

Dirty Little Secrets: Understanding and Managing Workplace Gossip

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this project is both to understand and to recommend directions for dealing with gossip in the workplace. Through a lens of critical theory I conducted a qualitative content analysis on 19 contemporary academic articles that reported on the phenomenon of gossip. While there appears to be ample literature to support this exhaustive study, there are still multiple calls for more research in this area (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Jeuken 2015; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

The significance of this study dovetails with recent additions to workplace bullying and harassment standards in British Columbia as well as the introduction of a national standard on psychological safety positioned as a world leader. With gossip commonly understood and mentioned in such documentations, the need for clarity on gossip has become more pressing. The project looked at definitions of gossip, pinpointing its evaluative nature; it unearthed both positive and negative functions for gossip, especially highlighting the power of gossip to encourage or destroy community. The project concluded with recommendations made for how leaders can engage gossip constructively. These included educating workplaces on both the definition and power of gossip as well as viewing gossip as symptom and a tool for the detection of underlying causes of distress in the workplace.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This chapter sets the framework for the research project, providing the theoretical lens with which the project was approached, as well as the context for gossip as a subject matter worthy of research and its significance for study to leaders in British Columbia and beyond. This chapter also provides a preliminary explanation for the academic purpose and methodology of the project as well as its design.

#### **Researcher Context for the Project**

This project examined the phenomenon of gossip and its implications for the workplace. Choosing this topic as a focus of study emerged in an iterative way. When I started to consider an area for research, gossip was one of my five ideas, but it was certainly not my first choice. I had my doubts about whether gossip was a worthy topic for study. As part of my process, I emailed several colleagues in my field of conflict resolution for their perspectives. The first two told me they thought gossip might be too “light” a topic to be worthy of sustained scholarly attention.

I had a similar belief, and the topic of gossip might have dropped there had it not been for a preliminary literature review I undertook that revealed some surprises. Ellwardt, Steglich and Wittek (2012) talked about gossip serving the positive function of strengthening friendships in organizations. This challenged my starting position that gossip was only a negative activity. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012), doing their own research, found that people are estimated to be gossiping anywhere from 65% to 90% of their conversational time. Although I realized people gossip, I had no idea it could be

that frequent. Going further, Jeuken (2015) reported that little was known about the reasons for the use of gossip in conflict. Since conflict is my area of professional practice, and gossip is often present when I am called in to help resolve conflict in the workplace, that finding was the most surprising of all. I started to become intrigued. Around the same time, I came across an article regarding the concept of ‘corporate intimacy’. Coach and storyteller Jordan Bower coined the term to represent the belief that in today’s tech-heavy world people are desperate for real connection (McKenzie, 2016). Bower believes that intimacy is needed in workplaces frequently rife with isolation and loneliness and that intimacy is built through sharing stories (McKenzie, 2016). Since most of our stories are about each other to some extent, gossip started to become more complex. In essence, telling stories with a negative spin made it gossip whilst telling stories with a positive spin created intimacy. I was starting to have more questions than answers. I was hooked.

I also have a personal story about a significant way gossip has played out in my own life as well as a professional interest. Personally, early in my career, I was actually a perpetrator of negative gossip. I was working for a non-profit, had a great job and a wonderful boss who gave me lots of flexibility to be creative. The problem was I was dissatisfied, needed more direction and yet wasn’t clearly able to articulate what my needs were. In addition to vague complaints to my boss, I would talk to other people about her. I called up Human Resources and asked what to do. The nice lady on the other end of the phone suggested it would be best to let sleeping dogs lie. “There wasn’t much to do,” she said. As time went on, my net widened. I considered approaching one person in particular. I admired how assertive and clear this person communicated and

knew I needed to be clearer myself. I told her my complaints about my boss as I had told the others. Unfortunately, the response I got provoked shame in me. She told me that I should not talk to her about these complaints, that it was none of her business. This piece of advice is something I have heard others say over the years: it's bad to gossip. Although I never did talk with her again, I also did not learn what else I could do. After four years in a great job, I left. My boss never knew why. This experience made me realize there was a lot more to communicating than met the eye and helped set me on a new career path of conflict resolution.

Professionally, for the last twenty years, I have been in private practice as a mediator, trainer and leadership coach, specializing in workplace conflict. Gossip, although not something I have thought of as central to my work, has come front and centre occasionally. Most recently, gossip was a major factor in a mediation case I was working on, involving someone on sick leave, so it was on my mind. Additionally, a few years ago, one of my clients was struggling with how to respond to the gossip in his team, with social media providing much of the fodder. The more he and I discussed the issue, the more gossip seemed to be a worthwhile topic to address. He asked if I could create a workshop on gossip, but before I could, he got a promotion, so we didn't go forward with the idea. As part of determining what Marshall and Rossman (2016, p. 5) call the "should-do-ability" of this topic, I contacted this client. He still thought it was very interesting and that a workshop of some sort to raise awareness about gossip and possibly provide direction for leaders and teams was still much needed. Buoyed, I also posted a LinkedIn message about gossip and received a deluge of responses – all positive and interested in the research direction I was considering. This was quickly followed by

communications from other conflict resolution colleagues I had subsequently reached out to, expressing great interest in the topic and a desire to know more. A topic, and my commitment to it, was born.

### **Gossip as Bullying and the Legislative Context**

In November 2013, workplaces in British Columbia received a seismic upgrade. That was the date for the release of WorkSafeBC's Bullying and Harassment guidelines. Until such time, British Columbia workplaces did not have any governing documents that outlined what bullying behaviour looked like exactly. These guidelines, an outcome of new provincial legislation concerning bullying and harassment, set out new expectations for employers, supervisors and employees regarding how they are to treat each other at work. The guidelines, described in WorkSafeBC's handbook entitled *Toward a respectful workplace: a handbook on preventing and addressing workplace bullying* (2013), specifically identifies "spreading malicious rumours" as a type of bullying (p.1). Gossiping is now considered a form of bullying.

The year 2013 also saw the release of a key national standard for civility in the workplace. It is entitled the National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety created by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC). This Standard is a first of its kind in the world, and has been developed as a tool for workplace leaders, human resource directors and occupational health and safety professionals. It is based on on-going and multiple consultations with organizations, academics, workplace stress-related legislation, regulations and case law and expert review panels. It is rapidly being adopted by many organizations in Canada and across the globe (CSA Group, 2013). Some of the early adopters in Canada include Health Authorities across the country and large

corporations such as Bell. This is causing a need in workplaces to expand the definition of safety from physical safety to include psychological, or emotional, safety. Given gossip could be considered a threat to psychological safety and a type of bullying, gossip is increasingly becoming important to understand and know how to respond to, in workplaces.

### **Purpose and Methodology of the Project**

The primary purpose of this project was to investigate how contemporary academic literature took up the notion of gossip, most specifically in the workplace, and to explore what the types of responses might be to this, for various workplaces in British Columbia and beyond. I chose to use content analysis, defined as a “systemic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories” enabling an analysis of a large volume of data (Stemler, 2001, p. 1). I chose an interpretive lens because this offered a research approach that is “based in an understanding of lived reality” (Angen, 2000, p. 380). This approach is also most in line with my own orientation, allows me to keep my own personal and professional lens as a conflict professional in the workplace and keeps me mindful that I do have my own biased perspective that I am looking through as I do my research.

Using criteria outlined in Chapter Two, I selected 19 academic articles ranging in publication dates from 2000 to 2016.

### **Project Design**

In Chapter Two, I describe the key elements of content analysis, and how they applied to my own study. I also outline the criteria I used to select the documents. The

study is not intended to be an exhaustive literature review, but a sampling of research. The conceptual framework and the analytical questions chosen are also discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Chapter Three outlines the themes that arose from the content analysis. The focus of the content analysis was to examine the ideas arising from considering the question of how leaders and other workplace members respond to workplace gossip. Chapter Four is a discussion of my findings, including recommendations for what leaders ought to do about gossip, given the context examined in the project. References are provided at the end of the project.

### **Significance of the Study**

This project has significance for leaders, human resource professionals and anyone working in British Columbia. The first reason for its significance is because of the release of WorkSafeBC's Bullying and Harassment guidelines in November 2013, mentioned earlier. Although these guidelines exist, they are still fairly recent and many employees and leaders I have come across in my work as a mediator, trainer and coach, are not much aware of the legislation and guidelines. For those who are, none I have spoken with seemed to have noticed that gossip is a possible contravention of those guidelines. Although many may be ignorant, all of us, none the less, are accountable to the standards. The WorkSafeBC Bullying and Harassment guidelines, and the new policies many BC employers have created as a result, have elevated the topic of gossip from water cooler socializing, to an issue to be taken seriously, with legislative consequences if not addressed. As a result, many leaders, although responsible for a safe work environment, do not have the concomitant guidance for what to do about gossip. This project can raise the awareness of what gossip is and provide guidance for how it

might be addressed by leaders and others in workplace communities.

This study also has relevance across the country, as other provinces have similar legislation and guidelines. Relatedly, this study also therefore has significance for conflict practitioners and those in Human Resources who are often responsible for guiding employers and workplace leaders. Several colleagues who practice in the workplace conflict field have reinforced that gossip is an important nexus in conflict. Statements such as the following, from someone working in human resources, are typical of what I have heard. This person said she saw gossip as “endemic” in her whole organization. Other colleagues have pointed out how gossip can sometimes create conflict that is worse than the originating incidents. Therefore, this project also has the potential to be of significance to leaders and conflict practitioners faced with conflict in the workplace where gossip may be a factor.

The study also has national and, possibly, international relevance because of the 2013 release of the National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) also mentioned earlier. Since “malicious gossip” is already specifically cited in various bullying and harassment guidelines as an unwanted behaviour in the workplace, bringing even more attention to the need for psychologically safe work environments will also heighten the need to be clear about what gossip is and how to respond.

This project provides insights, and makes recommendations for leaders, and others in the workplace, facing gossip. My hope is the project will provide some guidance for those who are either bystanders to gossip and not sure how to react, or those who may feel an urge to gossip and not sure how to proceed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter sets the theoretical and methodological stage for this study. It begins with a definition of gossip as it is used and understood in this project. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical lens of this project – critical theory and interpretivism – and then outlines the purposes and objectives. I conclude with a discussion of the methodologies and methods used including the document selection criteria as well as the coding process.

#### **Defining Gossip**

Foster (2004), a researcher who reviewed half a century of gossip data pulling from multiple disciplines, surmised that the definition of gossip “does not lend itself to simple formulaic definitions or uniform explanations” (p. 80). What gossip looks like, how prevalent it might be in the workplace and what to do about it are all dependant upon how one defines gossip. Through his survey of research, Foster (2004) identified two main characteristics of gossip. The first is that gossip is talk about third parties who are not present. Although some of the research Foster (2004) reviewed limited gossip’s definition to that one characteristic, others included a second key description: that gossip has evaluative content, either positive or negative. For the purposes of this study, the definition of gossip used will be the one set in an organizational context: “informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429). Put in my own words, gossip will be defined as talking about someone in a judgmental way when that person is not in the room.

### **An Interpretive and Critical Theory Lens**

Mack (2010) suggests, and I believe, you cannot “divorce yourself from your perspective as the researcher” (p. 7). I come to the study with an interpretive lens. Both my parents were English as-a-second-language speakers, and both spoke different languages from each other, so I grew up in a milieu of multiple meanings. My academic background in English Literature and Applied Linguistics gave me ample training in interpretation. My professional orientation as a mediator is to take a narrative approach, seeing disputants’ conflicts in terms of disparate stories needing an opportunity to be retold and rewoven. My frame entering into the research project is in line with Kincheloe and McLaren’s (2002) assertion that anyone doing research will automatically be doing interpretivist research. I bring this bias towards acknowledging the presence of the researcher as a factor influencing research to the study.

I also believe an interpretivist lens suits this research project. A hallmark of research in this paradigm is the intention to seek to understand rather than explain (Mack, 2010). Using an interpretivist lens means bringing a desire to hold multiple possibilities as opposed to a desire to limit a phenomenon into a reductionist paradigm (Anger, 2000). My starting point is to inquiry into the phenomenon of gossip itself, the act of telling stories, including what meanings and functions might be attributed to it as well as what might be causing one to gossip. Coming from an interpretive perspective will allow the study to explore multiple meanings without a need to search for, or categorize, the “truth” of the phenomenon. An interpretive approach is also based in “an understanding of lived reality” (Anger, 2000, p. 380) and I use my own experience to comment on the themes uncovered.

Additionally, I go beyond simply understanding the phenomenon of gossip and will also add a critical theory lens. Critical theory calls for ‘quasi-causal’ structural analysis, with the intention of revealing the constraining effects of institutions (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). In this way, critical theory is concerned with structures of power and the historical and social contexts that produce them (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Thus, where gossip fits into, maintains or subordinates these structures of power is a primary question behind this study.

My experience working as a professional peacemaker in multiple workplaces, including academic institutions, health care and government, has shown me that there are often larger, structural, issues beyond those impacting the two or three people identified as “the problem” in a conflict situation. These can include problems with leadership competency, lack of enough information circulating to be empowered and lack of resources to do one’s job properly. However, our individualistic, low-context culture keeps the focus on individuals, not looking to the collective, to the structure or to the community for context, support or problem-solving (Hall, 1989). So, gossip remains in a silo, only one individual’s problem to solve, with no collective space which to bring questions or struggles. A critical theory perspective challenges whether our neo-European culture has egalitarian community structures allowing for democratic dialogue and a place for gossip to go (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002).

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Project**

The primary purpose of the study was to examine how contemporary academic literature looked at gossip, most specifically in the workplace, as well as to reflect on the

themes emerging. According to Wert and Salovey (2004), at least 60% of adult conversations are about people who are not present. We spend an inordinate amount of time talking about other people and yet, gossip tends to have a bad reputation in the workplace. Given this context, the most important questions become: Is gossip useful or detrimental and how to know which is which? How should leaders and other community members in the workplace respond?

Ury (1990, 1995, 2000) tells us that certain indigenous peoples deal with gossip by encouraging community members to speak with each other directly and by providing a public collective space to air grievances if they are not solved at the interpersonal level. How we deal with conflict within organizations does not stop at the walls of an organization; organizations are permeable and are affected by the society they are situated in (Greif, 1994; Hofstede et al., 1991). So, this project also sought to explore the impact of our neo-liberal dominant society, with its attendant “possessive individualism,” on both gossip and community spaces (Apple, 2011, p. 21).

The end purpose of the study was to capture possible responses to gossip in the workplace, reflected through the researcher’s lens as a mediator and conflict trainer, that could be woven into leaders’ responses to gossip, including a possible workshop on the subject and applicable to workplaces in British Columbia and beyond.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis is the research tool chosen for this study. Content analysis is a “technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories” (Stemler, 2001, p. 1). Since the purpose of this project is to understand the nature of gossip and what to do about it, starting with a method that allows a survey of a vast array of research

to be categorised into smaller digestible concepts, is appropriate. Content analysis is also useful for identifying trends in documents (Stemler, 2001), which allows for a harvesting of what is being discovered by other researchers.

Content analysis is, at its core, a coding procedure, with coding defined as a process that enables the transformation of raw data into a standardized form (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2010). Historically, content analysis was seen as a way of generating an objective, quantitative description of content, with word frequency central to the method; the assumption was that words mentioned the most, carried the most import (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, as such assumptions were challenged, and the technique migrated to qualitative research, content analysis has evolved to focus on the meanings and inferences of the words present and the words not present (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Stemler, 2001). A key distinction to be made is between a “dictionary-based” quantitative approach to content analysis and qualitative approaches. In the quantitative approach, the emphasis is squarely on frequency of word count, whereas a qualitative approach focuses more on “intentionality and its implications” (Fadul & Estoque, 2011). This study reflects the evolution, with its emphasis on words themselves as well as their potential inferences.

It is assumed that textual information will have a theoretical frame. In this case, the theoretical frames of both an interpretivist and critical theory lens is responsible for choice of data, informs the data chosen and provides the meaningful interpretation.

Applying an interpretivist frame to content analysis acknowledges that the researcher is making choices about the data and how to interact with the research (Anger, 2000). An interpretivist lens also values the researcher’s own voice and the impact of the content

analyzed on the researcher (Anger, 2000). Content analysis itself is viewed today, complementarily, as a process for describing and interpreting the written output of a society (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

A critical lens applied to content analysis allows for a conceptualizing of categories beyond the more individualistic surface categories such as number of times gossip or conflict might have been mentioned in articles, to the number of references to community spaces or concepts akin to social capital and a critical interpretation of what might still be missing from our post-colonial culture. “Critical” content analysis allows for a “conceptual approach to understanding what a text is about, considering content from a particular theoretical perspective, such as sociohistorical, gender, cultural, or thematic studies” (Beach, n.d., p. 58).

### **Documents Selection Criteria**

At the outset of this study, my project supervisor, Dr. Darlene Clover, and I decided I would limit my document selection for analysis to between 10 and 20 academic articles by contemporary authors. This would help me to stay within the confines of a ‘project’ and set a more scholarly tone. Contemporary articles were ones that were published within the last 15 years. Given Jueken (2015) searched specifically for gossip and conflict and found a dearth of research that can be taken as some indication that choosing a contemporary frame would have relevance.

I chose the data, firstly, by conducting key word searches starting with the words “gossip” and “conflict” and selecting scholarly & peer reviewed and from the years 2000 to present day. I used “Summon” from the University of Victoria library’s “Search Everything” tab. This allowed me to easily limit my search to scholarly/academic

sources by date.

Once this initial data search was conducted, I then used snowball sampling, relying on citations in the original articles for mention of other articles (Krippendorff, 1980). Certain authors were mentioned several times, such as Foster (2004), alerting me to the importance of the work. In other cases, one of the authors of one article yielded another relevant article, such as the 2014 article by Dijkstra, M.T.M., Beersma, B. & Van Leeuwen, J. (2012) that led me to a more relevant article one of the authors, Beersma, as the lead author.

The 19 articles selected for this study's content analysis and are listed here in alphabetical order:

- Archer, J., & Coyne, S. M. (2005). An integrated review of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 9, 212–230.
- Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., & Vohs, K. D. (2004). Gossip as cultural learning. *Review of General Psychology*, 8(2), 111-121.
- Beersma, B., & Van Kleef, G. A. (2012). Why people gossip: An empirical analysis of social motives, antecedents, and consequences. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42, 2640–2670.
- Cobb, S. (2013). Liminal spaces in negotiation process: A case study of the process of crossing relational and interpretive thresholds. *Journal of Conflict*, 1(1), 25-40.
- De Backer, C., Larson, C. Fisher, M.L. et al. (2016). When strangers start to gossip: Investigating the Effects of Gossip on Cooperation in a Prisoner's Dilemma Game. *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, 2:266 - 278.
- Dunbar, R. (2004). Gossip in evolutionary perspective. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 100–110.
- Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., Wittek, R. (2012). The co-evolution of gossip and friendship in workplace social networks. *Social Networks* 34, 623– 633.

- Foster, E. K. (2004). Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions. *Review of General Psychology, 8*, 78–99.
- Geertz, A.W. (2011). Hopi Indian witchcraft and healing: On good, evil, and gossip. *American Indian Quarterly, 35* (3), 372-393.
- Grosser, T.J., Lopez-Kidwell, V., Labianca, G. (2010). A social network analysis of positive and negative gossip in organizational life. *Group & Organization Management, 35*(2): 177-212.
- Grosser, T.J., Lopez-Kidwell, V., Labianca, G., Ellwardt, L. (2012). Hearing it through the grapevine: Positive and negative workplace gossip. *Organizational Dynamics, 41*, 52—61.
- Hafen, S. (2004). Organizational gossip: A revolving door of regulation and resistance. *Southern Communication Journal, 69*, 223-240.
- Houmanfar, R. & Johnson, R. (2004) Organizational Implications of Gossip and Rumor, *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management, 23*:2-3, 117-138, D
- Jeuken, E. (2015). Aggression as a motive for gossip during conflict: The role of power, social value orientation, and counterpart's behavior. *Negotiation and conflict management research, 8*(3), 137-152.
- Kurland, N. B., & Pelled, L. H. (2000). Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace. *Academy of management review, 25*(2), 428-438.
- Michelson, G., Van Iterson, A., & Waddington, K. (2010). Gossip in organizations: Contexts, consequences, and controversies. *Group and Organization Management, 35*, 371–390.
- Nan, S. (2011). Consciousness in culture-based conflict and conflict resolution. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly, 28* (3), 239–262.
- Robinson, B. (2016). Character, caricature, and gossip. *The Monist, 99* (2): 198-211.
- Wert, S.R., & Salovey, P. (2004). A social comparison account of gossip. *Review of General Psychology, 8*, 122-137.

### **Data analysis; Document coding**

In looking for themes across the 19 articles, I read all the selected articles the first time cursorily, searching for possible themes as preliminary analytical categories, consistent with an emergent approach to coding (Stemler, 2001). I then re-read the

articles thoroughly, highlighting and capturing sections of the article that fit more tightly into one of those categories. After reading all of the articles, coding for possible categories, I then read through each theme in the category coding notes captured throughout all the articles. I also reviewed articles using word searches included instances of the words conflict AND gossip; gossip AND negative; gossip AND positive. In qualitative research this search for, and providing of, multiple sources of data is called triangulation and can also provide validation of the data (Stemler, 2001).

### **Analytical Questions**

Given a dual focus of gossip and community, the overarching question for this research project was to understand what gossip is and what role it might play in community dialogue spaces. These were the sub-questions to further focus the research:

- a) How is gossip understood? That is, how should we define it?
- b) What causes gossip? What is its function? Is it useful or detrimental and how do we know which is which?
- c) What is the connection between gossip and community? Are there models of community spaces, such as circles, useful in relation to gossip?
- d) How should we in the workplace engage with gossip, as leaders, co-workers or bystanders?

### **Limitations**

This project is not intended on being an exhaustive study of gossip. Although content analysis affords the luxury of surveying and reducing vast quantities of data into categories for easier digestion, one can never survey all the data, and such a technique

also reduces the richness of the data. There is much more to be understood about gossip that would also yield much useful data. Another limitation is that this study confined itself to the analysis of existing articles, recorded documentation, and not to generating original, raw data based on the study of subjects. This project was limited to creating new data based on a synthesis of others' research mixed with the researcher's selection and combining of data to create new meaning.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### FINDING AND THEMES

There has been ample literature in the past few decades on gossip to support an exhaustive study. For example, Wert and Salovey (2004) canvassed the research as far back as a 1947 textbook on gossip, *The psychology of rumour*, by American psychologists Allport and Postman. A more recent book dedicated exclusively to the topic of gossip is the 1996 *Grooming, gossip, and the evolution of language* by evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar. Yet, there remain calls to continue to do research in this area, especially with regard to gossip in organizations and, more specifically, gossip's relationship to conflict in workplaces. Ellwardt, Steglich and Wittek (2012) state there is "relatively little known about workplace gossip" (p. 201) and Wert and Salovey (2004) bemoan the topic as being overlooked by their social psychology brethren. Jeuken's (2015) recent research on aggression and gossip concludes that there is still very little research connecting gossip to conflict directly.

This chapter outlines the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the academic documents chosen for this study, as itemized in the previous chapter. The themes respond to the analytical questions outlined in chapter two, namely:

- a) How is gossip understood?
  - b) What causes gossip? What is its function? Is it useful or detrimental and how do we know which is which?
  - c) What is the connection between gossip and community? Are there models of community spaces, such as circles, useful in relation to gossip?

d) How should we in the workplace engage with gossip, as leaders, co-workers or bystanders?

The chapter begins with an overview of the definition of gossip, including a distinction between gossip and rumour. The next section outlines the function of gossip, with particular attention paid to themes for both the positive and negative functions of gossip found in the select literature chosen. The third section looks at the links between gossip and community from the research articles. The last section of the chapter reviews solutions for gossip that have emerged from the data.

### **Defining Gossip**

Any attempts to understand a phenomenon of gossip must start with a definition of what is to be understood. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the etymology of gossip comes from the combination of “God” and “sib” or “sibling.” In the middle ages, gossip was synonymous with godparent; it literally meant, “a person related to one in God.” As the word evolved, it became linked to those friends, especially female friends, who attended the birth of a child. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word was associated with a person who “enjoys indulging in idle talk or tittle-tattle itself” (*Definition of gossip in English*, n.d.). For the most part, when people talk about gossip, it still has a tinge of idle talk and is still connected to women, despite studies to the contrary. For example, the Telegraph newspaper once reported on a poll surveying 5000 people, which found that although it is commonly believed women love to spread gossip, the 2009 poll revealed that men gossiped more than women. Dunbar (2004), having spent hours coding the conversations of people in public places, also concluded that there was limited variation due to gender or age.

Turning to the research literature, there is no one definition of gossip as the definitive one. There are many attempts to define what gossip is (Dunbar, 1996; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Spacks, 1985), but they vary in what it means. On the one end, gossip has primarily positive attributes, including learning valuable information from peers (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and learning how to comply with group norms (Ellwardt et al., 2012). On the other end of the spectrum, gossip is associated with verbal aggression (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and even as the primary weapon of evil in the arsenal of the Hopi Indian religion's witchcraft (Geertz, 2011).

However, despite the lack of one unified definition for what gossip is, Foster (2004) is a key researcher in the area of gossip having reviewed 50 years worth of research on gossip. His definition brings the weight of this research: "the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties" (p. 83). Other researchers, including Kurland and Pelled (2000) and Wert and Salovey (2004) define gossip similarly to Foster's (2004), lending even more credence to this definition. Kurland and Pelled's (2000) definition is used in this study, as these researchers have positioned their definition in the context of the workplace: "informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present" (p. 429).

This definition has also been chosen because of its emphasis on gossip being neither positive or negative but inclusive of both. Although gossip's popular reputation is as a trivial activity or involving negative slander and character assassinations, Grosser et al. (2010) suggest there is a fairly even distribution between negative and positive gossip and that negative information may be remembered better, giving the illusion of its

frequency of occurrence in gossip exchanges. Furthermore, they emphasize this more balanced definition of gossip does contradict the popular business literature which tends to emphasize gossip as detrimental and undermining of both productivity and employee morale (Grosser et al., 2010). Waddington (2012) takes this challenge to the stereotype of gossip in organizations further by asserting her belief that gossip must be repositioned from trivial to “organizational communication and knowledge” (p. 156).

### *Gossip Versus Rumour Distinction*

The term rumour is used frequently in the workplace and the literature to describe activities that may seem similar to gossip. Hafen (2004) suggests these activities are similar, however, how the words are applied are gendered. Rumour tends to be used to discuss uncertain events in the public sphere, traditionally associated with male activities, such as those occurring in an organization. Talking about downsizing occurring in an organization would be considered a rumour. Gossip, however, is associated with the private or social sphere, traditionally women’s territory. This kind of speculative talk, linked to relationships and social norms, would be identified as gossip (Hafen, 2004). So, talking about someone in the workplace who was swearing about the downsizing would be understood as gossip.

According to Hafen (2004), this distinction between gossip and rumour harkens back to the origins of the definition of gossip as a way of talking about relationships such as those occurring at the birth of a godchild. The association with the feminine may be responsible for some of gossip’s perception of an absence in research, as well as the general trivializing of the subject (Hafen 2004). For the purposes of this study, the word

gossip is used, with its focus on relationships, although both rumour and gossip continue to be used interchangeably in the workplace.

### **What Causes Gossip?**

The causes for gossip are varied in the chosen academic literature. Some researchers saw gossip emphasize its positive functions, such as gossip as pro-social behaviour linked to evolution (Dunbar, 1996, 2004) or as a positive social activity (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Ellwardt et al. (2012) see the strengthening of friendships as a central outcome of gossip. From a critical theory point of view, Kurland and Pelled (2000) look to power as a key variable in gossip, noting that even one negative story about someone can transform a whole culture. Spacks (1985) mentions the possibility of a link between gossip and oppression, where gossip may act as a way to complain about, and inform others on, the actions of those in power. Wert and Salovey (2004) take this line of inquiry further, postulating that gossip may be a way to gain power for those who are usually left out.

There does seem to be some evidence that gossip can perpetuate a hostile environment, depending on the person's intention, which can be difficult to ascertain (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca and Ellwardt, 2012). Wert and Salovey (2004), coming from a social psychological behavioural lens, indicate gossip may be caused by an increased sense of threat or anxiety. They also use numerous anecdotes to point out that gossip seems to increase during wartime, natural disasters and before riots. Grosser et al. (2012) make a connection between gossip and a need for more workplace fairness.

These authors also flag gossip as a possible valuable diagnostic tool, however, do not give a clear indication of what gossip is a symptom of.

The overall function of gossip, whether positive or negative, seems as varied as the researchers and disciplines which take up its investigation. To look at its possible functions systematically, this research has been organized into positive functions and negative functions of gossip.

### **Positive Functions of Gossip**

#### *An Expression of Human Nature*

According to Dunbar (2004), gossip is what makes human society, as we know it, possible. Dunbar (2004) posits that gossip can be traced back to social grooming among primates and serves an evolutionary purpose of social bonding amongst groups. Baumeister et al. (2004) assert that gossip is present in most societies and cultures and serves multiple functions. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) cite a study that collected data on speech activity in a two week period showing gossip as the most frequently enacted speech event in that time period; their research also estimates we spend between 65% to 90% of our day-to-day conversations gossiping. Dunbar's (2004) direct observations and coding of multiple conversations came up with the similar number of 65% of conversations being gossip. Gossip is built into our very nature. It is a central activity we do as social animals and it dominates our social discourse. This will be taken up in the next chapter.

#### *Social Bonding/Connection/Belonging*

De Backer et al, (2016) conducted experiments to show how even complete

strangers end up feeling a sense of connection when they express a shared dislike towards a third party. Their experiment illustrated how merely sharing negative gossip, even with a stranger, may influence an interaction (De Backer et al., 2016). Baumeister et al. (2004) also assert that gossip strengthens the relationship between the teller and the receiver. Dunbar (2004) and Ellwardt et al. (2012) suggest that friendships are built because of gossip. Dunbar (2004) in particular points to our primate relatives, and our deeply social natures, positing that language and gossip replaced grooming as our way to keep close. He goes as far as to say gossip is “the core of human social relationships, indeed of society itself” (Dunbar, 2004, p. 100). Grosser et al. (2010) state that sharing gossip also speaks to the level of trust in a relationship. In a later study, they reference research that shows individuals who share their negative attitudes about third parties feel closer to one another as a result, since trust is required that the receiver of the gossip will treat the information appropriately (Grosser et al., 2010). This idea of gossip meeting a positive human need is an interesting one, and will be discussed in the final chapter of this project.

### *Storytelling and Entertainment*

Michelson et al. (2010) see gossip as “a type of ‘storytelling discourse’ that exists in the ‘unmanaged spaces’ of organizations and is a form of emergent story” (p. 373). Given stories are as old as time, there is a certain allure, comfort and sense of entertainment in listening to a story. Baumeister et. al (2004) explain gossip as a shared and collaborative experience that invites the listener into the story and invites contributions to the narrative. Relatedly, Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) see gossip as a form of ‘social enjoyment.’ Like gossip as an expression of human nature, gossip as storytelling, is here to stay. I will pick up on this idea of ‘storytelling’ in the next chapter.

*Gossip as Support During Times of Change*

Kurland and Pelled (2010) state that gossip can help spread more information in times of uncertainty in organizations, like in times of change. Sharing of the information can reduce uncertainty and confusion. Michelson et al. (2010) see gossip as providing contextual information, a key means by which individuals can acquire knowledge and thereby relieve feelings of tension and anxiety, especially during periods of organizational change. One is left to ponder here about what ‘information’ actually means, something I will do later in this project.

*Group Norms Protection*

Several researchers see gossip as a way to learn the rules of a culture as well as the possible sanctions for breaking the rules within said culture (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Baumeister et al. (2004) suggest gossip is a type of educative service, helping people learn how to function effectively in the groups they find themselves in. They further suggest that gossip acts as a policing device to regulate members’ behaviours and especially sanctioning those with selfish interests, detrimental to the broader community (Baumeister et al., 2004). Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) see gossip as a way to protect the group against harmful behaviours. They cite “free riders” as a particular threat to the group, as substandard contributions can negatively impact the overall performance of the whole group. Their research indicates that gossiping is perceived as the morally correct thing to do if the intention is to uphold group norms (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Robinson (2016) argues that gossiping well is when we are able to gossip just enough to have the effect of limiting future norm violations or promoting future norm conformity. Robinson (2016) emphasizes that gossiping well,

whether negatively or positively, can strengthen group harmony through its impact on group norms. Looking at the impact of gossip on social norms and harmony will also be picked up in the last chapter of this project.

#### *Positive Identity Building/Social Capital/Organizational Citizenship*

Continuing on the theme of gossip as a positive force, gossip has been cited as a tool for building personal identities as well as the identities of communities (Hafen, 2004). Hafen (2004) uses the term “organizational citizenship” as pro-social behaviour that draws attention to the community and builds the community. He notes that positive gossip is defined as a form of organizational citizenship. Cobb (2013) confirms social identity gets “socially constructed and reconstructed in conversations” (p. 26). Ellwardt et al. (2012) cites gossip as a type of social capital, providing a network of knowledge that allows access to resources and supports in the workplace. Given gossip has such a negative connotation in general, it is worth noting this altruistic function gossip can play, and I will reference this function in more detail in the next chapter.

#### *Social Status Power*

According to Elias (2008), French and Raven created the most frequently utilized model of social power used generally, as well as in the workplace. French and Raven (as cited in Elias, 2008) created a five part typology for power, many of which seem like the function gossip can play, including informational power, expert power and referent power. Baumeister et al. (2004) state that gossipers may gossip to elevate their own social status by relaying information about others, displaying expert power. Furthermore, many people in top leadership positions have been shown to rely on gossip to gain information difficult to come by. Baumeister et al. (2004) also suggest that those left out of a gossip

network have less power and control. Ellwardt et al. (2012) explain that employees who frequently share gossip are seen as having high “information status” knowing what is occurring in the workplace and who is doing what. Thinking of gossip as power is antithetical to gossip as trivial, and its use as power will be taken up in the next chapter.

### *Challenging the Status Quo*

Building on the idea of power, from a post-modern perspective “gossip raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, the nature of knowledge; it demands answers quite at odds with what we assume as our culture's *dominant* (emphasis mine) values” (Spacks, as cited in Hafen, 2004, p. 227). Wert and Salovey (2004) emphasize how gossip can be used as a subversive type of power, where gossip can function as a way to inquire after, and obtain more, information. They see how gossip can “bring powerful others ‘down to size’” (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 128). Michelson et al. (2010) add that gossip can give “voice” and power to people who might otherwise be marginalized in organizations. They cite a study done about women clerical workers in Japan, where gossip about their managers impacted the manager’s reputations and therefore using gossip to influence authority (Ogasawara cited in Michelson et al., 2010). Gossip can threaten managerial power in this way, as leaders struggle to control the frequency and content of their employees’ gossip (Michelson et al., 2010). Gossip as a challenge to managerial authority will be looked at in the next chapter.

## **Negative Functions of Gossip**

### *Social Exclusion/Threat/Coercive Power*

It is interesting to note how so many of the ideas above are also found in the

negative functions of gossip, which is of course why I will take them up in their complexity in the following chapter. For example, Archer and Coyne (2005) state that negative gossip can lead to excluding the person being gossiped about, possibly an exclusion by a whole social group. The researchers also talk about the dire consequences of exclusion on humans, including and up to suicide. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) mention how gossip has been used by insiders to exclude outsiders. Closely related to exclusion is the notion of threat. Because gossip can damage reputations, negative gossip may mean an implicit threat by the gossiper (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Kurland and Pelled (2000) predict that negative gossip can lead to coercive power. That is, those who hear negative gossip will fear the gossiper sharing this information, because they are afraid of becoming a target of negative gossip themselves. Jeuken (2015) notes the indirect nature of gossip, making it a fairly low-risk, safe and therefore easy way of aggressing in times of conflict.

#### *Damage to Identity and Reputation*

Social exclusion can be a negative consequence of one's social identity being publically reconstructed through gossip. Gossip impacts how we see others (Hafen, 2004). In stark contrast to the positive gossip associated with 'organizational citizenship' (Hafen, 2004), negative gossip is recognized as powerful poison in the arsenal of Hopi sorcerers (Geertz, 2011). Geertz (2011) goes on to examine the role of narrative in the process of self-construction and sees gossip's power to harm others linked through this link to identity reconstruction. Archer and Coyne (2005) see negative gossip as an attempt to manipulate someone's reputation, which is a form of social identity. Foster (2004) stresses that third-party information impacts people's opinions of their co-workers.

Jeuken (2015) suggests spreading gossip about the subject is a gossiper's way of trying to gain an advantage over the target, to negatively influence the perception of the target as lesser than somehow. Wert and Salovey (2004) issue their own caution suggesting negative gossip may be a contagion altering the way people think and feel about one another and must therefore be practised with great care, otherwise risking damaging group morale and individual reputations. Grosser et al. (2012) assert that gossip can be used to change or affect attitudes and opinions about others, making gossip a process of social influence.

#### *Social Status Power*

Archer and Coyne (2005) see negative gossip about others as an attempt to advance one's social standing at the expense of another. Grosser et al. (2012) highlight how gossip recipients are more likely to think a gossiper who shares positive gossip will spread good news about them and thus confer reward power to the gossiper; however, if it is negative gossip expressed, the gossiper is not likely to be seen as a high performer. So, spreading negative gossip may not confer status power as reliably as positive gossip. Grosser et al. (2010) highlight that excessive gossip can elevate an employee's status and influence amongst peers who may see them as a source of information, but decrease status in the eyes of the employee's supervisor, who may judge gossiping as subversive or negative generally.

#### *Gossipmonger Reputation*

At a certain point, there is a danger that one can be perceived as gossiping "too much." In a study by Ellwardt et al. (2012), those who were perceived as gossiping excessively were found to have less stable cooperative workplace relations, and were less

attractive as friends in the workplace. These researchers found that those who gossiped were not seen in a negative light if gossiping was perceived as serving the greater good of the group, for example, in response to a norm violation. Self-serving gossip was judged harshly, however. This points, once more, to the complexity in gossip, to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

### **Connections Between Gossip and Community**

This section of the chapter will look at the links between community and gossip, as found in the selected literature. Given we live in a neo-European, post-colonial culture, the need to look at how gossip might be impacted by this culture, and what can be learned from the pre-existing peoples of this land, the pre-colonial Indigenous communities, is important. By way of introduction to this topic area, I will begin with the Indigenous Pueblo tale of “How rabbit got his long ears” as I believe it perfectly illustrates what is missing from our low-context, individually oriented, culture (Labillois, n.d.).

In the Pueblo myth, rabbit spreads some rumours and many animals hear of it. They are all distressed, until Glooscap, a supernatural hero, comes along and starts to ask what is going on. No one seems to be able to provide a straight answer, as confusion mounts. In many workplaces, Bushe (2010) posits that, in organizations, rather than clarify our stories directly with an individual, people tend to go to third parties to test out their stories and compare notes. Bushe (2001) describes the resulting increasing confusion as “interpersonal mush.” The Pueblo tale shows one way out of this interpersonal toxic brew: bring the community together for a collective dialogue to sort out the interpersonal mush. Near the end of the Pueblo tale, Glooscap “called a meeting with all the animals and they all gathered around him in a circle. He got to the bottom of

it” (Labillois, n.d.).

Nan (2011) suggests calling a circle is one way of providing a collective opportunity for dialogue and shared meaning. In a circle, the formation makes it such that everyone is equal. Using tools such a talking piece ensures everyone has the opportunity to speak, that all voices can be heard and power can be, therefore, balanced (Sullivan, Mitchell, Goodman, Lang and Mesbur, 2003).

One management consultant operating in our dominant individualistic culture, Michael Hurley (2016), makes a link between gossip and the need for collective dialogue spaces. In his article “Workplace Whispers,” Harley (2016) talks about action he takes, and what he recommends to others as a consultant, in the face of workplace whisperings. As a leader himself in the workplace, when faced with workplace gossip, he calls a meeting to discuss how each person might be seeing things. His intention is to create shared meaning. In such a community gathering, he goes first, letting others know how he understands what is going on and then encourages others to do the same (Harley, 2016).

Storytelling is a key component of circles, and key in indigenous ways of knowing (Sumner, 2008). Ury (1990, 1995, 2000) is one of the founding fathers of the dispute resolution field and an anthropologist. His seminal book, *The third side: Why we fight and how we can stop*, includes close-up views of indigenous cultures that have peaceful practices. Two distinguishing factors in such cultures are how they handle gossip and the existence of community circles (Ury, 2000).

Ury (1995) explains when friends and relatives hear of negative gossip related to the parties early on, they encourage the parties to talk out their problem and resolve it

before it escalates into a serious dispute. This is in marked contrast to the practices in our North American culture, where the gossiper generally expects friends and relatives to agree with the negative perception. The cultural norms are completely different. More peaceful cultures, as studied by Ury, have the recipients of gossip act as peace promoters. They also use circles as a way to have a conversation about these dyadic conflicts that become concerns for the whole community if not resolved. Such communities also make use of third side 'intervenor' such as *korakoradies* who are Kalahari Bushmen's respected elders who act as community dispute resolvers (Ury, 1995).

Gossip has also been described as a vehicle for community building and maintenance, through its focus on conversations about relationships, social norms and the seeing of a larger social system than one's own sphere (Hafen, 2004). Baumeister et al. (2004) speak of gossip as conveying valuable information about culture and society, thereby promoting learning about the culture of the group. Such learning can promote more social, or community, cohesion. Worthy of note, Baumeister et al. (2004) also suggest gossip should be concerned not only with negative instances of norm violations but also with positive, rule-strengthening instances. The dark side of gossip and community is manifest in insider/outsider group dynamics, since gossip is usually shared in small, trusted groups (Michelson et al., 2010). All the more reason to look at the power inherent in seeing gossip as a way to engage the third force in conflict: the surrounding community within which a conflict takes place. I would argue that what is key here is to see gossip not as a manifestation of two individuals, but as woven into the very fabric of the community itself with the community positioned as a positive force of influence on the gossip, gossipers and their targets.

### **Dealing with Workplace Gossip**

This last section summarizes the themes found in the chosen academic literature regarding what leaders and organizations can do to deal with gossip.

#### *Gossip Cannot be Stopped*

Gossip, whether explained as evolution or social necessity, appears to be here to stay, whether in families or organizations. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) note that many organizations, unsure how to manage it, assume the way to deal with gossip is to discourage it even though attempts to prevent gossiping have been proven to be unsuccessful. Complicating matters is there often seems to be a lack of awareness, or denial, about one's own capacity to gossip, making gossip even more pernicious (Foster, 2004). Grosser et al. (2012) have amassed "research on organizations in both the United States and Western Europe that suggests over 90% of the workforce engages in at least some gossip activity on the job" (p. 52). Grosser et al. (2012) also see gossip as essentially impossible to eliminate, seeing the imposition of edicts against gossiping or anti-gossip policies as ineffective.

#### *Recognize Gossip's Power to Shape Social Identity and Reputation*

As mentioned earlier, gossip has the power to shape the perception and identity of those being gossiped about. Recognizing that gossip can have such an impact on social identity can possibly result in more responsible gossiping. For example, Archer and Coyne (2005) chroniclers of a host of ways that gossip amounts to indirect aggression, recommend, whether as a speaker or listener of gossip, that we ask ourselves whether this piece of information is something that will affect one's opinion of the person (Archer &

Coyne, 2005). This is reminiscent of what divorcing parents are told as their foundational principle: don't speak badly of the other parent. This is illustrated perfectly told by Jane Fonda's daughter, Mary Williams. Williams says of the period when Fonda and husband Ted Turner were separating: 'There were times leading up to and even after the divorce when [Jane] wanted to share with me some of the things Ted was doing that destroyed their relationship, but I refused to listen. I knew that if she shared with me anything hurtful that he had done to her, my feelings for him would change. I didn't want that' (Williams, 2013).

### *Clarify Intentions*

Cobb (2013) explains she gives min-lectures on what victim stories are, how to know you are in one, and what to do to get out of the one's victim story. She sees victim stories as possessing a strong allure, being "a relief to tell, but just as you get comfortably situated in them, you find yourself a prisoner" (p. 36). Cobb (2013) calls for distinguishing between "problematic narratives that generate conflict, and those that are productive of the transformation of conflict" (p. 39). Foster (2004) makes a distinction between "praise gossip" and "blame gossip" (p. 82) that I believe can help clarify what constructive gossip might look like, as covered in the next chapter.

Relatedly, asking about one's intention in gossiping may be of benefit to those listening to the gossip. Grosser et al. (2012) emphasize the key to whether gossip's potential is realized for positive or negative depends on the intention of the gossiper. They suggest this discerning question: "Is the information being exchanged about the absent party generally constructive or destructive?" (Grosser et al. 2012, p. 52). Michelson et al. (2010) also make the distinction that "talking behind-the-back is not

necessarily synonymous with a stab-in-the-back. The latter would assume that all such communication is negative and motivated by the intent to harm others” (p. 383). This points to the importance of asking the gossip what his or her intention is in sharing the gossip.

#### *Acknowledge Gossip as Symptomatic*

Grosser et al. (2010) suggests if organizations want to decrease gossip in the workplace, supervisors need to think about, and search out, what might be the underlying causes for the gossip rather than unilaterally condemning it. In addition Grosser et al. (2010) suggest that leaders may look at gossip, much as one would look at the value in a story of fiction: as representative and indicative of the values and concerns of individuals in the organization. Thinking of gossip as something to eradicate, as if it were a species of weeds, does not get to the root of this weed. Attempting to rid the workplace of gossip doesn't allow for a holy curiosity about gossip. What is gossip saying about what's really going on and what is valued and feared? Gossip can be a complex phenomenon. Grosser et al. (2012) affirm that gossip can be both positive and negative at the same time, making its true nature elusive. However, gossip can best be seen as diagnostic tool for leaders, a type of early warning device that lets attentive leaders know there may be issues such as interpersonal or team conflict brewing or a need for more information to be given to employees (Grosser et al., 2012). I turn now to some of the several possible explanations given in the literature for gossip as a symptom.

#### *Recognize the Need for Increased Information During Change*

Grosser et al. (2012) state that a lack of information, especially about pending organizational change, often creates anxiety among employees, which makes frequent managerial communication a necessity to stave off excessive gossip. They suggest during times of change leaders need to implement frequent meetings between top management and all employees, increased meetings at the team level as well as ample written communication from leadership addressing employee questions and concerns (Grosser et al., 2012). Houmanfar and Johnson (2004) also cite the increase of gossip and rumours during periods of social upheavals because of the concomitant sense of uncertainty, fear and anxiety.

#### *Seek to Increase Civility and Kindness*

Grosser et al. (2012) postulate that employees treating each other disrespectfully provide fodder for, and therefore increase, gossip. This is consistent with the function of gossip as a norm violation communicator. If there are norm violations, people will hear about it. Grosser et al. (2012) suggest one way to deal with a pattern of negative gossip is to offer training in negotiation, conflict resolution and dealing with difficult people to help promote a culture of respect. They also suggest systemic changes like using a 360 feedback tool, a method of asking for feedback about an individual's behaviour from 360 degrees: one's boss, peers, and direct reports or clients. The intention of using 360s would be to ensure disrespectful behaviour is surfaced, moving from the hidden, within gossip, to the more explicit. Grosser et al. (2012) also suggests that an organization identify what is acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours in the workplace, their

standards of civility and that those standards and competencies be included as part of the performance appraisal system.

#### *Search for and Rectify Lack of Workplace Fairness*

Another symptom gossip may be pointing to is a lack of workplace fairness or procedural issues. Grosser et al. (2012) state that the best way to enact procedural justice is to allow employees to have input into decision-making. Jeuken (2015) found a link between a manager's capacity to manage conflict fairly and the amount employees gossiped negatively or positively. There was more negative gossip when managers were not able to demonstrate what Jeuken (2015) calls "interactional justice" in the workplace, treating each of their team members with the same fairness and respect (p. 139).

#### *Alleviate Stress*

Grosser et al. (2012) cite stress as a cause of gossip and interpersonal relationships as a cause of stress. They suggest that negative gossiping, or "venting" is not a constructive way to deal with such stress, that gossip arising from stress must be dealt with through providing employees with ways to alleviate stress (Grosser et al., 2012). However, there may be situations where excessive stress is driving someone to gossip excessively, possibly due to mental "conditions" beyond a leader's ability to deal with directly. In such cases, Grosser et al. (2012) suggest a leader refer the employee to an employee assistance program for professional support.

#### *Use Gossip Strategically*

The last theme captured regarding how management should respond to gossip has to do with realizing a gossip network exists and to therefore use it wisely. Grosser et al. (2010) have gathered research that confirms information is transmitted more rapidly through organizational grapevines than through formal communication channels. Grosser et. al (2010) suggest that if this is understood, leaders can more quickly and efficiently disseminate information by using the organizational grapevine rather than, or in addition to, formal communication channels. Additionally, leaders who pay attention to the gossip in the informal social networks can also use gossip as a diagnostic tool, listening to what the gossip is and learning from it (Grosser et al., 2012). Grosser et al. (2012) also conclude that leaders who pay attention to gossip are in a better position to manage the darker aspects of gossip. Depending on the type of gossip circulating, its awareness can point the way for proactive action on the part of the leader (Grosser et al., 2012). As listed above, gossip can also help leaders by pointing them to possible symptoms in need of course correction by the leader.

In the next chapter, I pick up on some of the ideas in this chapter, discussing their complexity but in particular, thinking through their implications for leaders in workplaces.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The intention of this chapter is to review what I have learned as a result of the study, including my context as the researcher. I begin with a discussion of how the study has impacted me personally. Following this, I summarize the central findings, highlighting the complexities I flagged in the previous chapter. I conclude with a number of recommendations to leaders on how to deal with gossip in the workplace to leverage both its positive and negative aspects.

#### **Researcher Context - Learning Over the Project Period**

This study was done using an interpretive lens. According to Angen (2000), a key component of taking an interpretive approach is to consider and trace how the researcher's original sense of the topic may have changed over the course of the research. This section will outline changes noticed as a researcher and then from a personal and professional perspective.

When I was first considering what topic to choose for my project, gossip was a phenomenon I had noticed in my own personal life, as well as professionally as a workplace conflict resolver. However, I may never have chosen the topic if I had not allowed the topic to choose me. After much reflection, and discussions with my professional colleagues and supportive mentors, I committed to the subject matter, despite my own misgivings.

My first discovery was as a researcher discovering the extent to which gossip has been valued as an area of study. At first, I felt validated in choosing the topic because many articles talked about the centrality of gossip to human dynamics at work and in life.

As I continued, at a certain point over the course of the research, I was overcome by the wealth of research. Although many of the academic articles I canvassed would say there wasn't much research on gossip, I personally had a difficult time narrowing my research to less than 20 key articles. There appeared to be a plethora of articles on gossip from areas such as anthropology, social psychology, sociology, leadership and management studies. Each discipline seemed to think there was a paucity of research on a worthy topic, yet, cumulatively across disciplines, there is much research, both contemporary and historical.

On a personal level, I now also understand why I felt shame as someone who had perpetuated gossip, and why I still gossip today. I learned that most of us gossip most of the time. The statistic of our conversations involving gossip 65 to 90% of the time is a shocking figure to me and to many others I have shared this figure with over the course of my research (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012)). I also realized that the activity of gossip itself is tinged with its sense of shame from its roots in being perceived as a female, superficial activity (Grosser, 2010). Furthermore, according to Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) gossip is in fact mainly used to gather and validate information and to protect against norm violation. This larger context helps me understand how I have bought into the dominant social discourse of thinking of gossip as a wasteful activity. This is quite a change in perspectives as a result of this research project. This awareness also empowers me to step back and separate myself from seeing my past and present gossiping behaviours as negative but as natural. I also learned that because gossip is more powerful that I had realized it needs to be directed and managed in certain ways. How it must be managed will be taken up in the recommendations section.

Professionally, I have noticed changes in how I now view gossip and its role. I have a more complex lens with which to analyse what gossip is and how it can be handled. I would like to share a few examples of the application of this new understanding before moving to the sections on the summary of my findings and how gossip can be handled.

The implications of understanding gossip in my own professional practice, is profound. Contrary to my own starting point of seeing gossip as frivolous, I now fully see its power in the work that I do. I am better able to understand and articulate what I have already seen in my work as a mediator. I have the vocabulary and the confidence to describe the phenomenon with more clarity. I now recognize the power of gossip to destroy reputations, cause social isolation and perpetuate toxic teams.

This new learning has also caused me to see previous mediation cases in a new light. For example, two mediations come to mind, both involving individuals returning to work. In both situations, in the absence of specific information, co-workers questioned the veracity of the reasons for the individuals being off work. Co-workers shared stories of seeing the person doing things outside of the workplace that would “prove” they were not “really” sick. At the time, I did not fully understand that the co-workers talking with each other about the absent person was as significant a problem as I do now. My role as mediator did provide me with the privileged position of hearing all sides to the story directly from those involved. Whether the gossip target was hiding information or not I cannot judge, but what I do know is that the gossip swirling about the workplace affected each target profoundly. Each knew they were being gossiped about, knew they weren't being believed, and felt the animosity as they attempted to return to work. In one case,

the stories about this individual were so calcified, and the anger towards him so intense, he was not able to return to the workplace. In the second case, through opportunities to interact with the team in a safe, facilitated environment, the person was successfully able to introduce new elements to the gossip story about her and was able to successfully re-integrate. It is only through this research that I can now make the links between gossip and its power to destroy and cause isolation.

With regard to seeing the impact of gossip to spread toxicity on teams, I am also going forward with new awareness. A recent example is work with a large team where I was able to see early on the role that gossip played in perpetuating a toxic team. In my initial individual interviews, most team members mentioned words such as “chit chat” “back stabbing” and “closed door talk”. I would not have been as attuned to these descriptions, and their possible implications, without this research study. As they talked, I offered the label of gossip, which they all agreed with. As I acknowledged their reality, and offered this framework, they collectively began to speak more to the phenomenon and to articulate new wants with regard to it, including wanting the negative, complaining gossip to stop, not wanting to engage in it even though they were doing it out of habit and noticing it was detrimental to their team dynamics. Through several facilitated team and individual conversations over the course of a month, the team started to see gossip as a symptom of their inability to deal with conflict directly. They received training in how to have difficult conversations and came up with new group norms and in relation to gossip. The norm was that if a person had a frustration with a co-worker, they would first reflect on what that was about and whether it was worth bringing up. Then, they had a choice to either let it go through self-reflection, or to speak with their supervisor for

support. They also instituted a rule where they were no longer going to gossip about a co-worker. My belief is this outcome was a direct result of the research done for this study, which has impacted my own growing understanding of the phenomenon and how to work with it intentionally.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Throughout the examination of the key academic documents chosen for this study, there were four key questions searched for and shared in detail in the last chapter. This section summarizes the key points from the findings, once more according to these questions:

1. How is gossip understood? That is, how should we define it?
2. What causes gossip? What is its function? Is it useful or detrimental and how do we know which is which?
3. What is the connection between gossip and community? Are there models of community spaces, such as circles, useful in relation to gossip?
4. How should we in the workplace engage with gossip, as leaders, co-workers or bystanders?

### **Defining Gossip**

From examining the literature, I have discovered that gossip has a more robust description than ascribed through popular understanding. The first common definition to dispel is that gossip is idle talk. This was nowhere found in my research. In fact, the etymological roots of the word gossip being associated with women's talk is a possible explanation for its stereotypical, tarnished image. Gossip is vilified in the business

literature (Grosser et al., 2010) and seen as trivial in organizational contexts (Waddington, 2012). Given this, claiming back the word gossip can be a way to legitimize the power of story and traditionally associated feminine conversations.

The definition chosen for this study is one that emphasizes gossip as an activity that can be both positive and negative. This is important because a broader definition of gossip allows for more people to self-identify as being gossips. This point will be taken up further in the recommendations section.

### **What Causes Gossip?**

The key sub-question within this theme was whether gossip is useful or detrimental and how do we know which is which. From reviewing the chosen academic contemporary literature, the overall answer to the question is gossip is both useful and detrimental. Given that summation, it is important to understand how to distinguish positive gossip from destructive gossip. I will summarize the findings first from the positive functions of gossip, then for the negative functions, with the aim of creating key distinctions regarding its function.

### **Positive Functions**

#### *Human Nature, Belonging, Storytelling*

The key finding here is that gossip meets a basic human need for belonging and storytelling and is impossible to eradicate. Any attempts to do so would be foolish and naïve. As documented in the previous chapter, multiple researchers have confirmed the absolute ubiquity of gossip. Within the theme of the positive functions of gossip, researchers have asserted that gossip is present in most societies and cultures (Baumeister et al., 2004) and has evolved from our origins as primates who groom and now gossip as

a way to bond (Dunbar, 2004). Gossip brings people closer together, conveying a level of trust when sharing evaluative information about absent third parties (Grosser et al., 2010). Social entertainment and collaborative storytelling is also part of gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). To tell someone to stop gossiping is impossible. We all gossip.

More importantly, in the context of this study, for a leader of a workplace or a team to expect his or her employees to simply “stop gossiping” is not going to happen. This simple notion sets up both the employee and the leader to fail because gossip is meeting a fundamental human need to belong, connect and socialize. So, to institute a rule to stop gossiping and then expect that rule will work, is not the way to go about managing gossip in the workplace. We cannot stop gossiping, whether we realize we are doing it or not.

#### *Gossip as A Need for Knowledge During Change*

Gossip has been shown in the literature to meet a need for information, especially in times of change (Kurland & Pelled, 2010; Michelson et al., 2010). This legitimate use of gossip puts into question its reputation as trivial. We need gossip, and the knowledge it represents, especially when leaders have introduced organizational change. For leaders to call for gossip to stop especially in those times of uncertainty and anxiety in the workplace, could actually stop the flow of information so badly needed in such times and backfire as a strategy. Gossip may be increasing during times of uncertainty precisely because it is signalling more accurate information is needed.

#### *Gossip as Group Cohesion*

Another surprising finding is how gossip can actually be a factor of social harmony in groups (Robinson, 2016). Gossiping can serve the function of upholding

group norms, either highlighting how we want people to behave in a group, or sanctioning behaviours we do not want in our group. Relatedly, other researchers such as Haffen (2004) see gossip as a factor in pro-social behaviour that strengthens community. This function highlights once more, the danger of leaders or others in the workplace to simply ask a team or an individual to stop gossiping, with no more nuanced guidance or instruction on gossip. This edict to stop gossiping can possibly impact the impulses towards seeking social cohesion and inadvertently thwart efforts towards building more social cohesion.

#### *The Use of Gossip to Shape Positive Identity*

One of my mediator colleagues, upon hearing I was doing a study of gossip, told me she uses gossip as a way to spread positive gossip about others. In sharing that, it made me realize that I have done the same in my own work in organizations. There may be times where, with prior permission from a client, I may share a piece of information, or gossip, about the other person. In my work, the intention is always to pave the way for more understanding and compassion, the keys to peacemaking. So, when I found confirmation that social identity does indeed get shaped by gossip, it was a confirming piece of information (Cobb, 2013).

#### *Gossip's Use as a Power and Status Tool*

According to Elias (2000), well-known power researchers French and Raven created an often-cited five part typology for power. Many of the five emulate the function gossip can play, including informational power, where one individual has information to share about others; expert power, where the gossipier may be seen as an expert by way of

the knowledge possessed; and referent power, where the gossip may be followed by others because he or she is seen as someone who possesses power.

### *Challenging the Status Quo*

Gossip can serve to help leaders challenge those above them in the administrative hierarchy, serving as a counter-weight for the unintended or intentional misuse of power. Such challenges to managerial authority are essential in a healthy, functioning democratic workplace and society. Gossip can serve this most noble of functions, making use of its inherent capacity as a power and status tool to attempt to balance or rebalance power. Gossip then becomes a way to respond to workplace fairness issues and to administrative evil, the phenomenon whereby otherwise well-intentioned individuals participate in systems that cause harm to innocent people (Reed, 2012). Administrative evil is characterized by a lack of information (Reed, 2012), so gossip is particularly well-placed to be part of the solution. Calls for the abolition of gossip, as seen in this light, can erode the tenuous balance of power between leaders and their followers.

## **Negative Functions**

### *Social Exclusion*

The challenge with negative gossip is that when it is bad, it can be very, very bad. Negative gossip can have dire consequences such as social exclusion (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Social exclusion can sound vaguely harmful, but think back to the proverbial exclusion from being picked for the baseball team, the dance, the birthday party, the family event. Those exclusions hurt, to the point, in some cases, of suicide (Archer & Coyne, 2005). The fact that gossip has this kind of power must be acknowledged. This raw power of gossip to bring people to their knees is illustrated by a

mediation I conducted between a supervisor and her small team. The direct reports were bonded in their disdain and negative gossip about their supervisor although the supervisor held positional power. Gossip was rampant as the direct reports gossiped amongst themselves about their supervisor and the supervisor gossiped to her manager and others outside the team. Through the mediation process, it was revealed that the supervisor had felt both powerless and excluded by her direct reports and that had caused her much pain. The direct reports revealed, similarly, they also felt shunned and powerless and suffered pain as a result. The way through was creating a safe space for direct conversation and connection, to clear up the stories being made up by all parties through the negative gossip.

#### *Damage to Identity and Reputation*

Just as gossip has the power to shape one's identity in a positive light, it has the same capacity to shape how we see people in a negative light. It is necessary to understand that the evidence is clear: gossip impacts how we see people (Geertz, 2011; Hafen, 2004; Jeuken, 2015; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

#### *Social Status Power and Gossipmonger*

The literature indicates that gossiping negatively or excessively can have an unintended consequence of impacting the gossiper's social status power negatively, perhaps even causing those who gossip "excessively" to be seen as low performers (Grosser et al., 2012).

### **Connections Between Gossip and Community**

The most important connection between gossip and community to emphasize from the literature is the need for community dialogue spaces to allow gossip to flow and

clarify information and strengthen relationships. Without such spaces, gossip can spin out of control and have unintended, more harmful consequences than even the gossiper intended. In this way, gossip can be used as a vehicle for community building and maintenance, through its focus on allowing the time and place for conversations about relationships, social norms and the seeing of a larger social system than one's own sphere (Hafen, 2004).

### **Recommendations**

#### *1) Educate About What Gossip is and its Power*

Many people I have spoken to in the course of this research were surprised when they discovered the academic definition I use to describe gossip. At times, I would point out when we were engaging in gossip, and many would believe our exchange was not gossip. Then I would recite the gossip definition, and the surprise would happen. What is known from the research is that many people do not see themselves as gossips, or capable of gossiping, and that most people gossip most of the time (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Given this, having a definition of gossip that is concrete and specific, can start to raise awareness of its existence. For leaders, this would be a logical place to start. Having a clearly understood definition of gossip is especially important because of WorkSafeBC's guideline that "malicious gossip" is one form of bullying and because leaders have a responsibility to abide by these guidelines (*Toward a respectful workplace: a handbook on preventing and addressing workplace bullying*, 2013). So, the first recommendation is for leaders to use and share a definition of gossip with their team members and co-workers so that everyone has a clearer understanding of what gossip is, how it is we all do it and how it is at play in the workplace. Kurland and Pelled's (2000) definition is the

one I recommend because of its broad and workplace-specific attributes: “informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present” (p. 429).

Concurrently, because research has shown that attempts to prevent gossiping through anti-gossip policies have been proven unsuccessful (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Grosser et al., 2012), the common notion that one can just stop gossiping will not work. Once those in the workplace realize they are gossiping, the first reaction could very well be to decide to stop gossiping as the solution. That simply denies gossip’s enduring existence, its complex functions and its potency. As previously outlined, gossip has the power to shape social identity, to exclude and tear down, as well as the power to create bonds, increase social status and build up. So, in addition to educating about the definition of gossip, it would be beneficial to share with team members gossip’s positive and negative function.

## *2) Ask About Intentions*

There is a question I start every one of my mediations with and it is: “What is your best intention in having this conversation?” That question is one that can also be used by leaders and peers in workplaces. When we find ourselves talking about someone else, we can ask what our intention is in having the conversation. Leaders can see part of their responsibility as letting their employees ‘vent’. However, talking about another person not in the same room, in an evaluative way, is gossip. If leaders could think of the times their employees come into their office to vent, as engaging in gossiping, how might that shift the response? With the common understanding, through education, that gossip can damage reputations, shape identities and affect how we perceive and treat people, the

question of intention in gossiping takes on a deeper meaning. We can ask that question of ourselves and of others who come to us speaking of a third party not present.

Leaders have a responsibility to support everyone in the workplace. So when an employee comes into the office to vent the next time, the recommendation would be to start by asking the employee what his or her intention is in sharing their thoughts about the other person. If the employee responds it is that the intention is to vent, the leader can respond that venting is gossiping and share the definition of gossip. Secondly, the leader can share that gossip has different functions and ask about which function or purpose the gossiper might be using gossip for.

Part of the inspiration for asking about best intentions in gossiping comes from a powerful story learned through an academic mentor. She spoke of how as a young child she had watched her mother and her mother's friends talk about a woman they all knew. The gossip was about how to help the woman, as she was suffering from spousal abuse. The intention was to figure out how to support her. This is the power of intention. There is one study suggesting gossip can perpetuate a hostile environment, depending on the person's intention (Grosser et al., 2012). Asking about best intentions can also serve to help a gossiper connect with their own deeper, and more pro-social motives for gossiping. Foster (2004) made a distinction between "praise gossip" and "blame gossip" (p. 82) that I believe can help clarify what constructive gossip might look like.

### *3) Acknowledge Gossip as Symptomatic*

As noted in the previous chapter, Grosser et al. (2010) suggests if organizations want to decrease gossip in the workplace, leaders must think of gossip as a symptom of underlying causes.

### **Of a Need for Increased Information During Change**

One much documented underlying factor for increased gossip is during times of change, anxiety or uncertainty (Houmanfar, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2010; Michelson et al., 2010). If there is an inordinate amount of gossip in a workplace, it may be a symptom of the need for more information from leaders. Leaders tend to think others know what they are thinking, or have understood what seems quite clear to them about changes. Often leaders have thought about the changes, discussed them, digested them, been challenged by them, all long before mentioning a change to an employee. Whereas, especially in times of change, what leaders think must be repeated multiple times. We all need information and knowledge; it is a key reason we gossip.

### **Of a Desire to Connect and Promote Social Cohesion**

Since gossip has such a positive function in our evolution and in our essential quality as a pro-social species, it is important for leaders and workplaces to understand that gossip has pro-social functions. It can be helpful to look at the positive intentions of gossipers to help reframe what their motives might be. This reframing might even be for the gossipers as they may not even be aware that they have a need for connection, which gossiping may obfuscating.

### **Of the Avoidance of Conflict**

Although I have not found much direct research to correlate with my own observation that people gossip to avoid facing the person they are gossiping about, this symptom may be extrapolated from the research. Jeuken (2015) notes how easy it is to gossip as a type of aggression, which presupposes the gossipers is choosing aggression as a way to avoid engaging directly with the gossip target. Leaders also find themselves

with conflict taking up a significant portion of their time; Katz and Flynn (2013) cite four separate studies showing how senior, middle manager and supervisors spend anywhere from 21 – 50% of their time dealing with conflicts, whether their own or their employees' conflicts. Although neither of these studies point directly to gossip being a symptom of the avoidance of conflict, the connection seems logical. Anecdotally, when I asked the team with the toxic gossip about why they gossiped, all of the team members said they wanted to avoid engaging directly with the ones they were gossiping about.

#### *4) Promote Civility, Kindness and Workplace Fairness*

Research has found a number of negative outcomes associated with workplace incivility; Grosser et al. (2012) state that negative gossip is one such outcome. Grosser et al. (2012) further posit that a significant amount of negative gossip can be eliminated by, conversely, fostering a climate of civility. As noted in the previous chapter, Grosser et al. (2012) suggest responding to gossip by offering training in negotiation, conflict resolution and dealing with difficult people, to help promote such a culture. This further solidifies the supposition that gossip is linked to an avoidance of conflict, since giving people the tools to deal with conflict can help address workplace incivility. Building on the example from my professional life mentioned earlier, the team wanting to change their gossip patterns and attempt to deal with conflict more directly, also desired to be more kind as part of their team culture change.

Jeuken (2015) also called for leaders to exercise workplace fairness, having found a link between a manager's capacity to manage conflict fairly amongst employees and the amount of gossip in the workplace. A culture of civility and kindness complements a culture where employee's opinions matter and conflicts are dealt with fairly.

### *5) Create Opportunities to Build Community through Circles*

Ury (1995) in his research on peaceful cultures, found that when conflict couldn't be resolved by individuals, there was always the collective spaces where people sat in circle to bring their concerns to. These open conversational spaces were places where community members could talk about their feelings, their concerns, their desires. It was a safe emotional place to build up social capital and to problem solve using hearts and minds. Our usual workplaces do not have such practices. Many leaders provide the opportunities for staff meetings and possibly other more informal gatherings. However, the practice of circles, like in Ury's peace-oriented cultures, must be intentionally introduced to allow for the cross-pollination of ideas, the sharing of stories and the dispelling of the toxic aspects of gossip. Leaders concerned with gossip would be well-advised to create more such opportunities for teams to come together and talk in meaningful ways. The team mentioned earlier had a recent meeting which they began by talking about their best intentions in being at the meeting, as well as sharing one positive appreciation about the person to their right. Each person was assured a turn, as the instruction was to speak about the person beside you, which automatically ensured each person's voice would be heard in turn. This is an example of one quick yet meaningful way to use a circle concept to open up the conversational space for intentional conversation.

### *6) Use Gossip Strategically*

Since gossip is here to stay, it behooves leaders to feed positive, kind, social capital building information into the gossip mill. Hafen (2004) documents managers using gossip as a means to enhance the organization and to promote a positive culture.

Although not able to be controlled, gossip can be shaped through the intentional use of the gossip grapevine to feed in information that would be useful or enhancing for the team or organization as a whole. In my own work as a conflict resolver, there are occasions when I intentionally share a compassionate comment or perspective with someone in the “opposing” camp. This is done to increase understanding and empathy on both sides. Conversely, I have seen leaders in workplaces share negative and judgmental gossip with each side, resulting in increased hurt feelings, increased confusion and increased conflict. As Grosser et al. (2012) summarize: “What a manager would ideally be able to do is to reduce all of the destructive and unnecessary forms of gossip while allowing the positive and functional forms of gossip to remain” (p. 55).

### **Conclusions**

This project set out to examine how gossip is viewed in contemporary academic literature and what its implications are in the workplace. It used a narrative and critical theory lens together with a content analysis approach to examine 19 contemporary academic papers. The ideas I found were complex, multifaceted, confirming and surprising. I have learned much and it will help me in my later work. Regarding future directions, it is noteworthy that, despite the accumulated data on gossip from various disciplines, there is still very little on the role of conflict in gossip (Jeuken, 2015). The recommendations I make above are intended to help bridge that gap and to help leaders, co-workers and bystanders to think through the damage of gossip and to find its potential when used with intention, kindness and support.

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