mundane” organizational life and not wholly attributable to disruptive and crisis situations (linear events). Second, that this evaluative sensegiving activity (Maitlis, 2005: 29) is not the sole domain of the powerful but arises from employees who

gossip in evaluating the dominant narratives that seek to legitimize workplace practices. Individual sensegiving was central to building a sense of identity among a select group in formulating a collective sensemaking of the actions and behaviors of their immediate boss and senior managers. However, while attempts to directly influence the meaning construction of senior managers were not present in our data, sensemaking to target and delegitimize routine work practices and official narratives was in evidence. In drawing on the work of Mikkelsen and Wählin (2020)—who identify a hierarchical system comprising dominant, hidden, and forbidden sensemaking—we show how confidential gossip enables secret critical evaluations of events, issues, and people. It overlaps with the concept of forbidden sensemaking (Mikkelsen and Wählin, 2020). This is particularly noticeable in the nature of concealment. However, it also differs, for example, in the way that evaluative sensemaking both supports and counters accepted views and provides platforms for pragmatic and therefore micro-resistance that extend beyond conventional sensemaking processes (e.g. Mumby et al., 2017), enabling employees to partake in the organizing of organizations.

Taken as a whole, our rich contextualized analysis of gossip and confidential gossip offers four important insights. First, our data draws attention to the importance of gossip in the routines of daily practice (Schatzki, 2001) for making sense of organizations. As a form of informal communication, gossip allows social comparison (Wert and Salovey, 2004), information gathering (Rosnow and Fine, 1976), and provides stories that entertain and influence (Paine, 1967). By participating in gossip, interpersonal relationships develop and collective forms of sensemaking occur. In this way, the construction and development of a group can be a condition and consequence of gossip. In other words, gossip can constitute the sensemaking of particular social groups and of selves as “we” distinguish “ourselves” from “them” by constructing solidarity via identity, norms, behavior, and sanction (e.g. Gluckman, 1963; Rosnow and Foster, 2005; Waddington, 2012).

Second, our study highlights the need to differentiate between gossip and confidential gossip even though, the transition between the two often blurs in practice. As we show, gossip continuously shifts moving from conversations that are open to confidential stories and back to reflective conversations. Observations of furtive glances and the sound of hush tones all signal such transitions, underlining the sensitivity of the material while elevating the import of the message. They are harder to observe and study from other forms of communication with confidential gossip by its nature, being secretive (Fan, 2018). Concealment is central to our definition of confidential gossip, as it allows the construction of private spaces as sites for confidential gossip and enables participants to step outside of conventional meaning making in discussing more radical and controversial views and using such views to test the responses of others. Wariness and caution may prevent further developments; alternatively, non-verbal responses may signal that this is a safe place for further elaboration. This capacity for concealment promotes broader narratives that support learning and provide opportunities for resistance. These selective and secretive arenas, through creating boundaries for the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others, offer spaces and places to reconstitute threatened identities in providing a heightened sense of belonging and togetherness. Our findings illustrate how through engaging in confidential gossip, members reaffirm their membership of a select group in which radical and potentially sensitive interpretations in the sensemaking of people, issues, and events is central. As such, we argue it is important to research and differentiate general forms of gossip from confidential gossip.

Third, gossip and confidential gossip provides opportunities to vent frustrations over the actions and decision-making of more powerful others, including for example, senior managers, an immediate boss, or an important client. This enables—at least at an emotional level—resistance from less powerful members of staff. As Buchanan and Badham (2020: 114) claim, gossip can “undermine a leader’s credibility and perceived benevolence.” It is through gossip that individuals are able to share their anger and air their own critical assessments in making sense of their experiences and the experiences

of others. Evaluative sensemaking through confidential gossip arises around the rationality and irrationality that pervades organizations and often remains hidden, acting as a form of pragmatic resistance (McCabe et al., 2020). Emerging within a select group this critical and evaluative sensemaking is open to wider distribution through more general forms of gossip. It can promote disruptive thinking, question power relations and widen discussion and debate on the ambiguity and contradictions of organizational life. These may in turn lead to future actions or responses. In the Erin example, she uses this confidential forum to reject the decision of her superior and to gain support in reaffirming her sense of identity through the group. Although in this example resistance is covert—remaining within the confines of the group—it acts as a powerful bolster to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, providing a strong sense of collective identity that in turn, informs and shapes the ongoing sensemaking within the group (Mikkelsen and Wählin, 2020). Furthermore, in questioning hierarchical relationships in a directly evaluative and relatively liberal way, gossipers reinforce, through evaluations and affirmations, the stance and position of the group.

These findings support the work of Mikkelsen and Wählin (2020: 557) who note how “when people are located at different areas and levels in the organisational hierarchy and they draw on different experiences and areas of knowledge, they often develop conflicting interpretations.” Such conflicts further show how power and political struggles influence collective processes of meaning construction and organizing. Although our data reveals an “incompleteness” of resistance, as employees through gossip and confidential gossip evaluate and challenge power relations while remaining a part of formal authority structures (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2007), they provide clear illustrations of forms of pragmatic (McCabe et al., 2020) and micro-resistance (Merry, 1995). In this, gossip holds a contradictory relationship with resistance in offering space for voicing grievances and frustrations that question but also reinforce the diagnosed and depreciated practices of power. It opens up possibilities for resisting dominant narratives imposed by management through offering alternative evaluations offering a new sense for workplace behaviors and operating practices. Yet such “new” sense is open to revision, replacement and containment within the institutional construction of power. However, there always remain contradictions and ambiguities in the disorder and irrationality that continually seeps through the fissures of espoused order and rationality.

Fourth, gossip through making sense of issues, events, and people continuously informs learning that shapes future action. In the case of Quinza, it is not the sensemaking and learning that occurs from dynamic complexity (Guetta and Vandenbempt, 2016) or unprecedented disasters (Dwyer and Hardy, 2016), but the sensemaking and learning that occurs as part of organizational becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) in the routines of daily practice (Schatzki, 2001). As Hernes and Irgens (2013: 253) argue, this learning under continuity necessitates a temporal view in “assessment of present courses of action; exploration of future courses of action; and re-interpretation of past courses of action.” As we observe, participants of gossip continually extract from their flow of current experiences reflecting on the past and projecting to the future. Their evaluative talk about the ongoing present, past happenings, and projective futures opens up sensemaking processes in enabling participants to widen their views and thoughts. It feeds into learning and addresses issues of identity, especially if these are under threat through changes in procedures or events. In this, gossip can provide a way of affirming who we are and that this is the way we do things around here. It is generally value laden (Kurland and Pelled, 2000), proffering guidance on what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and offering frank evaluations on exigencies, events and the character, and abilities of others.

Participants of gossip can also test out their learning around the espoused values of management and the expected behaviors projected by their immediate peer group. Their place in the organization, how they should position themselves in terms of management and other significant groups,

and their group identity is all open for discussion and consideration. Confidential gossip provides a deeper and more critical sense and evaluation of who we are and how others expect us to behave. There is learning not only around dominant narratives that inform cultural expectations, but also around stepping outside of these in forming a new sense of group identity. In other words, confidential gossip enables group participants to critically evaluate dominant expectations and espoused values in creating their own sense of identity. It offers a tight bonding and feeling of solidarity within a self-selecting group that encourages a widening of views and opinions, and is central to processes of learning in organizations.

## Conclusion

We take the position that gossip and confidential gossip is an evaluative sensemaking process that continuously and subtly reveals, educates, informs, and in some instances challenges and reforms organizational rules and workplace practices. It acts as a medium for organizational learning in making sense of behaviors and events. In so doing, it enables people to push the boundaries in promoting critical evaluative learning about organizational life and opening sensemaking to the ongoing non-linear dynamics of organizational becoming. It is constitutive of meaning systems and central to forms of resistance and power relations, even though sensemaking through gossip often remains a hidden and unobserved consequence of the secrecy that attends confidential gossip. Residing in the shadowland, these processes of evaluative sensemaking promote forms of pragmatic and micro-resistance that simultaneously affirm, question, and resist in supporting and opposing the sense given to power relations at work. They bolster a sense of collective identity in engaging with micro-politics and the ambiguity and uncertainties of organizational life. Moreover, in giving sense to experiences and the behavior of others, they raise awareness and offer platforms for questioning existing ways of doing things while also inducing self-disciplining behaviors. As such, gossip is a central form of informal communication that is non-trivial, informing learning and simultaneously reinforcing and challenging power relations and workplace practices that shape futures actions and behaviors.

Gossip is forever present but difficult to research in organization. It occurs off the grid in informal corridor conversations, through chance meetings and the everyday social interaction of organizational life. While there is difficulty of examining gossip in organizations, the secrecy associated with confidential gossip further compounds access, marking a limitation of this study. Gaining insights into these processes of sensemaking and their influence on learning requires close interaction with people during daily workplace practices. Participative observation provides a method for interpreting subjectivities in the evaluative ongoing dynamics of gossip and confidential gossip. It relies on the research skills and abilities of the field researcher and uncovers contextually unique findings. Such studies are not replicable by other researchers; there is a risk of bias through close proximity and a lack of representativeness. Nevertheless, although the findings are not statistically generalizable—the collection of data is through an ethnographic case study approach—there is an authenticity to the data and as we outline in our discussion, there are significant empathic insights that arise that would not be accessible through positivistic studies.

We argue that gossip is central to processes of sensemaking in which organizing emerges and reconstitutes. It is not separate from behavior and action at work but rather is part of an ongoing dynamic entanglement that is processual. This mutual interweaving of meaning making, action and behavior is an area in need of further research. Another is the place of culture and context on processes of gossip that shape action through interpretation and evaluation of people, issues, and events. Confidential gossip, for example, can provide a critical turn on the meaning making that pervades the workplace in opening up space for alternative views and forms of pragmatic and

micro-resistance. These nuanced processes all warrant greater attention. We advocate that there is room for further longitudinal studies on the progressive achievement of gossip through sensemaking. It is surprising that while gossip dominates our social conversations in organizations (Dunbar et al., 1997), few people feel comfortable admitting that they regularly participate in these informal and at times, secretive conversations (Bergmann, 1993). We often downplay such conversations as superficial, trivial, and vacuous (Waddington, 2012). This is especially the case in professional organizations and yet as we show, gossip is central to processes of evaluative sensemaking in the everyday life of organizations (see also, Mills, 2010; Van Iterson et al., 2011; Waddington and Fletcher, 2005). We conclude by re-emphasizing the importance of gossip and confidential gossip as an important area in organization studies and management learning that warrants further theoretical attention and empirical research.

### Author's Note

Author Patrick Dawson is a Professor at Northumbria as well as an Emeritus Professor at the University of Aberdeen.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Patrick Dawson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3175-1275>

### References

- Bai Y, Wang J, Chen T, et al. (2020) Learning from supervisor negative gossip: The reflective learning process and performance outcome of employee receivers. *Human Relations*. 73(12): 1689–1717.
- Balogun J and Johnson G (2004) Organizational restructuring and middle manager sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal* 47(4): 523–549.
- Balogun J and Johnson G (2005) From intended strategies to unintended outcomes: The impact of change recipient sensemaking. *Organization Studies* 26(11): 1573–1601.
- Baumeister RF, Zhang L and Vohs KD (2004) Gossip as cultural learning. *Review of General Psychology* 8(2): 111–121.
- Bergmann JR (1993) *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*. Translated by JJ Bednarz. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Boje DM (2008) *Storytelling in Organizations*. London: SAGE.
- Brown AD, Colville I and Pye A (2015) Making sense of sensemaking in organization studies. *Organization Studies* 36(2): 265–277.
- Brown AD and Humphreys M (2006) Organizational identity and place: A discursive exploration of hegemony and resistance. *Journal of Management Studies* 43(2): 231–257.
- Brown AD, Stacey P and Nandhakumar J (2008) Making sense of sensemaking narratives. *Human Relations* 61(8): 1035–1062.
- Buchanan DA and Badham RJ (2020) *Power, Politics, and Organizational Change: Winning the Turf Game*, 3rd edn. London: SAGE.
- Catasús B, Mårtensson M and Skoog M (2009) The communication of human accounts: Examining models of sensegiving. *Journal of Human Resource Costing & Accounting* 13(2): 163–179.
- Colville I, Pye A and Brown A (2016) Sensemaking processes and Weickarious learning. *Management Learning* 47(1): 3–13.
- Combe IA and Carrington DJ (2015) Leaders' sensemaking under crises: Emerging cognitive consensus over time within management teams. *Leadership Quarterly* 26(3): 307–322.



- Costas J and Grey C (2014) The temporality of power and the power of temporality: Imaginary future selves in professional service firms. *Organization Studies* 35(6): 909–937.
- Costas J and Grey C (2016) *Secrecy at Work: The Hidden Architecture of Organizational Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Creswell JW and Poth CN (2017) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th edn. London: SAGE.
- Dawson P (2019) *Reshaping Change: A Processual Perspective*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Dawson P (2020) Establishing a high tech company in a global competitive market: A sociomaterial process perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management* 86: 233–243.
- Dawson P and McLean P (2013) Miner's tales: Stories and the storytelling process for understanding the collective sensemaking of employees during contested change. *Group & Organization Management* 38(2): 198–229.
- Dawson P and Sykes C (2019) Concepts of time and temporality in the storytelling and sensemaking literatures: A review and critique. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 21(1): 97–114.
- Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds) (2017) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dunbar RI, Duncan ND and Marriott A (1997) Human conversational behavior. *Human Nature* 8(3): 231–246.
- Dwyer G and Hardy C (2016) We have not lived long enough: Sensemaking and learning from bushfire Australia. *Management Learning* 47(1): 45–64.
- Eder D and Enke JL (1991) The structure of gossip: Opportunities and constraints on collective expression among adolescents. *American Sociological Review* 56(4): 494–508.
- Eisenberg EM (1984) Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs* 51(3): 227–242.
- Ellwardt L, Wittek R and Wielers R (2012) Talking about the boss: Effects of generalized and interpersonal trust on workplace gossip. *Group & Organization Management* 37(4): 521–549.
- Fan Z (2018) *The secret life of organization: Confidential gossip at work*. PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, UK.
- Fan Z and Grey C (2020) Everyday secrecy: Boundaries of confidential gossip. *Culture and Organization*. Epub ahead of print 13 August 2020. DOI: 10.1080/14759551.2020.1799213.
- Fan Z, Grey C and Kärreman D (2020) Confidential gossip and organization studies. *Organization Studies*. Epub ahead of print 11 August 2020. DOI: 10.1177/0170840620954016.
- Filstead WJ (ed.) (1970) *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World*. Chicago, IL: Markham.
- Fine GA (1986) The social organization of adolescent gossip: The rhetoric of moral evaluation. In: Cook-Gumperz J, Corsaro W and Streeck J (eds) *Children's Worlds and Children's Language*. Berlin: Mouton, 405–423.
- Fleming P and Spicer A (2007) *Contesting the Corporation: Struggle, Power and Resistance in Organizations*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Foster EK (2004) Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions. *Review of General Psychology* 8(2): 78–99.
- Gephart RP (1993) The textual approach: Risk and blame in disaster sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal* 36(6): 1465–1514.
- Gioia DA and Chittipeddi K (1991) Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal* 12(6): 433–448.
- Giuliani M (2016) Sensemaking, sensegiving and sensebreaking. *Journal of Intellectual Capital* 17(2): 218–237.
- Gluckman M (1963) Papers in honor of Melville J. Herskovits: Gossip and scandal. *Current Anthropology* 4(3): 307–316.
- Glynn MA and Watkiss L (2020) Of organizing and sensemaking: From action to meaning and back again in a half-century of Weick's theorizing. *Journal of Management Studies* 57(7): 1331–1354.
- Gold RL (1958) Roles in sociological field observations. *Social Forces* 36: 217–223.



- Guette A and Vandenbempt K (2016) Learning in times of dynamic complexity through balancing phenomenal qualities of sensemaking. *Management Learning* 47(1): 83–99.
- Hallett T, Harger B and Eder D (2009) Gossip at work: Unsanctioned evaluative talk in formal school meetings. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38(5): 584–618.
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd edn. New York: Routledge.
- Hannerz U (1967) Gossip, networks and culture in a Black American ghetto. *Ethnos* 32(1–4): 35–60.
- Hernes T and Irgens E (2013) Keeping things mindfully on track: Organizational learning under continuity. *Management Learning* 44(3): 253–266.
- Hernes T and Maitlis S (2010) Process, sensemaking and organizing: An introduction. In: Hernes T and Maitlis S (eds) *Process, Sensemaking and Organizing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 27–37.
- Holt R and Cornelissen J (2014) Sensemaking revisited. *Management Learning* 45(5): 525–539.
- Introna LD (2019) On the making of sense in sensemaking: Decentred sensemaking in the meshwork of life. *Organization Studies* 40(5): 745–764.
- Konlechner S, Latzke M, Güttel WH, et al. (2019) Prospective sensemaking, frames and planned change interventions: A comparison of change trajectories in two hospital units. *Human Relations* 72(4): 706–732.
- Kunda G (1992) *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Kurland NB and Pelled LH (2000) Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review* 25(2): 428–438.
- Low SM (2003) Embodied space(s) anthropological theories of body, space, and culture. *Space and Culture* 6(1): 9–18.
- Maclean M, Harvey C and Chia R (2011) Sensemaking, storytelling and the legitimization of elite business careers. *Human Relations* 65(1): 17–40.
- McCabe D, Ciuk S and Gilbert M (2020) There is a crack in everything: An ethnographic study of pragmatic resistance in a manufacturing organisation. *Human Relations* 73(7): 953–980.
- Maitlis S (2005) The social process of organizational sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal* 48(1): 21–49.
- Maitlis S and Christianson M (2014) Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *The Academy of Management Annals* 8(1): 57–125.
- Maitlis S and Sonenshein S (2010) Sensemaking in crisis and change: Inspiration and insights from Weick (1988). *Journal of Management Studies* 47(3): 551–580.
- Merry SE (1995) Resistance and the cultural power of law. *Law & Society Review* 29(1): 11–26.
- Michelson G and Mouly S (2000) Rumour and gossip in organisations: A conceptual study. *Management Decision* 38(5): 339–346.
- Michelson G, Van Iterson A and Waddington K (2010) Gossip in organizations: Contexts, consequences, and controversies. *Group & Organization Management* 35(4): 371–390.
- Mikkelsen EN and Wåhlin R (2020) Dominant, hidden and forbidden sensemaking: The politics of ideology and emotions in diversity management. 27(4): 557–577.
- Mills C (2010) Experiencing gossip: The foundations for a theory of embedded organizational gossip. *Groups & Organization Management* 35(2): 213–240.
- Mills JH, Thurlow A and Mills AJ (2010) Making sense of sensemaking: The critical sensemaking approach. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 5(2): 182–195.
- Morse JM (2012) *Qualitative Health Research*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Mumby DK, Thomas R, Martí I, et al. (2017) Resistance redux. *Organization Studies* 38(9): 1157–1183.
- Noon M and Delbridge R (1993) News from behind my hand: Gossip in organizations. *Organization Studies* 14(1): 23–36.
- Paine R (1967) What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis. *Man* 2(2): 278–285.
- Patriotta G (2003) Sensemaking on the shop floor: Narratives of knowledge in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies* 40(2): 349–375.
- Patriotta G and Lanzara GF (2006) Identity, institutions, and new work roles the case of a green field automotive factory. *American Behavioral Scientist* 49(7): 987–999.
- Rosnow RL and Fine GA (1976) *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*. New York: Elsevier.

- Rosnow RL and Foster EK (2005) Rumor and gossip research. *Psychological Science Agenda* 19(4): 1–4.
- Rouleau L and Balogun J (2011) Middle managers, strategic sensemaking and discursive competence. *Journal of Management Studies* 48(5): 953–983.
- Sandberg J and Tsoukas H (2015) Making sense of the sensemaking perspective: Its constituents, limitations, and opportunities for further development. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 36(S1): S6–S32.
- Sandberg J and Tsoukas H (2020) Sensemaking reconsidered: Towards a broader understanding through phenomenology. *Organization Theory* 1: 1–34.
- Schatzki T (2001) Introduction: Practice theory. In: Schatzki T, Cetina K and Von Savigny E (eds) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge, 10–23.
- Sheehan C, De Cieri H, Cooper B, et al. (2014) Exploring the power dimensions of the human resource function. *Human Resource Management Journal* 24(2): 193–210.
- Stewart PJ and Strathern A (2004) *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor G (1994) Gossip as moral talk. In: Goodman RF and Ben-Ze'ev A (eds) *Good Gossip*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 34–46.
- Teulier R and Rouleau L (2013) Middle managers' sensemaking and interorganizational change initiation: Translation spaces and editing practices. *Journal of Change Management* 13(3): 308–337.
- Tsoukas H and Chia R (2002) On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science* 13(5): 567–582.
- Van Iterson A and Clegg SR (2008) The politics of gossip and denial in interorganizational relations. *Human Relations* 61(8): 1117–1137.
- Van Iterson A, Waddington K and Michelson G (2011) Breaking the silence: The role of gossip in organizational culture. In: Ashkanasy NM, Wilderom CPM and Peterson MF (eds) *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 375–392.
- Waddington K (2012) *Gossip and Organizations*. New York: Routledge.
- Waddington K (2016) Rethinking gossip and scandal in healthcare organizations. *Journal of Health Organization and Management* 30(6): 810–817.
- 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.
- Weick KE (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Weick KE (2010) The poetics of process: Theorizing the ineffable in organization studies. In: Hernes T and Maitlis S (eds) *Process, Sensemaking and Organizing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 102–111.
- Wert SR and Salovey P (2004) A social comparison account of gossip. *Review of General Psychology* 8(2): 122–137.
- Whittle A, Mueller F, Gilchrist A, et al. (2016) Sensemaking, sense-censoring and strategic inaction: The discursive enactment of power and politics in a multinational corporation. *Organization Studies* 37(9): 1323–1351.
- Whyte WF (1984) *Learning from the Field*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Witz A, Halford S and Savage M (1996) Organized bodies: Gender, sexuality and embodiment in contemporary organizations. In: Adkins L and Merchant V (eds) *Sexualizing the Social: Power and the Organization of Sexuality*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 173–190.
- Zaher N (2019) *A process study of sensemaking and sensegiving during organizational change*. PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong, Wollongong.