TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

In today's communication-driven world, informal communication can at some point be construed as malicious gossip. Literature shows that certain areas of gossip are insufficiently studied, such as how gossip is defined in the workplace, when communication is construed as gossip, and what characteristics highlight the parameters between healthy communication and gossip. This research is of value because workplace gossip could have direct implications on trust in workplace relationships, might undermine principles espoused by corporate governance and could therefore lead to higher staff absenteeism and turnover. A qualitative research study was undertaken to explore individual constructions surrounding this phenomenon. Data was collected from structured individual interviews and the technique of card sorting, and a grounded theory analysis resulted in the formulation of a working definition of the concept, the identification of its parameters as well as the development of a typology of gossip in the workplace. The implications of the findings are discussed.

OPSOMMING

'n Tipologie van skinder in die werkplek. Informele kommunikasie in organisasies neem soms die vorm aan van kwaadwillige skinder. Dit word afgelei uit die literatuur dat die verskynsel van skinder – hoe dit in die werkplek gedefinieër, wanneer kommunikasie as skinder beskou kan word, en die eienskappe wat die parameters van gesonde kommunikasie teenoor skinder toelig – tot op datum ontoereikend bestudeer is. Die waarde van meer begronde navorsing oor hierdie verskynsel is daarin geleë dat skinder in die werkplek direkte implikasies vir onder andere vertroue in die werkplek mag hê (wat weer die beginsels van korporatiwe beheer mag ondermyn), en kan lei tot afwesigheid en arbeidsomset. Kwalitatiewe navorsing is onderneem om individue se konstruksies van skinder as verskynsel te verken. Data is versamel deur middel van gestrukureerde onderhoude en die tegniek van kaartsortering, waarna begronde teorie in 'n werksdefinisie vir die konsep, die parameters daarvan, en 'n tipologie vir skinder in die werkplek geresulteer het. Die implikasies van die bevindinge word voorgehou.

Communication can take place in many forms, such as face to face, telephonic, in newspapers, on television, and via email. Albeit an essential component of every organisation, communication has its limitations. Although it can confidently be said that no business will ever survive without communication, at some stage communication (in the informal sense) can be construed as gossip. Office gossip and rumours have for the most part been accepted as part of the work environment with the areas containing the coffee machine and the water-cooler providing seemingly perfect and comfortable settings for gossip. Systems such as the Internet and email facilitate the quick spreading of undesirable communication. Greengard and Samuel (2001) state that in today's malicious society, the nature and intensity of gossip have become more severe. Employees will always communicate facts, events and occurrences around them, but when do they cross the line between healthy communication and malicious gossip?

In a corporate world where transparency, honesty and openness are encouraged in employees, one wonders to what extent these workplace values could be misconstrued. To what extent are employees required to display honesty? For example, if Tom, a corporate manager, communicates to Margaret, his co-worker, about an in-office affair between some senior managers, he is clearly being open, honest and transparent in communicating these facts to his co-worker. At some point, however, he may have breached confidentiality or pried into someone's personal life. Values such as these clearly have boundaries.

One could speculate on the connection between ethics and workplace gossip. Rossouw and Van Vuuren (2004) explain that ethics is concerned with what is *good* for the 'self' and the 'other'. It can be said that gossip in the workplace could strain ethical values such as trust, respect and care for others. If this is so, codes of ethics that prohibit gossip would prove essential. If codes of ethics are instruments that guide morally acceptable behaviour in an organisation, the development of such codes could raise the ethical awareness of the negative effects of gossip in the workplace. In addition, codes could have the capacity to prevent unethical behaviour such as that of gossip in the workplace by encouraging desirable conduct. Therefore, a clear understanding of this phenomenon and its parameters could assist in the development of codes of ethics that correctly identify workplace gossip and similarly assist in the promotion of 'healthy talk' and the dissuasion of gossip in the workplace.

Furthermore, one needs to investigate the link between trust and workplace gossip. Trust is the foundation of relationships and should be a by-product of the decisions and actions of people carrying out the business of their organisations (Reina & Reina, 1999). A lack of trust might foster suspicion in a variety of circumstances. Such circumstances include situations where perceivers have forewarnings that another might be insincere or untrustworthy, or situations in which their expectations have been violated. In addition to the above, circumstances in which situational cues are recognised or possess contextual information that suggests another person might have ulterior motives could also lead to gossip breaking down trust in an organisation (Kramer, 1999).

Although the phenomenon of gossip is a familiar and obvious part of everyday life, this construct is not necessarily understood, especially in the work context. There is a need to understand this phenomenon because organisations could experience increased staff turnover, premature job resignations, as well as the loss of efficient and effective employees, due to the effects of gossip in the workplace. Furthermore, gossip could also undermine an individual, a group or organisation, break down trust between employees, and strain ethical values such as openness, transparency and honesty. Consequences such as these could decrease staff morale, motivation and interpersonal respect between employees. The rationale behind this article is to increase awareness in companies that gossip in the workplace can be malicious and detrimental to work relationships, ethical

behaviour and trust. By identifying a clear and unambiguous understanding of gossip and its parameters there can be general consensus on what really constitutes gossip in the workplace, and when communication is acceptable or unacceptable. The specific outcomes of this article are to develop a working definition for gossip in the workplace, identify its parameters and develop a typology of gossip in order to provide a bigger and clearer picture of gossip within the realm of informal communication. From a behavioural perspective, these outcomes could prove essential in the scientific and empirical understanding of this phenomenon.

Research in this area could contribute to better orientation, training and development programmes that could aid managers in identifying, dealing with and ultimately preventing the effects of gossip in the workplace. The extent to which employees need to display work values such as honesty, openness, fairness and transparency can also be established once there is a clearer understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, this research could aid in the development of future strategies to counter gossip in the workplace.

GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

Communication systems consist of formal and informal communication systems. The phenomenon of gossip falls under informal communication systems. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, only informal communication systems will be highlighted. Figure 1 was developed by the authors to represent informal communication systems graphically. Within informal communication systems, there are grapevine communication networks that consist of rumours and gossip. The grapevine is a major informal communication medium in an organisation – rumours are often a rapid form of grapevine communication that spread quickly and uncontrollably, and once initiated are difficult to stop (Crampton, Hodge & Mishra, 1998). Kurland and Pelled (2000) explain that while the grapevine includes a wide range of informal communication, gossip focuses specifically on information about people. Figure 1 shows that rumours and gossip can have both positive and negative effects. One would ideally want to promote the positive effects and avoid the negative ones.
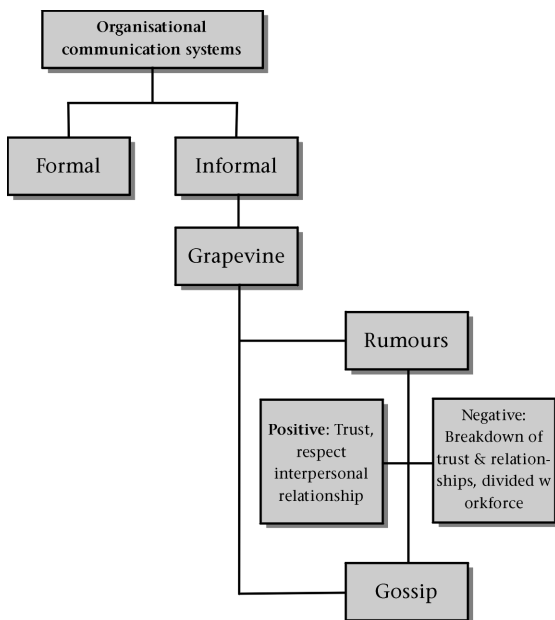
Figure 1: A Pattern of Informal Organisational Communication Systems

The concept of gossip has traditionally referred to idle chatter and chit-chat (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). It was only due to

religious writings through the years that the concept acquired a somewhat negative connotation. Readings from the Christian Bible such as the following depict the negative connotation and evil tongue associated with gossip:

'The godless man uses his mouth to destroy his neighbor but the virtuous use their wisdom to save themselves. Gossip reveals secrets, but the trustworthy man keeps a secret.' (Proverbs 11: 9, 13)

The Koran also includes comments on gossip:

'God has heard the speech of her who wrangled with you about her husband, and complained to God; and God hears your gossip; verily, God both hears and sees.' (Koran Sura 58: The Pleader of Madina)

Similarly, gossip in Hebrew is called 'Lashon Harah', which means 'the evil tongue', and the Torah outlaws gossip, true or false, about others or even oneself (Hecht, n.d). Below is a quote from the Torah in this regard:

'Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people.' (Leviticus 19:16)

Kurland and Pelled (2000) explain that these religious writings emphasised the immoral and improper aspects of gossip, and many individuals began to look down upon those who gossiped. More scientific and secular definitions of gossip include a definition by Kurland and Pelled (2000) who define workplace gossip as informal and evaluative talk in the organisation among a few individuals about another member of the organisation who is not present. *Evaluative talk* refers to the assessment of individuals in terms of their work and personal life. A further definition is provided by Barnhart and Barnhart (1994) who define gossip as idle talk, which is not always true, about other people and their affairs. For the purposes of this article, the term 'gossip' refers to the talk that takes place between employees in a work environment (at any organisational/job level or within any industry) about other people's personal or non-personal issues. This is the working definition of the concept - it may be regarded as provisional until the research findings are discussed in a later section.

Common aspects of gossip

Kurland and Pelled (2000) propose three dimensions for making distinctions between types of gossip, namely the sign, credibility and work-relatedness. The '*sign*' refers to the positivity or negativity of the information being related (refer to Figure 1). To illustrate this point, assume you were told that a colleague had just established that her daughter had been accepted to university. This information is positively related. However, if it was said that a colleague was getting divorced, this information would be negatively related as it conveys negative information. *Credibility* is the extent to which gossip is seen as truthful, accurate and believable. The assumption here is that the less reliable the information, the less it will be believed and the more the gossiper will be seen as an unreliable source. The last dimension is work-relatedness, which distinguishes between work-related gossip and *non-work-related* gossip. Work-related gossip is information that focuses on the subjects' work life, job performance and career progression, for example, obtaining a promotion, or being fired or transferred. Non-work-related gossip focuses on personal events such as marriage, illness or divorce. It would appear that work-related gossip is typically more readily believed than non-work-related gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

Waddell and Laing (2004) point out that in order to be 'effective', gossip needs to: (1) travel well, (2) meet the needs of the gossiper, (3) create excitement, (4) appeal to fear, and (5) reflect the wishes and feelings of staff. It is further important to note that gossip could be a complete fabrication, slight variation of the truth, mean spirited or a grotesque distortion of reality.

As Waddell and Laing (2004) explain, gossip is seldom pleasant, especially if it is to be remembered for a long time. It can therefore be said that gossip is detrimental to relationships, and in this light negative gossip equals unethical behaviour because it can create high levels of tension and emotional strain.

Effects of gossip in the workplace

The effects of workplace gossip are twofold. There are adverse effects for both the organisation and the individual.

Effects on the organisation: Organisations that suffer the consequences of gossip are generally unable to maintain the status quo and control, and trust between employees is lacking (Baker & Jones, 1996). Burg and Palatnik (2003) compare gossip to a virus and indicate that it can affect the bottom line and ultimately kill a business. They go on to say that the harm caused by venomous 'water-cooler' talk works steadily and over time affects morale and productivity, resulting in sick days, resignations and premature job searchers as victims of malicious gossip feel alienated, hurt and embarrassed.

Effects on the individual: Becoming the object of someone's ridicule means that victims of gossip suffer feelings of victimisation, betrayal, degradation and embarrassment (Greengard & Samuel, 2001). This hurt and anger mounts until eventually there are consequences, for instance, productivity decreases or the company loses a valuable employee. In their hurt, victims could suffer depression and a lack of self-esteem, and then lose the motivation to perform on the job. Individuals' job satisfaction decreases and in most cases work relationships and trust between employees break down, resulting in a divided workforce.

Reflecting on the literature review

While the literature review provides some information on gossip as far as it can be established, certain areas are not clarified, namely what is gossip in the workplace, when is communication construed as gossip, and what elements or characteristics highlight the parameters between healthy communication and gossip? This phenomenon needs to be understood better because in addition to the effects of gossip mentioned above, gossip in the workplace could (1) have direct implications on trust in workplace relationships, (2) undermine principles espoused by corporate governance, especially transparency, and therefore (3) lead to higher turnover and the loss of efficient and productive employees. Workplace gossip could also be linked to the straining of ethical values such as respect and care. The grey areas surrounding this phenomenon make further research essential in order to understand the concept of gossip scientifically. Qualitative research was believed to be an appropriate way to yield such an understanding.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to learn more about the phenomenon of gossip and develop a definition and parameters for the concept, qualitative research would be most appropriate as it would allow for the scrutiny of gossip as a social phenomenon in the workplace. The research was approached from a qualitative perspective because this approach allows for research to take place within the natural settings of the social sector, has a descriptive nature and aims to understand and interpret the meaning and intentions that underlie everyday human action (Mouton, 1988). A variety of qualitative research paradigms exist such as the classic, modernist and post-modernist traditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Since we believe that scientific rigour is important in qualitative research, we opted for a modernist qualitative research approach. This approach is characterised by the interpretation of reality by means of formalised qualitative methods and the understanding of rigorous data analysis, for example grounded theory (Schurink, 2004). The approach focuses on an interpretive perspective because people are believed to construct meaning and interpret experiences from their own unique perspective (Neuman, 2000). In this study, the aim was to understand how people construct the phenomenon of gossip in the workplace. Since not much has been written on gossip in general and specifically gossip in the workplace, it was decided that grounded theory would be used as a research strategy. Grounded theory provides a consistent set of data collection and analytical procedures aimed at developing theory directly from the data and not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). This would allow one to identify the parameters of gossip and begin to develop and expand on the theory of gossip in the workplace. Grounded theory is primarily inductive, and beginning with individual cases, incidents and experiences, it allows for the development of more abstract conceptual categories. It allows the analyst to synthesise, explain and understand the data, and to identify patterned relationships within it (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). For the purposes of this article, the research design will be discussed in five sections, namely data-gathering techniques, adhering to quality concerns, research participants, research procedure and analysis of data. Figure 2 depicts the research design graphically.
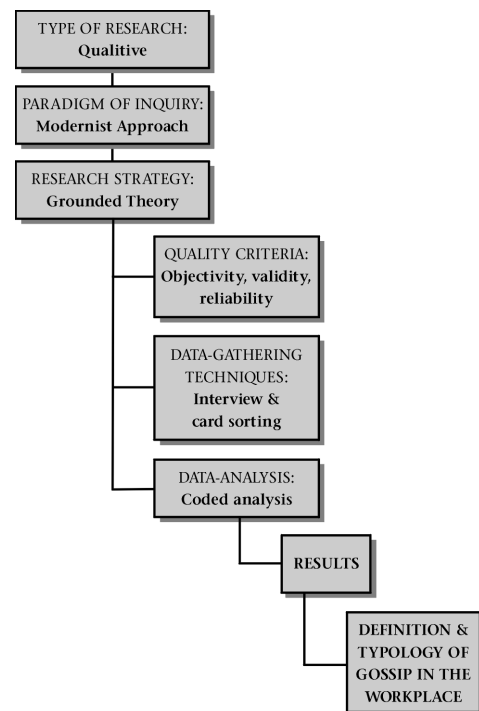

Figure 2: Research Design

Data-gathering techniques

Structured individual interviews as well as the technique of card sorting were the qualitative methods used for this research. The qualitative interview is a uniquely sensitive and powerful method of capturing the experiences and 'lived' meanings of subjects' everyday world (Kvale, 1996). It was our belief that by using interviews, we could arrive at the perspectives of how participants create meaning within the realm of gossip. By structuring the interviews, we were able to focus on specific aspects aimed at developing theory on the topic.

The card-sorting technique was used in conjunction with the structured interview as a second data-capturing technique. Card sorting is a type of structured question aimed at exploring the organisation of an informant's cultural knowledge, which leads to the discovery and verification of certain terms and concepts (Spradley, 1979). This provides a non-invasive way to find out not only what people know, but also *how they have organised knowledge*, and helps in the 'unpacking' of concepts to understand them and their meanings better (Spradley, 1979).

Adhering to quality concerns

To ensure trustworthy findings, objectivity, reliability and validity were considered. Although complete objectivity can never be achieved in an interview, it can be realised to some degree and therefore researchers strive for scientific objectivity by developing their own value system. This is referred to as the Münchhausen Objectivity developed by Smaling (1989), which states that by developing a value system, the researcher can decrease the degree of subjectivity. This was achieved in the research by allowing the participant to speak and by listening actively in order to do justice to the object of the study. To ensure reliability, triangulation was used and included a structured interview, a card-sorting exercise and participant field notes (written records of analysis related to the formulation of theory). Careful consideration was given to issues of sampling (discussed below) and in order to manage the volumes of data generated from the process of grounded theory, data-gathering was spread over two months to avoid information overload and researcher burnout. To ensure the validity of the research findings, we remained within the framework of the questions posed and kept field notes to capture relevant events and the state of affairs. These were studied on a regular basis.

In addition to the adherence of the above quality concerns, theoretical sensitivity was considered during the analysis of the data. Strauss and Corbin (1997) explain that this is the degree of sensitivity that the researcher brings to the study based on experience in the field and previous readings. The literature review ensured theoretical sensitivity during the analysis, which was further achieved through the use of questioning, the analysis of words and phrases, and the use of the flip-flop method of comparison (making a comparison at the extreme of one dimension). Theoretical sensitivity was further ensured by acknowledging and incorporating existing literature into the research findings.

Research participants

Purposive sampling was used for this research as it allowed for the selection of participants based on the fact that they could provide important information about the topic at hand (Potter, 1996). The criteria used for the selection of the research participants were threefold: firstly, participants were selected from environments where they made direct contact with fellow employees on an ongoing basis as this would ensure that the participants might have been exposed to informal communication systems such as gossip, rumours and grapevine communication. Secondly, participants were selected from several organisations and industries so as to avoid the organisational culture of a particular setting from swaying the research findings and to increase the applicability of the findings to various contexts and participants. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain that the more widespread the sampling, the more conditions and variations that will be discovered and built into the theory, and therefore the greater generalisability of the research findings. Thirdly, a mix of people with regard to job positions and careers, level of education, work experience, age, gender and race was achieved. This was to ensure a variety of views and experiences with regard to gossip in the workplace. Fifteen female and ten male participants were interviewed ranging from the ages of 19 to 54 years. On average the participants had six years working experience and came from various industries such as financial, educational, retail, health and beauty, and medical sectors.

In total, 25 participants, including two pilot study participants, were interviewed. Potential participants were personally contacted and invited to participate in the research. A brief description was given of the research study as well as what would be required of them. The participants were assured that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the entire process and that the interview would take no longer than an hour and a half. Of the individuals approached, only one declined the offer to participate in the research. Those who accepted were telephoned personally in order to set a date and time most suitable to them. Interviews took place over two months in venues selected by the participants. All the interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the participants.

Because confidentiality was assured, two agreements were drawn up. The first was a confidentiality agreement stating that the participants' personal particulars such as name and place of employment would remain confidential throughout the entire research process. The second was a consent agreement to audiotape the interview. The participants were given the option of terminating the interview unilaterally at any time and refraining from answering any questions with which they were not comfortable. This right was exercised by only one participant who asked for the recording to be suspended while he gathered his thoughts. Two participants asked that the interview be transcribed by the interviewer personally due to personal and confidentially related details revealed during the interview. The two agreements were explained carefully to the participants before they were required to sign them.

Research procedure

An initial pilot study was conducted with the aim of obtaining tentative ideas on what people assume gossip in the workplace to be and to generate case studies to be used as part of the card-sorting technique during the individual structured interviews. Seven participants were asked to share their thoughts on gossip and to share experiences in which they were either involved in gossip or were victims of gossip in the workplace. These participants were interviewed for the purposes of the pilot study only and were not used for the research interview. The information obtained from the pilot study was used in conjunction with on-line gossip stories off the Internet and personal work experiences to develop 11 realistic case study scenarios involving the divulgence of information that may or may not be construed as gossip. The cases developed were used for the card-sorting exercise, which is presented in Table 1.

After the development of the case studies and interview questions, a second pilot study was conducted to assess whether the interview structure would provide sufficient data for understanding gossip in the workplace. During the individual structured interviews, participants were asked to:

- perform a card-sorting exercise in which they read and briefly studied 11 case studies;
- order the case studies in a sequence from 'least' like gossip to 'most' like gossip;
- explain the criteria they had used to determine their sequence;
- rate each case on a scale in terms of the extent to which it could be perceived to be gossip (the four-point scale consisted of: 'not gossip', 'slight gossip', 'quite a bit of gossip' and 'very much gossip');
- answer questions pertaining to each individual case; and
- provide a definition of gossip in the workplace.

Questions pertaining to the authenticity and nature of the information typically gossiped about were included, for example:

- What kind of information does gossip deal with?
- Is gossip always true, always false or both?
- Is Hollywood/tabloid information gossip?

Participants were also asked to describe the types of people that gossip. Questions included:

- Demographically describe the type of people that gossip.
- What type of tactics do people use to gossip?

- What type of information do people gossip about?
- Why do people gossip?

The final questions asked of the participants were:
- How does gossip in the workplace affect the organisation?
- How would you go about preventing and dealing with gossip in an organisation?

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TABLE 1

**CASE STUDIES AS PRESENTED TO THE PARTICIPANTS
DURING THE CARD-SORTING EXERCISE**

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CASE

A   Marie a 32-year-old, single, heterosexual woman, is a top insurance broker who has been working her way up the corporate ladder. It's taken many years and hard work to get to her current position. The other day, on the way to the photocopy room, she overheard some colleagues talk about her sex life over coffee and doughnuts. As the discussion about her sexual preference continued, someone remarked: 'I know she is a dyke for sure'.

B   In the weekly meeting between John and his boss, the boss let it slip that the company was in trouble and that retrenchment was inevitable. All positions would be in jeopardy. John's boss asked him to keep this confidential until top management decided to bring it to light. During lunch in the canteen, John couldn't help but tell his colleagues what he had heard.

C   While sipping on their coffee, Jessica remarks to Brett that the boss is very late for work as it is already 10:00 am and there is no sign of him anywhere. Brett tells Jessica that their boss probably wouldn't be at work due to the loss of his mother the previous evening. One week later while Brett is at his table doing some work, the boss calls him into his office and says, 'Brett, I would appreciate it if in future, you keep quiet about my personal life instead of sharing it with the entire office'.

D   Jake, a 57-year-old factory worker, walks into the building on Monday morning with a big smile on his face. When you ask him why he is smiling, he tells you that his oldest daughter got engaged over the weekend. During the day, someone remarks that Jake looks really happy. You tell them that it's because of his daughter's engagement.

E   Sam overheard Lyn (a colleague) mention to her husband over the phone that their daughter, Mary, was not accepted into university. During the tea break someone mentions their child's academic achievement. Someone else says: 'I know Lyn's daughter was also waiting to see if she got into university ... I wonder if she made it?' Having heard the conversation earlier between Lyn and her husband, Sam speaks up and says 'no, unfortunately, Mary did not get in'.

F   There are two managers at the store where you work. You are good friends with one of the managers Joan. You heard from a reliable source that the other manager and some employees are not registering certain items on the cash register in order to pocket the money. You know that if head office finds, out both managers will be dismissed regardless of who is responsible. Over lunch you mention the situation to Joan.

G   Matthew's secretary is going through a messy divorce. As a result, her work performance has decreased. Although she has told him about her divorce, she asked that he not mention it to anyone. Matthew is in a meeting with his manager, Mary a few days later. She remarks that it has come to her attention that Matthew's secretary is 'slacking' in her performance, not getting to work on time, taking too many days off and failing to meet deadlines. Matthew mentions the fact that he is worried about her and that her lack of performance is due to a pending divorce.

H   The boss and the new manager are having an affair. Paul knows this for a fact because he saw them kissing. While everyone is having tea and talking about Days of our Lives, Paul mentions the company's very own scandal.

I   Jan had been working in a position for some time, and put in extra effort because of a promotion she was keen to get as executive manager. To her surprise, a colleague's daughter who has just finished matric got the position. Jan is disappointed and angry. When everyone is convened around the coffee machine during lunch, she mentions her disappointment. She heard some time ago that her boss and colleague were romantically involved, and she mentions to the group that that may be the reason for her colleague's daughter getting the position.

J   It's apparent that money and stock have gone missing from the cosmetic store where Sarah works. Some make-up went missing on Saturday. Sarah and her team were working over the weekend. When she walked into the storeroom, she saw Jack packing containers. She tells the supervisor that he may be responsible for the missing stock.

K   Alex, an administration officer, is photocopying documents. A document catches his eye while sorting through some forms. The document stipulates that due to a loss incurred by the company, the employee pension funds will be decreased by 35%. When Alex returns to his desk, he shares the information with the other administration officers.

The second pilot study resulted in the refinement of the interview. This was achieved through the re-wording of certain questions and phrases, and the compilation of extra questions and an extra case study (case K).

Data analysis
Interviews were transcribed and then analysed with the field notes through the process of open coding. Strauss and Corbin (1997) explain that coding in grounded theory is the process of breaking down, conceptualising and grouping data together in new ways in order to build theory, give the research vigour, and help the researcher break through biases and assumptions. During open coding analysis, comparisons were made between interviews in order to identify categories (themes) of gossip in terms of their properties and dimensions. Different categories emerged (for example, harmless information, venting/ tattletaling, harmful information, work-related issues and non-work-related issues) through the analysis of the card-sorting exercise. Each category was based on its own properties, for example, harmful information/gossip results in negative consequences and is divulged behind a person's back. To enhance trustworthiness, the categories emerging from the data were subject to peer examination (in this case, the study supervisors) and a comprehensive register of data was kept. These categories aided in the development of a typology of gossip (discussed below), which in turn aided in the development of a working definition of gossip in the workplace (discussed below).

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FINDINGS

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The data obtained from the grounded theory analysis of the interviews was used in conjunction with the literature review in order to (1) develop a definition of gossip in the workplace, (2) identify the characteristics and criteria that highlight the parameters of gossip, and (3) develop a typology of gossip in the workplace.

Gossip in the workplace: A working definition
Table 2 illustrates key concepts related to gossip which were identified and defined by the participants throughout the interviews and serve as a glossary of terms.

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TABLE 2

KEY CONCEPTS RELATED TO GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

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Concept	Definition
Tattletaling	Not exactly gossip but the act of 'telling on' a person. The information may be unjustified and have no fact or evidence.
Hearsay/overhearing/ eavesdropping	The act of hearing information that is not told to you directly, and divulging this information. It is a type of gossip.
Rumour	Divulging information that leads to gossip.
Organisational/ office politics	When work-related information develops into gossip, for example, a colleague is promoted (office issue), and fellow colleagues mention that he/she was not deserving of the promotion.
Grapevine	Informal information that cannot be traced back to the original source.
'Skinder'	Afrikaans word equivalent to gossip.

Speaking out of turn	The divulging of information that is not rightfully yours to divulge. You have no consent or licence to disclose the information.
Invasion of privacy/ prying	Being inquisitive and poking your nose into someone else's business.
Sensitive information	Information that is generally disappointing, embarrassing or personal, for example, a daughter who was not accepted into University or a grandfather who is HIV positive.
Professional office gossipers/gossip and rumour mongers	The groups of people within every working environment, who are friendly with everyone, know everyone's stories and live off spreading these juicy bits after having blown them out of proportion.
Venting	Day-to-day 'blowing off steam': the intention is not to gossip but rather to get an issue off your chest/voice a frustration. The consequences are not negative.

The most common definitions as identified by the participants during the interviews were analysed in detail. It was found that many definitions overlapped and held common themes. The most common elements in the definitions included that gossip information: (1) is disclosed behind the subject's back, (2) concerns matters that are private or sensitive to the subject and (3) could lead to harm once they are disclosed. The general opinion is that gossip is destructive, particularly so in the breaking down of employee morale. Authenticity and distortion were also identified as important factors, the implication being that if the source is reliable, the information is more likely to be true. Distortion implies that the more the message is distorted, the more hurtful it becomes and therefore the more likely it will be construed as gossip. Table 3 depicts the most common themes identified by the participants in their definitions of gossip in the workplace.

TABLE 3
THEMES IDENTIFIED FROM PARTICIPANT DEFINITIONS
OF GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

Identified themes	Ssupporting extract
• Talking behind someone's back	*'You know it's gossip when the minute the person (you were talking about) walks in and you quickly change the topic to the weather.'*
• Confidential, sensitive information	*'Gossip is everything you wouldn't bring up in the boardroom.'*
• None of your business	
• Blown out of proportion (authenticity & distortion)	*'With gossip you start off with a small bit of information. By the time it gets to the last person, it's got a head, tail, and is fully clothed ... and all you did was give it a nose ... but now it's blown completely out of proportion.'*
• Spreads like wildfire	
• Creates stress/uneasy working environment	*'Gossip is mostly bad. Someone always gets hurt.'*
• Negative consequences	
• Making assumptions/fuelling speculation	
• Creates false impressions	*'It's talking about someone's personal life without their consent, and adding your two cent's worth when you don't even know the person.'*
• Prying, speaking out of turn, hearsay	*'How reliable is the reliable source? Did the source see it or did the source hear it from another reliable source?'*

Two definitions of gossip in the workplace were provided in the literature review. According to Barnhart and Barnhart (1994), gossip is idle talk that is not always true about other people and their affairs. Kurland and Pelled (2000) define workplace gossip as: 'the informal and evaluative talk in the organisation among a few individuals about another member of the organisation who is not present'. These definitions are rather vague, and therefore the above definitions were used in conjunction with all the definitions presented by the participants, the common themes identified (Table 3) as well as the typology of gossip (Figure 1), Table 2 and the criteria used to determine gossip parameters to develop a detailed working definition of gossip in the workplace. The working definition of the concept is presented below.

Gossip in the workplace can be defined as:
- The spreading or sharing of information that could be
  - Confidential
  - True/false
  - Handled incorrectly
  - Exaggerated
  - Positive/negative
  - Personal/job related
  - Traumatic
  - Scandalous
  - Unrelated to the crucial functioning of the business (does not affect the employee's work performance, but adversely affects the employee/others)
- Information that is disclosed:
  - between two or more people;
  - about a situation or a person they may or may not know;
  - behind his/her back so that the subject is unable to defend him/herself.
- Information that has no relevance to the gossiper/s
- Harmful because the disclosure of information could:
  - have negative and harmful consequences for an individual, group or organisation;
  - spread like wildfire
  - reach the wrong ears; and
  - create uneasy, harmful and emotionally stressful working environments.
- Knowledge that is not for public consumption and is based on:
  - Speaking out of turn
  - Second-hand information
  - Assumption
  - Rumours
  - Hearsay
  - Prying into people's lives
  - Derogatory/defamatory information
- Information that could lead to negative consequences such as:
  - The undermining of an individual, group or organisation
  - The breakdown of trust relationships
  - The straining of ethical values
  - Fuelled speculation
  - The creation of false impressions

The above definition is both detailed and specific. The following is an abbreviated definition of gossip:

> *Gossip in the workplace is the spreading of information between two or more people about a situation or person they may or may not know, behind their back, regarding information that is of no relevance to them. The content of the message is not for public consumption and the disclosure of the information leads to undesirable circumstances such as fuelled speculation, false impressions and the breakdown of trust.*

Determining the parameters of gossip in the workplace: criteria and characteristics
In the following section, the focus of discussion includes the criteria used to determine the parameters of gossip in the workplace, the characteristics of harmful gossip, the type of information gossiped about and reasons for gossip as identified by the research participants. Important to this research are the criteria or parameters used to determine the extent to which information can be construed as gossip. During the card-sorting exercise, participants were asked to name and describe the criteria used to determine the extent to which a particular case study was gossip. Fourteen criteria were identified based on the trends that emerged from the research. It is important to note that although not every criterion needs to be considered in order for information to be construed as gossip, some criteria are interrelated.

The first criterion is that of authenticity in which the information is judged on the extent to which it is *true or false*. When asked about the **authenticity** of gossip information, the participants held different views. Some believed that gossip was always false and that anything true could never be construed as gossip as long as the disclosure of the information was not a breach of confidentiality. The majority believed that the information could be true and false, exaggerations of the truth and edited or twisted information. Two participants said the following, which was the general opinion of other participants who were in accordance with the fact that gossip information can be true:

> *'Gossip is normally true. The information starts somewhere with some truth to it but as it moves through the channels it becomes less factual.'*
>
> *'I believe that gossip can be the truth ... where there is smoke there is fire!'*

In terms of authenticity, how the information was made known needs to be considered, i.e. did you see it yourself or did you hear it from a reliable source? The *reliability of the source* is very important. If the source witnessed the occurrence, the information can be said to be first-hand information because the information moves from the original source to the recipient. If the reliable source hears it from another 'reliable' source, this is termed 'hearing via the grapevine' and is regarded as second-hand information. Second-hand information cannot be verified for authenticity because the origin of the information is unknown and can be dubious.

The **intention** is the next criterion used to determine the extent to which information is gossip. This criterion refers to whether the information was disclosed out of maliciousness, sympathy, sincere concern or the need for the information. If the information was divulged with a hidden agenda as opposed to good intentions, it is more serious in terms of gossip. The *context* in which the information was divulged and the *tone* in which the information was disclosed also impact on the intention. The context and tone can imply certain things. If, for example, someone exclaims in a worried tone: 'I wonder why the boss is late', it can be deduced that the intention is one of concern, but if it is said in anger, the intention could be annoyance or to cause harm. The consequence or outcome refers to the effect caused by the dissemination of the information. In other words, did anyone benefit from the information being disclosed or was it harmful to the extent of altering people's perceptions about a certain person/situation and creating false impressions? This criterion marks an important distinction between harmless and harmful information. Most of the participants were of the opinion that harmful information always has a negative consequence even though the intention is not always to cause harm. **The measurement of the authenticity, intention and consequences** is a very important criterion. The participants believed that the authenticity, intention and consequence need to be quantified on a scale in terms of severity in order to determine the extent to which the information is true/false and causes harm. Therefore, the more serious the consequences, the more harmful the intention, and the less the information can be verified by evidence, the more it is seen as harmful gossip. The above were the most common criteria identified by the participants.

Less common criteria include the **relationship between the gossiper and the subject** who is being gossiped about. One participant explained:

> *'If you like someone, whatever information you disclose about them will never be nasty, and when someone else talks badly about someone you like, you tend to turn a blind eye.'*

Therefore, if the information comes from a friend of the person being talked about, the information is less likely to be construed

as gossip than if the same information comes from a person who is known to be on bad terms with the subject.

The **nature of the information** is also a criterion of concern when determining the extent to which the information is harmful gossip. If the information is negative, for example, about a person not deserving a promotion, then this information is more quickly termed as nasty gossip than information about a manager who received a bonus due to his/her hard work and extra effort. Therefore, information that is undesirable or negative is more easily construed as harmful gossip than information that is desirable or positive. Some participants also mentioned the criterion of considering the **number of people** who can or would be **affected** by disclosing the information. Although information is equally harmful whether it causes harm to one person or many people, it was mentioned that the seriousness of the divulged information increases if the effect is collective. In other words, when work-related information causes harm to all the employees of an organisation, the implications are more severe than when information only affects a single employee. For example, disclosing confidential information about retrenchments to a group of employees will cause organisation-wide panic. In certain situations, **who the information is disclosed to** is a criterion that should be considered as it was agreed that when information is disclosed to the correct person, it is not gossip but when information reaches the 'wrong ears', it is gossip. Disclosing to the supervisor that money has gone missing from the cash register during team A's shift is not gossip because the supervisor has the right to know this type of information. However, if the employee first mentions this information to the employees in team B, which will undoubtedly lead to speculation, then this is gossip because the information has nothing to do with them in the first place. Whether there is **confidentiality** surrounding the information or **consent** to disclose the information is another point of consideration. Confidential information that is disclosed is more easily construed as gossip than non-confidential information. Confidential information in this sense refers to information of any sort that is bound by some form of confidentiality (written or verbal) or when you are aware that the person concerned would not want the information to be divulged. One participant defined confidentiality as:

> *'Making a promise to keep information to yourself. Provided the information is not illegal, then the confidentiality should be honoured.'*

It is important to note, however, that confidentiality on its own is not sufficient to determine the extent to which information is gossip and should be considered together with criteria such as the intention, the consequence and who the information is disclosed to. Consider case G (Table 1), if the manager discloses to the supervisor that the employee is having personal problems (even though the employee asked that this remain confidential), this would not be considered harmful gossip because the intention is noble, i.e. to save the employee's job, and the information is disclosed to the correct source, i.e. the supervisor who has the right to know. Furthermore, disclosing information behind someone's back without their consent is not seen as harmful if the information is positive or has a positive consequence.

The next criterion although important was identified by only half of the participants: the **extent to which the information fuels speculation**. A message that includes an open-ended question, for example 'why did she commit suicide?' tends to fuel speculation and therefore leads to gossip. The 'why' question in particular was emphasised by the participants because this word almost always 'opens a can of worms'. Two participants explained:

'The best type of gossip (most harmful) has open-ended questions such as "is she pregnant?" because it allows for debate.'

'The "why" question allows for everyone to get involved and offer their "two cents' worth" on their own version of the matter.'

It was also suggested that the **sensitivity** of the subject (person being spoken about) is another criterion that needs to be considered. If you know that a particular person is shy, reserved or sensitive about a topic, then the information should not be disclosed even if confidentiality is not mentioned. For example, if an employee lost a close friend who had AIDS, it would be inappropriate to share this information with someone else, knowing that the employee is reserved when it comes to matters in his/her personal life. Again, a criterion like this would be considered in conjunction with criteria such as the nature of the information, the intention and the consequence.

The last three criteria should be considered together when determining the extent to which information is gossip and should further be considered in conjunction with the issue of confidentiality. The first is the **connection to the workplace**, which refers to the extent to which the disclosed information is related to one's work and could affect an individual's career, productivity, performance rating and company morale. The consensus is that the most harmful gossip is the information surrounding one's personal life. This is not to say that work-related information is never harmful, but work-related issues are less likely to be construed as gossip if they affect one's working performance and are not disclosed with a malicious intent. A few participants included the criterion of 'whether the issue would have to be **handled by the Human Resource (HR) Department**. Issues that have to be referred to HR for resolution are termed as more serious and can be viewed as harmful gossip, for example, when an employee is falsely accused of stealing and lays a grievance against the company. Closely related to this criterion is the extent to which there are **legal implications**, for example, an employee who has been falsely accused of theft can sue the company for defamation of character, in which case it can be said that the disclosure of this information is very harmful. From the above, it can be seen that several criteria need to be considered to determine the parameters of gossip. The characteristics of harmful gossip and the type of information with which gossip deals will now be discussed briefly, together with the main reasons why people gossip.

All 25 participants agreed that gossip is undesirable and deals with negative information. Some went so far as to say that gossip is never a good thing because it always has a negative outcome: *'when you talk about people and their business behind their back, they get hurt'*. Still, a few believed that gossip could be harmless in some cases, for example, talking about a wedding or mentioning a colleague's deserving promotion. The participants were unanimous in saying that gossip concerns both personal and work matters, especially matters of a scandalous nature. As stated by one participant:

'The juicier the gossip, the better.'

The majority agreed that personal matters were 'juicier' and therefore easily construed as more serious gossip than non-personal matters. But, when work-related issues have a negative connotation such as an in-office affair, they are also seen as serious gossip. A minority disagreed saying that work-related issues could never be gossip because anything that affects one's performance at work needs to be communicated. Interestingly enough, however, when it came to case H, about an office affair, the same participants rated the case as 'very much' gossip.

The participants were asked to provide characteristics of harmful gossip. As identified by the participants, in order for information to be construed as harmful gossip, the information must be 'juicy, exciting, entertaining, addictive and scandalous'. The information also needs to leave room for assumption, i.e.

encourage 'why' questions. The information must be able to be edited and adapted to suit the gossipers' own story-telling style. 'Sugar and spice' are essential to give information enough flavour to ensure that it 'spreads like wildfire'. Finally, if the information can provoke emotional arousal and curiosity, then it is regarded as classic gossip.

To summarise the above section, gossip is seen as information that could be conveyed with positive or negative intention, but generally leads to negative consequences because it causes harm and is therefore seen as undesirable. Information could be of a personal or work-related nature and the more scandalous the information, the better it is in terms of harmful gossip. Finally, gossip is seen as information that could be factual, or lies, or variations of the truth with modifications. In order for information to be construed as gossip, it needs to be interesting and adaptable, and arouse curiosity. Given the above, one area remains to be analysed: the reason why people gossip.

The participants identified many reasons why people gossip, the most common being that gossip is seen as an act of socialising: the coming together of people to share information over a cup of coffee. Gossip is also the basis of forming work and social relationships. Furthermore, in the monotony of life and work, participants were of the opinion that gossip brings a sense of excitement to people's lives. Therefore, the act of gossiping is believed to be both exciting and entertaining. While some people gossip because they seek popularity and believe this to be a way to gain it, others do it out of jealousy and retribution, and to point fingers. To a large extent, gossip at the office is viewed as a weapon to sabotage someone, normally someone in a higher career position. This form of backbiting or causing harm has made gossip the malicious tool that it is today.

When asked to describe the type of people that gossip and the tactics they use, the participants identified a term - Professional Office Gossipers (POGs). One participant explained:

'POGs are the group of people within every working environment who are friendly with everyone, know everyone's stories and live off spreading these juicy bits after having blown them out of proportion. For some unknown reason, people feel the need to share their life stories with these people, which makes them (the POGs) feel superior in knowing something that others don't know.'

Participants identified 'gossip or rumour mongers' as a synonym for POGs. The participants were asked to describe these POGs in terms of their demographics and the tactics they use to gossip. One of the main distinctions highlighted was that of gender. Fifteen participants believed that POGs are men and women equally, eight participants were of the opinion that women gossip more and one participant believed that men gossip more. It was the belief of some participants that men and women POGs gossip for different reasons and use different tactics. One participant stated:

'Women gossip to become friends while men establish a friendship first and once there is a foundation for trust, they gossip.'

From the above, it can be said that women open up more easily than men and are more willing to share information. It was the belief of many participants that female friendships are formed and based on office gossip conversation while men first establish a friendship: speaking about cars, sport and motorbikes. Only once the relationship is established and the men are sure that they can trust each other do they start to share gossip information. It was also mentioned that men and women POGs gossip about different things. Men gossip about a single topic while women can gossip about 'anything and everything'. This

means that women will speculate about 'who said what?', 'who ate what for lunch?' and 'whose car is parked outside?'. Men on the other hand talk about one thing only: namely anything with a sexual connotation. One participant summed it up in the following way:

'When I hear about an office affair, it always comes from a male. They are always the first to know because they enjoy boasting about their conquests. It is really quite shocking to hear the things that come out their mouths. They are not shy to ask you personal questions and know more details than women.'

A few participants agreed with this statement, leaning towards the notion that men do gossip as much as women, especially when it comes to information of a sexual nature. But it was also mentioned that women tend to be more malicious or nasty when they gossip. One participant said:

'Women use gossip as a conscious tactic to undermine other women in the office who are in higher positions while men use other tactics to undermine. Although these tactics are still gossip, men attack a person's ability directly and to the person's face instead of behind their back.'

In opposition to the above, other participants mentioned that men gossip just as much, but they are able to hide their maliciousness better. This could be attributed to the fact that women are supposedly more emotional and could therefore find it more difficult to contain themselves in a bout of vicious anger.

Interestingly enough, the female participants were willing to admit that there were cases where women gossiped more. Males on the other hand either said females gossiped more or equally as much as men, but they never mentioned that they themselves could be the POGs or gossip mongers. This means that although perceptions are changing, the common stereotype of women being gossipers still holds even if this research article shows that men and women gossip equally, but about different things. One male participant explained that women gossip more for fun while men do it more for information purposes, emphasising that even when men gossip, they pretend that they are doing something else. It is as if they really do not want to be labelled as gossipers. To support this, a few female participants said that when men gossip they tend to be more structured, rational, logical and objective as if to mask what they are actually doing, but ultimately they are still gossiping.

One of the outcomes mentioned earlier was the development of a typology in order to provide a clearer picture of gossip within the realm of informal communication. This typology will be discussed in greater detail below.

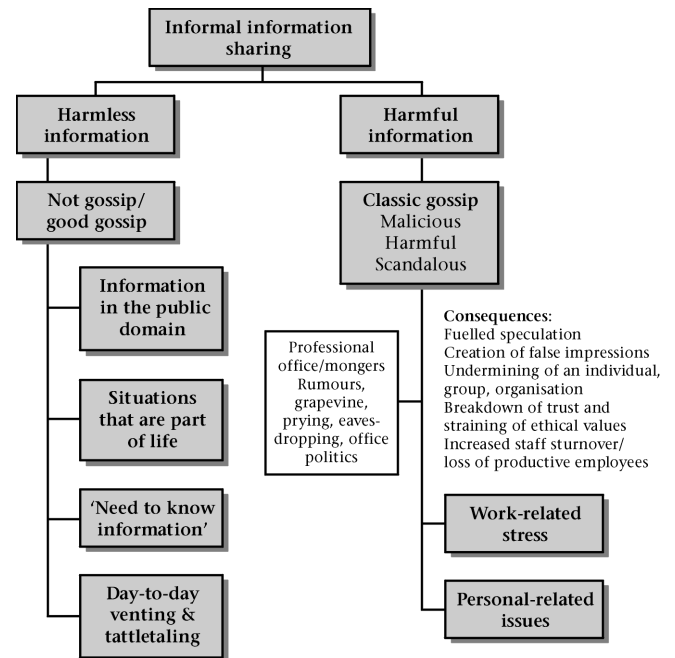**A typology of gossip in the workplace**
Mouton and Marais (1990) define a typology as a conceptual framework in which phenomena are classified in terms of characteristics that they have in common with other phenomena. Typologies are found in every discipline in the social sciences and in this case a typology was developed in order to classify gossip into main and subtypes. Although the typology is discussed last in this article, it was the first development to arise during the data analysis phase and was used to develop the working definition of gossip in the workplace. As mentioned, during data analysis the process of open coding led to the identification of categories (themes). As general trends emerged, a typology of gossip was developed. The results of the card-sorting exercise also aided in the development of the typology. Table 4 depicts the results of the card-sorting exercise and how each case was rated by the participants. A general sequence is presented below the table, depicting the most common sequence for the card-sorting exercise. The sequences were used to determine how information is categorised into different types according to the properties they possess.

TABLE 4
PARTICIPANT RATINGS FOR THE CARD-SORTING EXERCISES

	No. of participants rating the case:			
CASE	Not gossip	Slight gossip	Quite a bit of gossip	Very much gossip
A	0	0	1	24
B	0	1	12	11
C	12	9	4	0
D	21	4	0	0
E	3	6	10	6
F	13	8	1	3
G	6	7	7	5
H	0	0	4	21
I	0	1	5	19
J	7	5	6	7
K	3	4	7	6

Sequence based on the above statistics from least to most gossip:

LEAST D F C J G E K B I A H MOST

Figure 3: Typology of Gossip in the Workplace

Information in the informal sense can be viewed in terms of Figure 3. Information sharing can take place on two levels: sharing information that is harmless, and sharing information that is harmful. Information that is harmless is basically seen as 'good gossip' or information that is not gossip. There was general consensus that fine and definite lines are difficult to determine when it comes to information that is 'not gossip' and 'good gossip' as they seem to overlap. In addition, 'gossip' and 'not gossip' are also closely related concepts that can vary on a scale in terms of their maliciousness or seriousness. It was agreed that although gossip is generally harmful and negative, there are grey areas that yield to the divulgence of information being perceived as less serious.

Good gossip refers to the sharing of information that could have a positive intention, is completely harmless in nature, generally does not have negative consequences and is divulged because it needs to be made known. The main criterion for harmless information is that it does not cause harm. Within '**good gossip**' there are four subtypes (as identified by the participants): (1) information in the public domain, (2) situations that are part of life, (3) 'need to know information', and (4) day-to-day venting and tattletaling. These will be discussed in more detail.

Information in the public domain refers to any information that is available to everyone through the media. Examples include international news such as the death of the Pope. It was enquired whether Hollywood/tabloid information would fit into this domain, and 15 participants believed that Hollywood information was gossip and potentially harmful gossip. One opinion is given below:

> 'You're speculating on information which may not even be factual. Reporters are known to make up stories and, at the end of the day, it is still offensive and damaging to the person who is being gossiped about.'

The nine participants who believed that Hollywood information was not gossip or harmless gossip added that the information was available and free to all. The people are not personally known, and being victims of tabloid gossip comes with the territory of being famous. Since this issue does not fall directly into the domain of interest in this research, it was not studied further, and is placed in the 'not gossip' category purely because it is information available to everyone via the media.

Situations that are part of life refer to two extremes: information that is light-hearted in nature (engagements, weddings, birthdays, births and promotions) and information that is 'darker' in nature (death and illness). Two cases, C and D (refer to Table 1), fall into the category of situations that are part of life. Case D was rated as 'not gossip' by 21 participants, while the remaining four participants rated the case as 'slight/harmless gossip'. The general reasoning was that the case depicted positive and harmless information. A few participants even commented that information of this nature could never be gossip and that it is more difficult for positive information to be construed as gossip (provided that the information is not edited). Case C was rated as 'not gossip/slightly harmless gossip' by 21 participants. The agreement was that the intention in disclosing this information was not harmful. It was explained that:

> 'The intention was not to gossip but rather to give an honest account of the boss's whereabouts.'
>
> 'Death is rarely a source of gossip. People don't speak badly about people who have passed away.'

Those who classified the case as 'quite a bit of gossip' were unanimous in saying that the intention was not malicious but that perhaps the employee should have asked the boss's permission to disclose the information, allowed the boss to disclose the information himself or respected the fact that he may not want anyone to know this information. When asked if it was acceptable to disclose that the supervisor's mother was brutally murdered or had committed suicide, all the participants were again unanimous in saying that this type of detail was completely inappropriate due to its sensitive nature. In situations like this, the participants believed that saying 'she passed away' was sufficient because giving further details would lead to speculation and could then develop into gossip.

The above case also fits into the next subtype: '*need to know*' information. As the name states, this refers to information that needs to be made known for reasons such as accommodating or helping someone. It was suggested that in circumstances of death in the family, the correct people at work such as colleagues and managers have the right to know so that they can offer support and re-delegate the work of the bereaved to others while they are away. Knowing this type of information also ensures that colleagues will not only understand the employee's behaviour, but will also respond sympathetically towards the employee. Case G received mixed reactions: 13 participants believed the case was 'not gossip/harmless gossip', while 12 participants believed the case to be 'quite a bit' to 'very much' gossip. What was common, however, was that all the participants were of the opinion that when a situation impacts negatively on one's work performance and can be detrimental to one's performance rating, the supervisor has the right to know in order to be accommodating. Although the actual reason and details need not be disclosed the supervisor is entitled to know that the secretary is, for example, going through a difficult time or is experiencing personal problems. For this reason, the case was termed 'need to know information'. One participant summed it up as follows:

> 'How can you expect people to understand your behaviour and to cut you some slack if you don't explain to them what is going on?'

The last subtype of harmless information is *day-to-day venting and tattletaling*. Definitions for these terms are given in Table 1. Although none of the cases were identified to fit into this category, the participants identified that there were situations where information sharing was not gossip but where the dissemination was essential for pure venting purposes. Situations falling into this category are generally seen as harmless because the intention is more to vent frustration and not to cause harm or deliberate gossip. An example would be to exclaim annoyingly to a colleague that due to the heavy workload, you will have to come to the office during the weekend and therefore miss out on the weekend rugby on television.

Harmful information, as the name states, is information that once disclosed causes harm to an individual, a group of people or an organisation. Therefore, although the intention of the information disseminator may not be to harm, the consequence is negative and leads to the altered perceptions of other people towards the subject (person/s being gossiped about), ultimately creating false impressions of that person or situation. Harmful information was termed as classic gossip by many participants. This type of information is characterised as being malicious and scandalous, and creating speculation and assumption. The information is gained through acts of eavesdropping (overhearing), prying into people's personal lives, rumour mongering, speaking out of turn and hearing through the grapevine (refer to Table 1 for concept definitions). This is the domain of a group of people termed POGs or gossip/rumour mongers, mentioned previously in the article.

The *classic/harmful gossip* domain consists of two subtypes namely *work-related gossip* and *personal-related gossip*. A common characteristic of both types of classic gossip is that the information is normally sensitive:

> 'Information that is generally disappointing, embarrassing or personal, for example, a daughter who was not accepted to University, a rape in the family, or a family member who has AIDS.'

Work-related gossip refers to situations such as retrenchments, promotions and pension cuts, while personal-related gossip refers to home or family situations. Organisational/office politics falls within this spectrum of gossip. One participant described office politics as 'one of the handshakes in gossip', meaning that office politics goes hand in hand with gossip in the workplace. For instance, when someone is promoted, this is known as an office issue, but the minute people start speculating about the employee not being deserving of the promotion, then it becomes office

politics. Therefore, office politics results from office-related talk, especially when this type of talk has negative outcomes. Five of the 11 cases presented to the participants dealt with work-related issues.

Case B was rated as serious, harmful gossip by 23 participants. The main issue was that confidentiality was broken, and that the divulging of this information would affect the collective (all the employees), and lead to unnecessary fear, panic and emotional stress. This case was compared to case C, which was mentioned under 'need to know' information. What came through strongly is that although both cases dealt with the disclosure of confidential information, in case C, the information was disclosed with a good intention and to save someone's job or performance rating. It was also stated that the information was disclosed to the correct party, i.e. the supervisor. Therefore, this case was not seen as classic gossip. Case B was different in that the disclosure of the information affected a whole group of people negatively. It was also mentioned that the company had the right to disclose this type of information to the employees at an appropriate time.

Case K was viewed as less severe in terms of gossip because there was no confidentiality agreement in place, but the majority still rated it as harmful gossip because of the repercussions it would have on the employees, i.e. it would cause panic and fear. Case I was seen as extremely serious in terms of gossip. Although nepotism is in no way supported, it was explained that it was not right to disclose this type of information to a group of colleagues as it led to a misperception of an employee and would cause people to treat the employee differently. Another issue of concern was the authenticity of the information because it was based on hearsay information. Case F also concerns the topic of authenticity. Overall, this case was rated as 'good gossip' because as an employee, it is one's ethical responsibility to bring these types of issues to light. The majority of the participants said they would also have disclosed the information so that the innocent manager would not lose his/her job. However, an issue of concern was the reliability of the 'reliable' source. A participant said the following, which reflects the views of the other participants:

'How reliable is the reliable source? Did the source see it or did the source hear it from another reliable source?'

The opinion regarding the above case is that if the source witnessed the event and you trust the source, then it is first-hand information as opposed to second-hand information, which is heard via the grapevine and could be dubious, leading to incorrect assumptions. The last case relating to work issues was case J. This was the most debatable case: the participants believed this information to be harmless and stated that because the situation impacted on the business, it was the leader's responsibility to bring the issue to light. The same participants also said it was not gossip because the information was given to the correct source, i.e. the supervisor and not fellow employees, in which case it would have been more serious gossip. However, 13 participants believed this case to be extremely serious due to the lack of evidence in the allegation that the employee had stolen the stock. The participants believed that this had far-reaching consequences as it was defamatory to that employee's character and could create false impressions. From a legal perspective, if the employee is not guilty, he/she could sue for defamation of character, making this case more serious.

Personal-related gossip may or may not impact on work performance. Personal issues that do not impact on one's work performance are seen as the most malicious of all gossip and tend to be scandalous in nature, for example, talking about affairs (case H), speculating about someone's sexual preference (case A), or discussing that a colleague's daughter

was not accepted to university (case E). These case studies were rated unanimously as 'very much' gossip because they were seen as not relating to the person's individual performance at work and was generally no one's business. The issues that could impact on work performance, such as divorces (case G mentioned above), were only seen as serious gossip if the information were disclosed to all the incorrect people, such as fellow employees. However, when the information was disclosed to a supervisor or manager, it was less likely to be perceived as gossip, provided that unnecessary details were not disclosed.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research was conducted to develop a typology of gossip in the workplace and to define and identify its parameters. The research also acquired additional findings such as a greater understanding of the POGs, the tactics they use, the reason they gossip and the type of information they gossip about. Given the above, the following is a brief discussion on recommendations for possible organisational interventions for preventing and dealing with malicious gossip in the workplace. Gossip can be very serious in an organisation to the point that it can be detrimental: people leave their jobs, motivation and staff morale decrease, causing serious harm to the individual, group or company. Greengard and Samuel (2001) are of the opinion that malicious gossip can be controlled if a company nurtures a functional and positive culture. Some individuals are of the opinion that as serious as gossip is, it cannot be controlled because it is part of what human beings do. Below is the response of one participant, which was the general feeling of those who believed it could never be controlled:

'Gossip is part of human nature and Professional Office Gossipers become smarter. They gossip when you are not around. It is hard to give an incentive for people not to gossip.'

Other individuals believe that there are ways and means to control gossip to a certain extent. One intervention highlights the discussion and explanation of the negative implications of gossip, and the penalisation of employees for gossiping. In this way, a gossip-free working environment with high moral values can be created. A gossip-free culture would have to start with top management leading by example and having an open-door policy for employees to raise issues of concern so that they can be addressed prior to their becoming gossip. Organisations that instil values of corporate governance such as fairness, transparency, open communication and trust, can reduce the effects of office politics and gossip. Telling the truth is of particular importance as it was mentioned that by telling the truth, employees would not have anything to speculate about. The 'honesty is the best policy' theme coincides greatly with the view of many that from a management point of view, certain steps can be followed to ensure that information is not misconstrued. This involves being cautious with whom confidential information is disclosed and being consistent with the delivery of messages. It is believed that when it comes to work-related issues such as retrenchments, restructuring and pension cuts, which affect the organisation as a whole, the company should avoid telling groups of people at a time and rather communicate them to all employees simultaneously. This 'tell everyone or tell no one' policy ensures that information is not misconstrued and does not develop into harmful gossip.

An **anti-gossip policy** could be compiled to counter workplace gossip. The development of such a policy could be aided by clearly stating how the organisation defines gossip and perhaps using the working definition derived in this article. Other recommendations include the formulation of

codes of ethics, increasing awareness of the phenomenon through communication **campaigns** and the development of **training and orientation programmes** for new employees. Depending on the severity of malicious gossip in an organisation, **workshops** dealing with the issues could also be used to educate employees on the possible serious consequences of gossip, for example, the erosion of trust, morale and interpersonal respect. However, to believe that organisations would be willing to budget for such campaigns, training programmes and workshops is unlikely, but the incorporation of gossip awareness as a dimension of other training programmes and workshops could be plausible. By including a section on gossip awareness into a team building workshop, ethical awareness campaign or leadership programme, organisations could raise the awareness of the detrimental effects of malicious gossip and educate employees on how to deal with and avoid it, without having to budget for it as a specific stand-alone intervention.

Another way of discouraging and dealing with gossip is to use a procedure used by many organisations, namely **confidentiality agreements**. These agreements could be extended to the governing of information that could maliciously hurt employees and/or the company. It is also recommended that HR innovate ways to incorporate this into company policies and procedures.

Coaching by managers and supervisors could also be used as a device to counter workplace gossip. Coaching provides the platform (open forum) for employees in an organisation to vent their anger, frustrations and concerns to one person, the coach, as opposed to people all over the office who could in turn spread the information.

The new age movement of **appreciative inquiry** could be used to mitigate gossip by using positive good-news stories. Incorporating appreciative inquiry into organisational systems and policies encourages people to focus on the positive and that which is visionary, instead of the negative. It was explained that:

> '*Appreciative inquiry is a deliberate way to counter negative stories by bringing people together to design a protocol with positive questions so that people cannot talk about the negative problems...people respect this and don't undermine something that's positive. It takes people up a spiral where people start to identify positive themes. If this continues it becomes part of the work culture.*'

As Mouton and Marais (1990) point out, any research involving humans has shortcomings. We encountered the following problems which could have impacted on the research findings. Interviews were conducted in venues chosen by the participants. Some of these venues, particularly those in coffee shops were not conducive to interviewing. The final adjusted interview schedule was only developed after the fifth interview therefore not every single participant received the identical interview which could have impacted on the reliability of the findings. Since the accounts presented by some participants could have been influenced by the fact that the interviewer knew them personally, validity may have been affected. On the other hand, those participants whom were not personally known might have not had complete trust in the interviewer and held back sensitive information.

Further studies in this domain could include inquiry into the issues of gossip as it transcribes across gender and culture. Researchers interested in the phenomenon could also test the above recommendations in order to determine the most effective ways of controlling gossip.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the research were generally consistent with the literature review in terms of the definition of gossip and the common aspects of gossip. However, the literature available on gossip as far as it could be established was rather limited and vague, and the research findings may have added more substance. In addition, the definition of gossip in the workplace, the identification of criteria essential to determine the extent to which information could be construed as gossip, the development of a typology for gossip in the workplace and a better understanding of the POGs and the tactics they use have complemented existing knowledge of the phenomenon. The formation of the detailed definition of gossip in the workplace could prove useful for organisations that wish to control gossip. It was stated earlier in the article that gossip in the workplace could be defined as 'the spreading of information between two or more people about a situation or person they may or may not know, behind their back, regarding information that is of no relevance to them. The content of the message is not for public consumption and the disclosure of the information leads to undesirable circumstances such as fuelled speculation, false impressions and the breakdown of trust'. Given the working definition, the formation of anti-gossip policies could be useful in stating the parameters of gossip, thereby providing a more detailed under-standing of when information can be construed as gossip in the workplace. The working definition could further be used in the formulation of codes of ethics, which might in turn increase ethical awareness pertaining to this phenomenon.

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