

**PERCEPTIONS OF OFFICE GOSSIP AMONGST
DIVERSE GROUPS IN THE WORKPLACE**

BY

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work on which this dissertation is based is original, except where acknowledgement indicates otherwise, and that neither the whole work nor part of it has been, is being, or will be submitted for another degree at this university or any other university or tertiary education institution or examination body.

Lise Gerber

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ABSTRACT

Purpose– The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a difference in the perceptions of diverse individuals, from different racial groups and genders, regarding office gossip.

Design– This paper followed a qualitative interpretivist research design, and content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data.

Findings– The findings indicate that the perceptions of office gossip are not gender specific, whereas there were indications of race specific perceptions related to office gossip. A definition of office gossip was compiled and the nature of and the participants in office gossip were identified, while the reasons why people gossip in the workplace and the impact of gossip on an organisation and its employees were emphasised. Furthermore, the characteristics that can be used to draw a line between healthy communication and gossip were identified.

Research limitations– The limitations of this study were that the results were limited to the respondents and the specific work context used. In addition, seeing that the focus of this study was the diverse perspectives of individuals from different genders and racial groups, other factors, such as personal and organisational factors that could also have influenced their perceptions of office gossip, were not considered.

Practical implications– The results of this study should alert employers to the need for controlling office gossip effectively. Also, formal channels of communication should be utilised effectively to ensure that the grapevine is not misused. Furthermore, employers need to develop a policy against malicious office gossip which should be context-sensitive and detailed. Because gossip is not gender specific, attention also should be given to gossip across genders. Lastly, culture-sensitivity training could prevent different cultures gossiping about one another.

Originality– This paper makes a contribution to the literature on gossip in organisations, as there is little known research in South Africa or elsewhere that explores the diverse perceptions of office gossip among employees from different racial groups.

Key words– gossip; office gossip; race; culture; gender; communication

Paper type– Research paper

SAMEVATTING

Doel– Die doel van hierdie studie was om te bepaal of daar 'n verskil is tussen die persepsies van diverse individue, vanaf verskillende rasse groepe en geslagte, aangaande skinder in die werksplek.

Ontwerp– Die navorsingsontwerp van hierdie studie was kwalitatief en interpreterend en inhoudsanalise is gebruik om die data te analiseer.

Bevindinge– Die bevindinge het aangedui dat die persepsies van skinder in die werksplek nie geslag-spesifiek is nie, maar daar was wel aanduidings dat die perspektiewe aangaande skinder in die werksplek rasse-spesifiek was. 'n Definisie van skinder in die werksplek is opgestel en die aard van en deelnemers aan skinder in die werksplek, sowel as die redes waarom mense skinder en die impak van skinder op 'n organisasie en die werknemers, is benadruk. Ook die karaktereienskappe wat gebruik is om 'n lyn te trek tussen gesonde kommunikasie en skinder is geïdentifiseer.

Navorsingsbeperkinge– Die beperkinge van hierdie studie was dat die bevindinge beperk was tot die groep mense wat deelgeneem het aan die studie en die spesifieke werkskonteks waarin die studie plaasgevind het. Verder, siende dat die fokus van die studie gerig was op die diverse persepsies van individue vanaf verskillende geslagte en rasse-groepe, is ander faktore, soos persoonlike en organisatoriese faktore wat ook die persepsies van skinder in die werksplek kon beïnvloed, nie in ag geneem nie.

Praktiese implikasies– Die bevindinge van hierdie studie moet werkgewers se aandag daarop rig dat dit nodig is om skinder in die werksplek effektief te beheer. Verder moet die formele kanale van kommunikasie effektief gebruik word om te verseker dat informele kanale van kommunikasie nie misbruik word nie. 'n Beleid teen kwaadwillige skinder in die werksplek, wat konteks-sensitief en gedetailleerd is, moet deur werkgewers geïmplementeer word. Siende dat skinder nie geslagspesifiek is nie, moet aandag gegee word aan skinder deur beide geslagte. Laastens kan kultuur-sensitiewe opleiding voorkom dat verskillende kulture oor mekaar skinder.

Oorspronklikheid– Hierdie studie maak 'n bydrae tot die literatuur wat betrekking het tot skinder in organisasies, aangesien daar min navorsing in Suid-Afrika of elders

gedoen is om die diverse persepsies van skinder in die werksplek onder werknemers van verskillende rassegroepe te bestudeer.

Sleutelwoorde– skinder; skinder op kantoor; ras; kultuur; geslag; kommunikasie

Verslag tipe– Navorsingsverslag

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY



“We are not scientific observers who can dismiss scrutiny of our values by claiming scientific neutrality and authority. Neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world.” (Charmaz, 2006, p.15)

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“Pssst...Have you heard?” These are words typically used to capture the attention of an audience and to create a context in which gossiping can take place. Gossip plays a significant role in informal conversation, and the workplace is not exempt from this phenomenon. Office gossip is a phenomenon that occurs in the workplace and that can range from harmless chit-chat to malicious discussions of co-workers behind their backs. If this seemingly innocent form of informal conversation is not controlled and dealt with adequately, it could have dire consequences in the workplace. Malicious gossip saps the productivity of an organisation, diverts the attention of co-workers from their duties, causes segregation among the workforce, leads to monetary losses, and can inflict a great amount of suffering on the people who find themselves the targets of such gossip (Akande & Odewale, 1994; Armour, 2007; Bruce & Bruce, 1997; De Gouveia, Van Vuuren & Crafford, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Michelson & Mouly, 2004).

Michelson and Mouly (2000, 2004), Noon and Delbridge (1993) and Kurland and Pelled (2000) concur that, despite the potentially harmful impact that office gossip can have on

the workforce, gossip processes have received less attention than other work-related processes. This could be due to the fact that workplace gossip does not constitute directly observable, transparent behaviour, but is more private and secretive in nature and therefore more difficult to evaluate and control.

This chapter outlines the background to the research; the research problem; the research purpose and research questions; the significance and contributions of the study; and the limitations, delimitations and assumptions of the study. The chapter concludes with a structured outline of the chapters that follow.

1.2 BACKGROUND SETTING OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The background setting of the research problem is described in terms of a brief overview of the literature available on the topic under discussion, as well as a discussion of research from previous studies on office gossip.

1.2.1 Background to gossip and office gossip

Gossip within this study is defined as “...informal, evaluative talk about a member of the discussants’ social environment who is not present” (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 123). In addition, *office gossip* is 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” (De Gouveia et al., 2005, p. 67).

Gossip has an influence on and is prevalent in every individual’s day-to-day life. A number of authors have emphasised that gossip is an important part of human nature and that it should be studied as such (Dunbar, 1993; Gluckman, 1963; Haviland, 1977; Levin & Arluke, 1985). The importance of gossip in conversation is emphasised by the

following: a person who does not gossip or who does not react to gossip with a bit of curiosity could be marginalised from his or her social group (Eggins & Slade, 1997, as cited in Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963), whereas a person who gossips too much could also be marginalised from his or her social group (Gilmore, 1978; Yerkovich, 1977). Gossip has been broadly researched by anthropologists, sociologists, economists, sociolinguists, philosophers, social historians, psychologists and evolutionary biologists for decades (Besnier, 1989; Foster, 2004; Fox, 2001; Handelman, 1973; Holland, 1996; Loudon, 1961; Ramos, 2000; Stirling, 1956). The occurrence of *workplace gossip*, its functions and its potentially beneficial and detrimental impact on the workplace have only become a topic of research in more recent years (Akande & Odewale, 1994; De Gouveia et al., 2005; Dunn, 2002; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson & Mouly, 2000).

Although researchers of office gossip have made ample suggestions to control, minimise or completely eradicate office gossip from the workplace (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Jacobs, 2009; Matthews, 2007), insufficient research has been done to ascertain which elements have an impact on the occurrence and perceptions of office gossip and the characteristics of these elements. Therefore, the prevalence, consequences and management of gossip have received more attention from researchers than the possible *causes* of gossip. In terms of the elements that could possibly influence the propensity to gossip and the perceptions of gossip, researchers have seemingly not explored the possible impact of culturally diverse backgrounds. In addition, there still seems to be inconclusive research available on gender specific perspectives on gossip and the likelihood that a man or a woman will engage in gossip.

More research on the phenomenon of gossip in the workplace, especially across races and genders, is needed, as is exemplified by the following: (1) Limited research has been conducted to broaden the understanding of gossip in the workplace, especially within the South African working environment. (2) Gossip has been associated with a negative impact on productivity, the targets thereof and the relationship between employees within an organisation (Armour, 2007; Bruce & Bruce, 1997; De Gouveia et al., 2005; Holland, 1996; Joyce, 2002; Matthews, 2007; Picarda, 2008). More knowledge

of this phenomenon is therefore necessary to enable employers to manage it effectively. (3) The study of the perceptions of office gossip across diverse racial groups and genders is justified by the continuous reference made within gossip literature to the social component of gossip and its influence on the manifestation thereof. There is limited research available on a possible relationship between different races, genders and behavioural tendencies in terms of workplace gossip and of gossip in general (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Groeschl & Doherty, 2000; Holland, 1996; Michelson & Mouly, 2000). In summary, it is obvious that further research on office gossip across racial groups and genders is essential – especially in a multicultural society such as South Africa.

1.2.2 Research on gossip and office gossip

The theorising of gossip as a genre of conversation is still very elementary, as there are no empirical grounds for most of the assumptions made in terms of gossip (Foster, 2004; Michelson & Mouly, 2004; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Van der Merwe, 2005; Wert & Salovey, 2004; Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells & Weiser, 2000). Wilson et al. (2000) state that this could be due to two factors: (1) The conceptualisation of gossip is still under debate – although group-serving intentions for gossip have been identified (Dunbar, 1993; Gluckman, 1963), other researchers still maintain that gossip has individual, self-serving roots. (2) Scientists find it challenging to study gossip, as the presence of an outsider makes participants reluctant to engage in this activity while being watched. Therefore, the conceptualisation of gossip (the group-serving versus the self-serving debate) has to be resolved for the meaning of gossip to be more widely agreed upon, and the methodological challenges of gossip have to be resolved for the study of gossip to become more inclusive and not merely descriptive in nature.

Numerous studies on gossip have been conducted from a social-theoretical perspective. The most important findings are explored in greater detail in the following section.

1.2.2.1 Participants in and targets of gossip

Michelson and Mouly (2000), Kurland and Pelled (2000), Burke (2004) and De Gouveia et al. (2005) state that, despite the universal viewpoint of gossip as inappropriate, gossip seems to play a significant role in the world of work. In addition, gossip seems to occur across all age groups, genders and career statuses or levels (Fox, 2001; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Van der Merwe, 2005). In this section, research that focuses on the occurrence of gossip across genders and age groups, and the typical targets of gossip (gossipees), will be explored.

a. Occurrence of gossip across genders and age groups

Although people tend to think that women gossip more than men, research does not concur with this stereotype (Brennan, 2009). It was stated by Van der Merwe (2005) that, in the past, various studies were undertaken to determine the grouping of people who typically participate in gossip. She went on to explain that, historically, it was predominantly women who were regarded as tattletales. According to her, this stereotyping of women as gossipers could be regarded as a form of *sexism*, as research studies by Allen and Guy (1974, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005), Bergmann (1993, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005) and Arbor (1995, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005) have all confirmed that gossip is universal and takes place equally among both genders and across all age groups. These studies therefore emphasise the fact that the stereotyping of women as the primary gossipers is unfounded and that men are just as prone to gossip when in conversation with others.

There seems to be *very little proof* that women gossip more than men (Dunbar, 1993; Eckert, 1990; Haviland, 1977; Levin & Arluke, 1985; Loudon, 1961), and if any difference was found it was very little. Evaldsson (2002) and Goodwin (1990, as cited in De Backer, 2005) have confirmed that there are no differences between young men and women in this regard. As age progresses into adulthood, women appear to spend *more time gossiping* and the *topics* gossiped about seem to differ among men and women

(Levin & Arluke, 1985; Nevo & Nevo, 1993). According to a study by the Social Issues Research Centre (2007), women seem to gossip for slightly longer periods a day on average than men (on average 69 minutes for women and 63 minutes for men). Women between the ages of 26 and 35 years tend to spend the most time gossiping, with an average of 74 minutes dedicated to gossip a day. In addition, the study found that television shows, co-workers and office gossip were the most prevalent topics among both men and women. Women, however, seem to emphasise their feelings, personal lives and families, whereas men prefer more factual topics of discussion. Furthermore, women seem to have a wider range of subjects to chat about than men. De Backer (2005) and Tebbutt (1995) concur with these findings when they state that when men gossip, they seem to discuss their colleagues, their line of work and “things” (more factual topics), whereas women appear to prefer talking about the personal lives of their allies and relatives and about “feelings” (more emotional topics).

De Backer (2005) found that the *perceptions* of 300 participants from different age groups and of different sexes about the difference between men and women regarding gossip were diverse in terms of their age groups. According to Bruno (n.d.), other research studies have concluded that men and women perceive gossip differently and that they also engage in gossip in a different manner. According to Tannen (1990, as cited in Bruno, n.d.) and Tebbutt (1995), women are inclined to be more cooperative due to their concern for people, to steer clear of arguments and hence to display *indirect avoidant behaviour* through gossip. Men, on the other hand, are more individualistic, tend to deal with confrontations more directly and are therefore more aggressive in dealing with arguments. From these research results it therefore seems as if women are more likely to engage in office gossip if they are in a conflict situation, whereas men deal with conflict more directly. Kathryn Waddington from London’s City University presented her research to the British Psychological Society’s occupational psychology conference in Winchester in 2001. She reported that her research on eighty health workers concluded that women more easily confessed to *enjoying* gossip, whereas men preferred to rather refer to it as *networking* (“Gossips may be...”, 2001). This finding was supported by a study cited by Fox (2001), which found that women are more driven than

men to make gossip entertaining through high and lively tones of voice, the provision of detailed messages, and enthusiastic feedback.

McAndrew, Bell and Garcia (2007) concluded that both men and women show more *interest* in people who are of the same gender as themselves, and whereas men prefer to share a confidence with their romantic counterparts, women seem to be just as likely to confide in their romantic partners as in their female friends. According to De Backer (2005), when her research respondents were asked what the *intentions* of men and women are when they gossip, most of the participants concurred that female gossip seemed to be more harmful in nature than male gossip. The participants seemed to believe that female gossip was grounded in jealousy and therefore hurtful, whereas male gossip seemed to be focussed more on emphasising their social knowledge.

b. The targets of gossip – gossipees

According to Ben-Ze'ev (1994, as cited in De Backer, 2005), people typically gossip about three main groups (gossipees): (1) people in their direct social environment; (2) well-known individuals; and (3) individuals whose private lives are out of the ordinary. Fox (2001), Waddington ("Gossips may be...", 2001) and Wert and Salovey (2004) point out that more reserved and aloof individuals are often the target of gossip, intimidation and harassment. Other people who are especially vulnerable to gossip seem to be those who constantly breach the social norms within a specific society (Almirol, 1981).

1.2.2.2 The prevalence of gossip in conversation

Dunbar (1993) confirmed through his analysis of a sample of human discussions that, when they gossip, people spend 60 percent of the time gossiping about relations and private occurrences. This concurs with the findings of Emler (1994, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004) and Levin and Arluke (1985). Fox (2001) reported that two-thirds of communication comprises gossip, which seems to be of critical importance to a human being's social, mental and physical well-being. Fox (2001) stated that the pervasiveness

of gossip was found in numerous settings, and across various age groups and social backgrounds. It was also discovered that around five percent of the time spent gossiping was dedicated to condemn or evaluate others negatively. Another five percent of discussions dedicated to social issues were used as a means to obtain or offer advice in terms of the manner in which social situations should be dealt with. The remaining 90 percent of gossip revolved around “who is doing what to whom” and private societal occurrences.

A study by Steelcase in August 2007 reported that two-thirds of employees indicated that workers gossip about organisational news (Armour, 2007). Furthermore, twenty-eight percent of employees who did not have consistent channels for the communication of news stated that they used gossip as their primary information supply (Armour, 2007). From these studies it can therefore be concluded that gossip is a very prevalent and intrinsic part of dialogue among humans. In addition, gossip could be a response to a lack of information.

1.2.2.3 The perceptions and functions of gossip

Research conducted by De Backer (2005) revealed that the participants in her study viewed gossip as “bad talk” about shocking occurrences. Despite the participants indicating that gossip did not only consist of “bad talk”, they gave mixed responses in relation to also defining it as harmless chitchat. Interestingly, gossip was viewed as more negative as the respondents’ ages increased. The younger respondents therefore did not view gossip as negatively as the older respondents. In a study conducted by Wilson et al. (2000), 195 participants were asked to rate the extent to which they endorsed or condemned specific situations in which a neighbour was gossiped about behind his or her back. The researchers found that self-serving gossip was condemned, whereas responsible gossip based on norm infringements was endorsed. Group-serving gossip was therefore approved of. The researchers stated that it seemed as if the manner in which gossip was responded to was context sensitive – in certain scenarios, the reputation of a person who did not gossip could be in greater jeopardy than if he did

gossip. This could be due to the fact that the group was compromised and necessary information was not shared with the group. The social control mechanism of gossip therefore seems to be acceptable in groups.

1.2.2.4 The nature of the gossip

Negative gossip seems to appeal to people, as it can be used to distinguish the in group from the out group; it can enhance a person's self-esteem; and it can reveal a lot of information about the person who gossips (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer & Swann Jr., 2006). Dunbar (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 2004) proposed that negative gossip can be particularly useful in social bonding. Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann and Milinski (2007) found in a study of 126 students that gossip can be used to manipulate the subsequent behaviour of people. People are inclined to gossip more positively about individuals who cooperate in teams, whereas they are inclined to gossip more negatively about those who do not. Moreover, people seem to be more cooperative when working with someone when they have had access to positive gossip about a person, than when they have had access to negative gossip about him or her.

McAndrew et al. (2007) found that gossipers typically spread malicious and negative information about competitors and positive information about allies and partners. De Backer's (2005) exploratory research indicated that, in terms of gossip, the participants seemed to take the reliability of the information source into consideration. Although the respondents were cognisant of possible retaliation from the target of the gossip, this was not on their minds while they gossiped, but rather subsequent to the gossip.

1.2.2.5 The impact of technology on gossip

In the organisations of today, communication is made easier and more efficient through computer-aided technologies (Robbins, 2005). Although face-to-face gossip is still a very popular channel to spread gossip (De Backer, 2005), the rise of technology has provided people with even more interfaces to discuss other people and events. With the

rapid growth in technology, office gossip has become a powerful force within organisations, which can enhance camaraderie, but also obliterate careers and relationships at work (Armour, 2007). The availability of instant messaging, emails, internet blogs and cell phones lead to the spread of destructive rumours at an increased pace (Armour, 2007; Fox, 2001).

A survey conducted by Blue Coat Systems Inc. in 2003 among 300 respondents found that 65 percent of employees in the United Kingdom and 39 percent of employees in the United States indicated that they had private discussions at work through instant messaging. Also, 80 percent of employees who had access to instant messaging stated that they participated in office gossip via instant messaging. A survey conducted in 1999 among senior directors of 800 FTSE-1,000 (Financial Times and the London Stock Exchange) organisations found that, despite the fact that email and internet utilisation among employees had increased, organisations in the United Kingdom had not taken adequate measures to ensure that they were protected from legal liabilities that could arise from the use of these communication channels (“Are you at e-risk?”, 1999). Twenty-two percent of the companies had been exposed to “cyber liabilities”, where emails had been used to gossip with others in or outside the organisations. Over half of these companies indicated that men were the main offenders in gossiping through emails (“Are you at e-risk?”, 1999). It therefore is clear that the use of technology to gossip poses organisations with the threat of cyber liabilities.

In summary, the research largely seems to concur that gossip is an integral part of conversation and that it is prevalent among both men and women, and across various age groups, career statuses and job levels. It has been found, however, that gossip topics, time spent gossiping, intention to gossip and perceptions of gossip differ across gender and age groups. Men and women seem to prefer talking about same-sex people. Women more freely admit to enjoying gossip. Men prefer to refer to gossip as networking. Some people seem to be more prone to be the subjects of gossip, whereas negative gossip seems to play important roles for individuals and inside groups. Group-serving gossip seems to be condoned, whereas self-serving gossip seems to be

opposed. The research emphasises the importance of dealing with gossip adequately, as employers may be faced with a legal backlash and cyber liabilities if they fail to protect employees from malicious gossip in the workplace. In addition, adequate channels of information are imperative if the onset of gossip is to be minimised.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

Against the above background it is evident that research regarding perceptions of gossip in the workplace is limited, which highlights the need to explore this topic more comprehensively. It is a necessity to explore this issue as previous research has confirmed that office gossip could have a profound impact on issues such as: employee productivity, work relationships and trust, ethical issues in the workplace, morale, job security, the climate of the work environment, job stress and anxiety, the professional standing and status of an employee, employee health and safety, the human rights of an employee, organisational liabilities, the implementation of change initiatives and the overall work satisfaction of employees (Armour, 2007; Bruce & Bruce, 1997; De Gouveia et al., 2005; Dunn, 2002; Holland, 1996; Joyce, 2002; Matthews, 2007; Picarda, 2008; Searle & Ball, 2004).

Also, various individuals and groups could possibly be affected by gossip. These include employees who gossip (gossipers); those who are the targets of gossip (gossipees); those who listen (and react) to the gossip; and even stakeholders of the organisation who ultimately will not be able to circumvent the negative consequences of gossip should it become malicious and influence the bottom line of the organisation negatively. No research could be found that has compared the cross-cultural perceptions of office gossip in South Africa. The need to investigate this topic has been emphasised by various researchers (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Groeschl & Doherty, 2000; Holland, 1996; Michelson & Mouly, 2000). In addition, despite the fact that genders have been the focus of gossip research, a comparison of their perceptions in the South African context has been found wanting. The focus of this study will therefore be the diversity of perceptions of employees regarding office gossip. This diversity is related to the different races and

men and women from each racial group. Looking at diverse groups will provide a perspective of how each individual perceives gossip. In this study the researcher will not be implying that, for example, a white man represents all white men – the aim is to determine how diverse individuals interpret and view gossip. Using respondents of different races and genders merely enables inquiry into the perceptions of diverse individuals.

In response to the call for research on the cross-cultural perceptions of office gossip and the need for more research on the gender specific perceptions of workplace gossip in South Africa, the main purpose of this study is hence to determine whether there is a difference in the perceptions of diverse individuals from different racial groups and genders regarding office gossip.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to answer the following specific research questions:

- a. How do diverse individuals define gossip within the workplace?
- b. What are the perceptions of diverse individuals regarding gossip in the workplace?
- c. What characteristics do diverse individuals identify when distinguishing between healthy communication and malicious gossip?

In attempting to understand the impact that race and gender have on perceptions of workplace gossip and the propensity to gossip at work, this study focused on office gossip, with a specific emphasis on the socio-cultural element of gossip. The units of analysis of the study were male and female employees representing the four main racial groups, namely white, African, Indian/Asian and coloured. The participants were sampled from the non-academic human resource department of a multicultural tertiary institution in Gauteng, South Africa. The study aims to provide insight into the multidimensional nature of office gossip and to shed some light on the complex interplay between office gossip and diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as office gossip and

genders. This could potentially aid management in controlling the phenomenon more effectively.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Companies in South Africa find themselves in a multicultural context. Hence, practical approaches have to be developed by management to enable effective management of its workforce, irrespective of its employees' genders, cultural backgrounds, value systems, work ethic and other differences. To enable management to control office gossip, similarities in the perceptions thereof have to be identified among the diverse employees. This will enable the development of an integrated framework of office gossip that is more widely understood across racial groups and genders. Studies have already been conducted to determine models of gossip in the workplace (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and models of gossip outside the work context (De Backer, 2005). What was found to be lacking was research on the differences in the perceptions of office gossip among diverse employees, which formed the focus of this study.

This study was therefore meaningful, as little research could be found that has been conducted in South Africa or elsewhere to explore a cross-cultural understanding of office gossip. There hence is a considerable gap in the literature regarding the topic of interest.

1.6 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The importance and benefits of the paper are extensive. From the above discussion it is evident that the current study will make a significant contribution in terms of academic and practical knowledge, and will make human resource practitioners, industrial and organisational psychologists and top management aware of the different perceptions across racial groups and genders in terms of office gossip.

From a practical perspective, the study will make the following contributions to the existing body of knowledge on office gossip: Firstly, the study enables the construction of a definition of office gossip based on the shared perceptions of its properties among diverse employees. This will allow management to develop a common understanding among employees of the properties of malicious gossip and accordingly enable them to fairly implement control measures should malicious gossip take place. Secondly, seeing that office gossip can have a direct impact on the principles advocated by corporate governance, on staff turnover and on absenteeism, which all relate to the effective functioning of the organisation, it is a necessity to explore this phenomenon in depth. Therefore, for the organisation to function optimally as a collective unit, the diverse employees in its workforce have to work together and communicate effectively – in the absence of malicious gossip. Thirdly, gossip amongst employees could aggravate the cultural and language barriers that are already in existence and be detrimental to the building of trust among employees. Therefore, it only makes business sense to explore a phenomenon that could potentially be poisonous to the work environment and relationships among employees.

From a theoretical perspective, research on this phenomenon may help address the knowledge gap nationally and internationally regarding cross-cultural perspectives of office gossip and supplement the existing knowledge of this complex phenomenon. The results of this study could contribute to the understanding of the interplay between the cultural and social dynamics of communication. In addition, this study can make a significant contribution to research in cross-cultural psychology applied in the workplace.

1.7 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Seeing that limited information is available in relation to the field of inquiry, the major focus of this study had to be defined carefully to ensure that it was explored in its entirety and that future researchers know exactly what elements were included in and excluded from the study. This study has various limitations and delimitations, which are discussed in this section. What the study therefore did and did not attempt to achieve,

and what the design of the study intrinsically permitted and did not permit, will be described carefully.

Before the delimitations and limitations of this study are described, the focus of this study is defined clearly. The focus of this study was to explore the diverse perceptions of employees regarding workplace gossip. Two participants, one male and one female, were used per racial group. The participants came from the white, African, Indian/Asian and coloured racial groups. The rationale for using male and female participants from each racial group was the intention of also exploring gender specific perceptions. The participants used in this study all worked in the non-academic human resource department of a tertiary institution in Gauteng, South Africa.

1.7.1 Delimitations

This study has different delimitations related to the context, target population and units of analysis. The first delimitation of the study was that it was conducted only within the non-academic human resource department of a tertiary institution in Gauteng, and that the study might therefore have been *department, institution and industry specific*. Inferences could hence not be drawn from the results of the study and applied to other non-academic or academic departments at the tertiary institution; to non-tertiary institutions; or to departments of any other tertiary institutions. Other departments at the tertiary institution or at another tertiary institution or organisation were not included in the study. This was due to the fact that, although it could be interesting and provide a less specific focus, other institutions and departments were outside the researcher's grasp due to time constraints. However, the researcher did attempt to counter this limitation by speculating whether similar results could have been found in other work contexts and by encouraging further research within other work contexts.

Secondly, the study was *limited to the South African context*. This was also due to time constraints and accessibility concerns. Important to note, however, is that a student in America was very interested in this study and conducted her own study in the American

context – with the aim of comparing her findings with those of this study. The student's study will therefore also be valuable in the determination of the similarities and differences in perceptions of office gossip among South African and American employees. In addition, her study could emphasise the changing nature of gossip in different contexts.

Thirdly, the *perceptions of unemployed individuals and students were not explored* in this study. Individuals who were already employed in an organisation were rather used, as it was expected of them to provide scenarios and share experiences, which would be easier for an employed person to provide than an unemployed individual who had not been active in the work environment for a specified time, or for a student whose working experience most probably was limited.

Fourthly, aspects such as personality factors, age group, demographic factors, the organisation's culture, an individual's overall job satisfaction and other factors were not taken into account and could have had a significant impact on the responses provided by the participants. The results of the study might therefore also have been affected by *other personal and organisational factors* and not merely by the individual participant's race and gender. This delimitation was limited during the data collection phase, as the researcher oriented the research participants to the focus of the study and asked numerous questions in which as much reference as possible was made to the racial and gender focus of the study. The fact that two individuals from each racial group were included as research participants made it possible to compare similarities between each racial group and to question whether the differences were caused by other factors or by variant views within a racial group.

Fifthly, the research study was broadly *focused on the perceptions of individuals from different racial groups and not on the perceptions of a specific racial group per se*. This was due to the fact that the aim of the study was to ascertain whether there was an indication of differences in cross-cultural perspectives on office gossip – specifically due to the multicultural nature of the South African working environment. Only two

participants from each racial group were therefore used in an attempt to explore the nature of the perceptions of individuals from different racial groups. However, the researcher ensured that the inputs from each racial group were saturated and, if this did not seem to be the case, the intention was to include more individuals in the study. Important to note is that the researcher did not attempt to generalise the findings of a specific participant to an entire racial group or gender, but rather to focus on the *diversity* of perceptions. Diversity was therefore ensured by including different races and genders in the study.

Sixthly, the *researcher's cultural background and personal biases* could have influenced the results obtained from the participants from different racial groups. Also, the manner in which the world is perceived and construed by the researcher, in other words the researcher's "... assumptions about human nature, the physical and spiritual world, and the ways in which humans should relate to one another" (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 48), could have had an impact on the analysis and interpretation process. The researcher addressed this issue by being open about her views and biases throughout the research process and trying to ensure that she did the analysis and interpretation of the results as objectively as could be expected from a researcher subjectively involved in the process. By continually questioning the basis in which the analysis and interpretation was grounded, this delimitation could be minimised. In addition, the researcher attempted to be transparent in terms of the manner in which conclusions were arrived at. Also, the researcher had previously worked in the department used for the research and this therefore could have assisted the participants in being open about their own views and perceptions – as the researcher was possibly not viewed as a stranger with ulterior motives. This benefit could also be considered a possible barrier, as the researcher already had certain preconceptions of the department and its employees. Therefore, transparency and openness regarding the researcher's biases was emphasised throughout this study in this regard as well.

Lastly, *acculturation* was not taken into consideration in this study. Acculturation takes place when individuals or small family units become part of a new region that has a

homogeneous or mostly homogeneous culture; as time progresses, they gradually become part of the dominant culture, letting go of their own values, traditions and language and adopting those of their new environment (Gumperz, 1977, as cited in Ross, 1978). In modern society, acculturation is a very relevant and probable phenomenon, especially in South Africa, where so many different cultural groups work and live in the same environments. The researcher could not hypothesise at which stage of acculturation a racial group was. In addition, inferences made about a specific racial group based on the research findings could not be generalised to all members of the race throughout South Africa, as individuals of similar races are exposed to different environments and challenges, and acculturation could therefore present differently for the same race in different contexts. However, the researcher did attempt to focus particularly on statements made regarding the participant's *racial* influences – which provided race-specific information within a specific geographic region, and in a particular institution and department.

1.7.2 Limitations

This study has various limitations. In order to obtain rich information on the complex phenomenon under study, the research design of this study was *qualitative and interpretive* in nature. This implies that only a small sample was investigated, which made it virtually impossible to draw broader inferences to the population at large. This formed the first limitation of the research study. One could speculate, however, that the same results could be obtained if the study was to be done with other individuals with the same characteristics within the same type of context (Cline, 2008). Such inferences would be solely speculative, however, and would have to be explored to make definite deductions. In addition, the research was not meant to be predictive of the behaviour of an extensive group of people, but focused on the perceptions of a specific group of individuals within a specific context – as is characteristic of qualitative research. The researcher could, however, more readily draw inferences to the whole human resource department of the tertiary institution in question.

Secondly, although the researcher assured the participants of the anonymity of their responses, they may have still been cautious in terms of the amount and type of information they divulged. The richness of information collected might therefore have been affected by the participants' *fear that their identity would not be protected* and that they therefore could have problems with their employer or other employees if they spoke too candidly with the researcher. In this regard, the researcher supplied the participants with a consent form at the onset of data collection, in which it was explained that their anonymity would be maintained and that no linkage would be made in the final report between the specific individual participant and the information they provided. Also, the researcher made sure that no other individuals were nearby throughout the data collection process, as this could hamper the research process or the participant's belief that the information conveyed would be treated with the utmost respect and discretion.

Lastly the qualitative, interpretive nature of the study meant that the research participants had to provide information to the researcher in a face-to-face manner. Participants of a race and gender other than that of the researcher might not have divulged information as freely, due to perceived *racial and gender barriers and a lack of trust*. They may have felt that the results of the study could reflect negatively on their own race group or gender and therefore not have been entirely forthright when supplying their answers. This limitation was addressed by the researcher's extensive attention to building trust and rapport before the process of data collection was undertaken. In addition, the researcher attempted to be as open-minded and non-judgemental as possible to whatever information the participant divulged, regardless of the researcher's personal reaction to the statements being made.

1.8 ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions made within a study are those things that the researcher presumes to be factual, without validating their accuracy. Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p. 5) define an assumption as "...a condition that is taken for granted, without which the research project would be pointless".

This study made certain assumptions about informal communication within an organisation, the prevalence of gossip within the workplace, and the cultural component at play during interactions among employees. As such, and on the basis of previous studies on office gossip, the following basic assumptions were made in this paper:

- Both formal and informal communication takes place between the employees of an organisation.
- People contextualise and perceive the nature of gossip differently.
- The race and gender of an individual has an influence on his or her interactions inside the same and among different racial groups and genders.
- Racial groups differ in terms of the values, meanings and beliefs they ascribe to specific events, and these are reinforced through interactions among individuals of similar races.
- A qualitative, interpretive research design was the most appropriate to use in the attempt to gather rich information from individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This would enable the in-depth exploration of a complex human phenomenon that has not been researched adequately.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

In this paper, the following chapter outline was followed:

Chapter 1 Contextualising the study

This chapter sets the scene for the context within which the study took place. It includes the background of the topic under study; the research problem and research questions; the significance of the study; the limitations and delimitations of the study; and the assumptions which form the basis of the study.

Chapter 2 Research methodology

In this chapter the methodology that was used in the research study are discussed. The research design is explored, which includes the researcher's key scientific beliefs, the

research paradigm, the research strategy, the research methodology, the manner in which the quality of the research was maintained, and the ethical issues that were considered throughout the research process.

Chapter 3 Literature review

In this chapter the core concepts of the study, as they were reviewed in different literature sources, are discussed. In addition, different points of view and theories are explored in terms of the research topic.

Chapter 4 Pssst! Unpacking perceptions of office gossip

The results of the analysis of the findings are provided in this chapter, following the principles of content analysis.

Chapter 5 Findings of the study

In this chapter the findings of this study are discussed in terms of the literature on office gossip. Therefore, where the findings support the literature and where the findings differ from previous research studies are the main focus.

Chapter 6 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter concludes the research study through a discussion of the research results, the limitations of the study and its practical implications, and provides recommendations for future research. A brief personal reflection of the researcher's research journey is also provided.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

“In virtually every subject area, our knowledge is incomplete and problems are waiting to be solved. We can address the holes in our knowledge and those unresolved problems by asking relevant questions and then seeking answers through systematic research.”

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 1)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of employees from different racial groups and genders regarding gossip in the workplace. The exploration of the perceptions of employees from different races and of different genders within a specific cultural group makes a valuable contribution to the field of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, Human Resource Management, Anthropology and Social Sciences. Earlier studies that focused on gossip made use of the following research methodologies: *ethnographical research or participant observation* (Besnier, 1989; Eder & Enke, 1991; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963; Handelman, 1973; Hannerz, 1967; Haviland, 1977; Loudon, 1961; Paine, 1967; Roy, 1958; Szwed, 1966, as cited in Foster, 2004; Yerkovich, 1977), *video and audio recording* (Baumeister, Zhang & Vohs, 2004; Besnier, 1989; Eder & Enke, 1991), *eavesdropping* (Dunbar, 1997, as cited in Foster, 2004; Levin & Arluke, 1985; McCormick & McCormick, 1992, as cited in Foster, 2004), *questionnaire studies* (Jaeger, Skleder, Rind & Rosnow, 1994, as cited in Foster, 2004; Nevo & Nevo, 1993), and *experimental research* (De Backer, 2005; Wilson et al., 2000). Foster (2004) stated that research methodologies more refined than eavesdropping and easier to administer than ethnography should be developed and implemented. He also suggested that the factors that have an impact on how people react to gossip and on their resulting behaviours should be established, as this will improve our understanding of the impact of gossip on relationships and social thinking. This study aimed to use data collection methods that enable the collection of rich and

comprehensive information. It also aimed to explore the impact that diversity – in terms of gender and race – had on perceptions of office gossip. This would ultimately contribute to an understanding of social cognition and relationships.

This chapter explores the relevant theory on the research processes and research design that were followed, and states the rationale for choosing the particular research approach and research methodologies. It commences with an illustration of the research process that was followed in this study. This is followed by a discussion of the research design, which comprised of the research approach that was followed, the researcher's key scientific beliefs, the research strategy, the research methodology, the manner in which the quality of the research was maintained, and the ethical issues that were held in the highest regard throughout the research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter.

2.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Sydenstricker-Neto (1997, para. 10) stated that a research design refers to "...the strategy to integrate the different components of the research project in a cohesive and coherent way". Therefore, a research design arranges the research in such a way that the research questions can be answered (Trochim & Land, 1982). According to Nieuwenhuis (2007), a research design specifies aspects such as the fundamental philosophical assumptions on which the research is built, the choice of research participants, and the data gathering and data analysis approaches to be followed. In addition, the research design chosen by the researcher is directed by factors such as the assumptions, research abilities, research approach and personal experiences of the researcher; the research problem; and the audience to whom the research is made available (Creswell, 2009). Three aspects are usually included in the research design: the research paradigm, the research strategy and the research methodology (Babbie & Mouton, 2006).

To commence this discussion, Figure 2.1 illustrates the research process that was followed in this study.

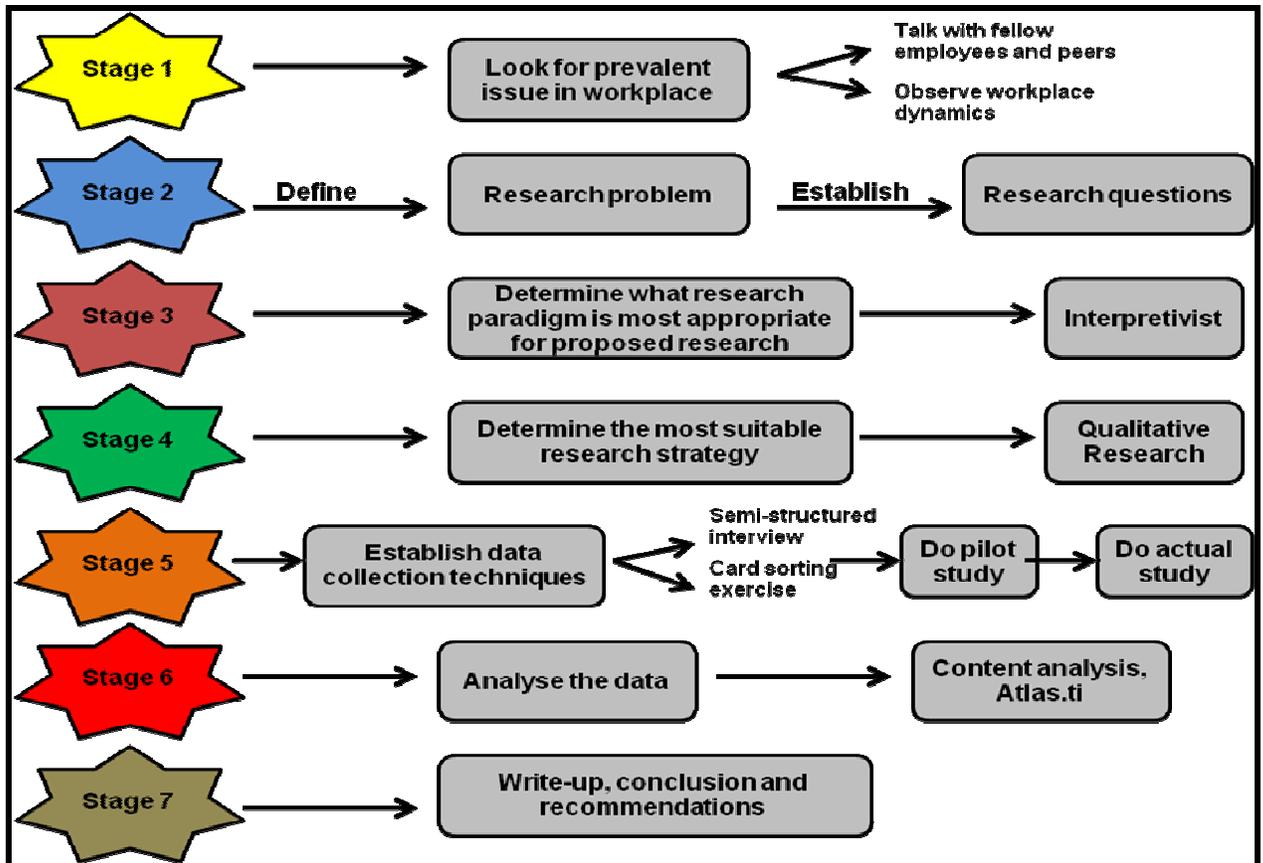


Figure 2.1. Illustration of the research process employed in the study of diverse perceptions of gossip in a South African work context.

In the section that follows, the main scientific beliefs of the researcher are described.

2.2.1 Key scientific beliefs

Guba and Lincoln (1994) postulated that the fundamental assumptions on which a research paradigm is built are based on the ontological, epistemological and methodological positions of the researcher. The researcher’s “...set of assumptions or beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality...such as beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between knower and known (epistemology) and assumptions

about methodologies” (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p. 47) directs which research paradigm is ultimately chosen and hence guides the behaviour of the researcher (Creswell, 2009).

2.2.1.1 Ontology

The ontological position of a researcher refers to the researcher’s belief about whether reality is regarded as true and objective or whether reality is perceived as created and hence subjective (Samdahl, 1999). Ontology is associated with the nature and structure of reality, which is conceptualised differently depending on the research methodology and research approach in question (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this regard, an objectivist or traditional worldview and an emerging or subjectivist worldview can be distinguished (Nieuwenhuis, 2007; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). A *traditional, objectivist worldview*, which comprises the positivist approach, postulates that one objective reality exists that can be observed independently from the observer. An *emerging, subjectivist worldview*, which is synonymous with a qualitative approach, regards social reality as subjectively constructed by humans through words and ideas. An emerging worldview was the most appropriate in terms of the researcher’s beliefs about the nature of reality.

In concurrence with the emerging worldview, the researcher assumed that multiple external realities are constructed by individuals or groups. These realities are regarded as being shaped by an individual or group through lived experiences and are believed to have an impact on the researcher and the context under observation. In line with this, the researcher also regards herself as part of the research process, seeing that each participant’s “reality” was interpreted by the researcher, who therefore could not be regarded as an objective entity due to her own preconceptions and take on reality.

2.2.1.2 Epistemology

Whereas ontology deals with the nature of a phenomenon, epistemology focuses on the manner in which we come to know that phenomenon (Schapper, De Cieri & Cox, 2005). Epistemology refers to the manner in which the researcher and research participants

relate to one another – whether the researcher is regarded as an outsider, or whether the researcher is viewed as engrossed in the research (Samdahl, 1999). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), epistemology can be understood as the manner in which the nature of reality is made known. A distinction can once again be made between a positivist and a qualitative approach in terms of epistemology (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The *positivist research approach* asserts that reality is an objective truth that can be discovered through scientific inquiry. The *qualitative, interpretivist research approach* asserts that reality cannot be discovered, as there are multiple socially constructed, subjective realities that are assumed to be shaped by the beliefs, objectives, norms and assumptions held by human beings. In relation to this, every cultural and historical context is regarded as distinct and should be researched as such. Research findings can therefore not be generalised due to the uniqueness of human experience. They can, however, provide increased understanding of phenomena within a specific context; leading to an enhanced understanding of human nature.

In terms of the current study, the epistemological stance adopted was the qualitative approach. The perceptions of the respondents were explored and regarded as “real” through the eyes of the participants. The researcher’s aim with the research was not to discover one objective reality, but rather to explore the different socially constructed realities of the participants. Questioning was used as a methodological approach to gain direct access to the perceptions of the participants. In this regard, the researcher established a relationship with the research participants to allow for information to be gathered from the participants through conversation. The context in which the study was conducted is regarded as unique and the researcher hence did not attempt to generalise the research findings to the broader population.

The key scientific beliefs of the researcher determined the research paradigm to be followed. The most appropriate research paradigm, based on the researcher’s fundamental assumptions, is explored in the section that follows.

2.2.2 Research paradigm

A research paradigm can be defined as “... a basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator...” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). The philosophical paradigm on which the research is grounded is important, as it defines the researcher’s fundamental beliefs of the world, which influence the methodological decisions made by the researcher as well as the manner in which the research is conducted (Creswell, 2009).

Research can be classified in terms of three main categories: the positivist, interpretivist and critical paradigms (Neill, 2006). Neill (2006) asserted that *critical researchers* investigate society, assess it critically and attempt to empower others to rise above the issues identified in society. Nieuwenhuis (2007) stated that the *positivist tradition* asserts that only objective, observable and scientific facts are regarded as meaningful. In addition, the ultimate objective of positivism is the discovery of the laws that govern a society. Creswell (2009) said that the *interpretivist worldview* is based on the assumption that individuals attach different subjective meanings to lived experiences. Interpretivist researchers explore the multiplicity of subjective meanings attached to a phenomenon, and construct a theory or set of views inductively, based on the perceptions of the participants. The research problem, the research purpose and the research objectives of this study all led to the conclusion that an interpretivist paradigm would be most appropriate to study the phenomenon of office gossip in the South African work context. For the remainder of this section the rationale for following the interpretivist paradigm is defended and discussed.

The interpretivist view assumes that “...it is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors” (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 106). The metaphor “social actors” refers to the social roles an individual plays within a particular context. An individual’s unique set of meanings and values will direct the type of role that will be played. In conjunction with this, Creswell (2009) stated that interpretivist researchers believe that social standards guide behaviour; therefore, in

order to understand human actions, the social standards that guide them should be interpreted. The main assumption of interpretivism is that, for a phenomenon to be understood completely, it has to be studied as a whole (Neill, 2006). Therefore, the social context, values, principles and conventions of the individual or community should be taken into account. In addition, a researcher cannot be separated from the research.

Neill (2006) stated that the interpretivist paradigm presumes that, to advance knowledge of human life, the multiple subjective meanings individuals and societies attach to lived experiences must be explored. Reality is believed to be socially constructed through human interaction. Therefore, due to the subjective creation of realism there is no objective truth that can be discovered – but rather multiple realities (Creswell, 2009). An advantage of the interpretivist approach is that it yields rich and in-depth information, whereas disadvantages are its subjectivity and the inability to generalise its research findings to contexts other than the one in which the research was conducted (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The aim of interpretivist, qualitative researchers is not to generalise their research findings to different contexts, however, but rather to gain a rich understanding of a complex phenomenon within a specified context.

The interpretivist worldview is appropriate for the study, as different perceptions were generated inductively on the basis of the diverse perspectives of employees. The researcher acknowledges the fact that the interpretation of the findings of the study was influenced by her personal worldview and biases, and took this into consideration throughout the research process. In addition, the interpretivist worldview was appropriate, as an exploration of the different subjective realities of employees from different cultural backgrounds and genders was the focus of this study. The construction of meaning through interaction with others was explored in the study. Results arising from the study provide insight into the influence of race and gender on the construction of meaning and the understanding of office gossip.

2.2.3 Research strategy

The research strategy followed in a research study refers to “...a plan of action that gives direction to your efforts, enabling you to conduct research systematically rather than haphazardly” (Ferguson, 2005, para. 2). According to Creswell (2009), the strategy of inquiry gives direction in terms of the methodology and procedures followed within the chosen research design. The researcher should decide whether a qualitative, a quantitative or a mixed method strategy of inquiry will be utilised. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) provide researchers with information on the most appropriate research approach, based on specific questions that should be answered by the researcher. Among others, these questions address the researcher’s ontological and epistemological beliefs; the research problem; the research questions; the available literature on the topic; the research focus; and the researcher’s writing and reasoning ability.

In answering these questions, the researcher’s answers seemed to lean predominantly towards a qualitative research approach: the researcher believes that individuals create different subjective realities; the research questions were investigative in nature, which is a characteristic of the interpretivist paradigm; and the literature available on the topic of inquiry was limited, which necessitated an in-depth study. The research problem necessitated research that did not skim the surface, but allowed the researcher to dig deep in an attempt to form a significant and in-depth picture of a multifaceted, intricate phenomenon. Therefore, based on the research requirements and the researcher’s own personal skills, knowledge and interests, the qualitative, interpretivist research approach was deemed the most appropriate research strategy to follow in this study.

The selection of the qualitative research method is supported by earlier studies, which used a similar strategy of inquiry in the exploration of gossip and its properties (Baumeister et al., 2004; Besnier, 1989; De Backer, 2005; De Gouveia et al., 2005; Dunbar, 1997, as cited in Foster, 2004; Eder & Enke, 1991; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963; Handelman, 1973; Hannerz, 1967; Haviland, 1977; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Levin & Arluke, 1985; Loudon, 1961; McCormick & McCormick, 1992, as cited in Foster, 2004;

Paine, 1967; Roy, 1958; Szwed, 1966, as cited in Foster, 2004; Wilson et al., 2000; Yerkovich, 1977).

Qualitative research can be defined as “...a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). This type of research seeks to gain insight into the practices, as well as the social and cultural backgrounds, that trigger different patterns of behaviour by asking how and why questions (Nieuwenhuis, 2007; Woods, 2006). Through qualitative research methods, understanding can be gained of the manner in which people ascribe meaning to their day-to-day behaviours within particular contexts (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). According to De Gouveia et al. (2005), definitions can be constructed most comprehensively if data is collected directly from participants, as they can elaborate on any answers supplied. Rich data can also be collected from participants who are surrounded by a natural milieu in which they feel comfortable to express themselves openly.

Qualitative research approaches usually have the following features in common: (1) qualitative research typically takes place in natural settings, (2) qualitative researchers aim to uncover the hidden meanings and perceptions underlying behaviour, (3) qualitative research focuses on the “how” or process type issues, and (4) qualitative research uses an inductive approach, where theory is developed from the data (Woods, 2006). In concurrence with these features of a typical qualitative research approach, this study will demonstrate the following:

- 1) *Qualitative research in a natural setting.* The setting in which the research is undertaken is important, as it will have an impact on the behaviour of the respondents (Woods, 2006). The researcher aimed to study office gossip within the real-life setting in which it is typically found – the workplace. The *researcher was deeply involved* throughout the research process, as it was her responsibility to collect data directly from the research participants through observation and interaction with them, and

also to make sense of what was discovered (Creswell, 2009; Nieuwenhuis, 2007). As such, the researcher was therefore a research instrument (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

- 2) *Uncovering of hidden meanings and perceptions underlying behaviour.* The focus of the research process was on the *subjective meanings* the participants attached to office gossip (Woods, 2006). The researcher therefore did not aim to understand office gossip objectively, but rather sought to appreciate office gossip as it was conveyed through the subjective views of human beings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). To enable the researcher to gain more insight in terms of social life and the participants' behaviours, she tried to become as close to the participants as possible. This was achieved by developing trust between the researcher and researched (Woods, 2006).
- 3) *Emphasis on process.* Qualitative research methods emphasise answering the *how* and *why* questions related to a specific phenomenon (Woods, 2006). Throughout the qualitative research process, an *interpretivist approach* was followed (Creswell, 2009), seeing that the researcher's interpretations were based on what was observed or heard and were influenced by her background. Similarly, the participants and readers also had their own perceptions, which influenced the research process. Hence, the interpretivist paradigm emphasises the nature of qualitative research: to take multiple interpretations into account and not to seek a universal truth – as is the case in quantitative research. The research was conducted from a *holistic* perspective; the complexity of all the factors that might have influenced the phenomenon under study was therefore considered (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Therefore, the phenomenon was studied in terms of all its dimensions and layers, so that the multifaceted nature thereof could be reported on – where the different perspectives all had equal validity or truth.
- 4) The *data analysis* was done *inductively*. The aim of the research process was therefore to ultimately make generalisations or develop theories from the data gathered (Woods, 2006). As a result, themes were constructed consistently throughout the data collection process, and built into more complex themes during the process of data analysis as more information was gathered and patterns were identified (Creswell, 2009). Inductive reasoning, which is characteristic of the qualitative research approach, is illustrated as a process in Figure 2.2. The research

process was *flexible* and the research design was of an *emerging* nature, seeing that the researcher's main concern was to gain richness of information. This ensured that the understanding of office gossip and its underlying complexities was enhanced (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Also, in order to gather rich information of the perceptions that guided the participants' behaviours, the researcher made use of *various data sources* during data collection (Creswell, 2009).

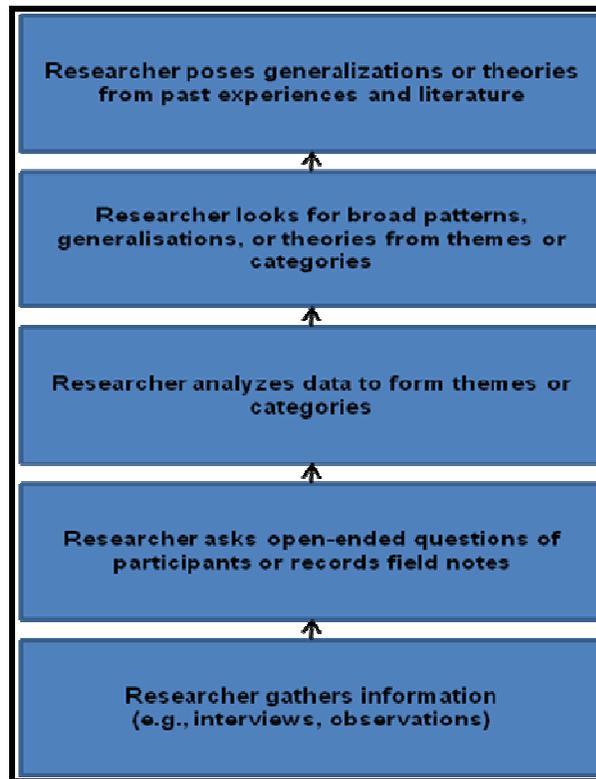


Figure 2.2. The inductive logic of research in a qualitative study (adapted from Creswell, 2009, p. 63).

In summary, the qualitative research approach enabled the in-depth exploration of the social and cultural contexts that influence the behaviours and perceptions of the research participants. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research design was beneficial, as it enabled the inductive construction of definitions supplied by diverse individuals and, though direct interaction with the participants, it facilitated the establishment of where the line was drawn between healthy communication and malicious gossip.

2.2.4 Research methodology

The research methodology includes the data collection, data analysis and interpretation processes that the researcher proposes to use within a research study (Creswell, 2009). This section involves a discussion of the research setting; entry and establishment of researcher roles; the sampling of participants; the data collection process; the data analysis process; strategies employed to ensure quality data; and research ethics.

2.2.4.1 The research setting

This study's research participants were chosen from employees who worked at a non-academic human resource department at a tertiary institution in Gauteng – which falls within the public education sector. This institution was chosen because of its multicultural workforce and its accessibility. The human resource department had undergone a lot of changes, the most significant of which was the implementation of a new computerised processing system that led to restructuring within the department.

2.2.4.2 The manner in which entry was achieved

The researcher had previously worked in the human resource department of the tertiary institution; therefore gaining access to the department was not too difficult. In an attempt to identify the relevant gatekeepers, the researcher contacted various key members in managerial positions within the department. After the researcher was given the contact details of the relevant gatekeepers, they were contacted and the nature of the research was explained to them. The researcher then asked the gatekeepers whether the study could be conducted in the particular department. The gatekeepers were also informed that they could have access to the research findings once the study had been completed.

After the relevant gatekeepers had given informed consent for the study to be conducted, the researcher contacted potential participants and asked them whether they would be willing to participate in the study. During the initial contact with potential participants, they were informed of the nature of the study, what was to be expected from them should they agree to become part of the research process, what the researcher's role would be in the research process, and of the confidential and voluntary nature of the research. This was done in an attempt to start building rapport between the researcher and the participants and to get their buy-in in terms of the research.

Although the researcher had not previously worked directly with any of the participants who were interviewed, the fact that she had worked in the department had an impact on how the participants responded to her – namely in a positive manner. The participants were open and willing to talk with the researcher as they perceived her as someone who could be trusted and not as a stranger with ulterior motives. Also, it was much easier for the researcher to build rapport with the participants. However, due to their familiarity with the researcher, the participants might have been cautious of the information that they divulged and might have preferred to talk with a researcher whom they perceived to be more objective and whom they did not know. In this regard, the researcher felt that it was of the utmost importance that she took ample time to first assure the participants that the information they divulged would be kept confidential and that their identities would be protected. The participants were assured that they could remove themselves from the research process at any time without any dire consequences or need for a reason to be presented. In addition, the researcher was open with the participants regarding the entire research process and ensured that they fully understood the purpose of the research.

Due to the fact that the researcher was familiar with the working environment, she found it easier to understand the organisational culture and challenges facing the employees in the department. Conversely, the researcher was careful not to impose her own perceptions of the working environment onto the participants and tried not to lead them

in their answers – this was done by continually confirming whether the participants' responses were understood correctly.

In the section that follows, the specific sampling method that was used in this study is described, followed by a description of the units of analysis.

2.2.4.3 The sampling methods employed

Sampling can be defined as "...the process of selecting units (e.g., people, organizations) from a population of interest so that by studying the sample we may fairly generalize our results back to the population from which they were chosen" (Trochim, 2006a, para. 1). Qualitative research mostly utilises non-probability and purposive sampling, as opposed to probability or random sampling techniques (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). *Non-probability sampling* is a sampling technique that leaves the discretion of selecting samples for a study up to the researcher (Saunders et al., 2007). Non-probability sampling therefore is subjective and is typically done with a specific pattern in mind (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). In this study, non-probability sampling was used to gather data from the sample population. The specific pattern that played out in the researcher's mind when the research respondents were selected from the sample population is defined in the section on the units of analysis.

Non-probability sampling can be divided into purpose and convenience sampling. *Convenience sampling* refers to the sampling of research subjects from the sample population, based on ease of access to them (Trochim, 2006b). *Purposive sampling* enables the intentional attainment of participants who possess a defining characteristic, with the aim of sourcing a sample that is an accurate representation of the target population and that enables the researcher to best meet the objectives of the study (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005). In terms of this study, the non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling, was used, as the researcher aimed to sample specific subjects from the sample population. The research participants were chosen based on the criteria defined in the section on the units of analysis. Participants from various racial

and gender groups were the main focus of this study and therefore heterogeneous sampling, a purposive sampling strategy, allowed the researcher to look for key themes that emerged from the data collected from the diverse participants (Saunders et al., 2007).

Non-probability sampling has the benefit of providing a judgmentally representative sample (Adamchak et al., 2000). Seeing that this study is qualitative and interpretive, and that only a small sample therefore is used, non-probability sampling enables the researcher to draw a sample that is adequate in terms of the requirements of the study. In addition, non-probability sampling is more flexible – if the data is not saturated, the researcher can sample more respondents who meet the requirements of the study (Adamchak et al., 2000). Non-probability sampling has the drawback that one cannot determine the reliability of the findings mathematically (McGreevy, 2000). Another key limitation of the non-probability, purposive sampling technique is that no statistical inferences can be drawn from the findings – as is the case with probability sampling (McGreevy, 2000). This is due to the fact that purposive sampling is not adequately representative of the target population and because of the subjective nature of the sampling. Seeing that this study was a qualitative, interpretivist study, the main aim of the study was not to generalise the findings to other contexts, but rather to ensure that data saturation was reached and that rich, in-depth information was gathered within a specific context and from a particular sample population.

Potential participants were personally invited to participate in the study. The *criteria* that were used to select research participants for the study were as follows:

- 1) Participants in the study needed to have direct contact with other employees on a day-to-day basis, as this ensured that they would most probably have had encountered informal communication forms – such as gossiping.
- 2) The selection of the units of analysis was based on obtaining a sample of:
 - a. individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in terms of race and
 - b. male and female employees.

The tentative sample size for the study was eight individuals. The sample included two Indian, two coloured, two white and two African participants – one male and one female in each racial grouping. This was the original sampling, but additional sampling would have been done if data saturation was not reached. It was not possible to collect data from participants from every possible lineage within a racial group, due to time and accessibility constraints. It is important to note that, in conjunction with the assumptions of qualitative research, this study did not aim to sample a representative sample of the population and therefore did not attempt to generalise the findings to the population at large. Only two participants, one male and one female, were therefore sampled from each ethnic group – based on their willingness to participate in the research process and their accessibility. For the pilot study, two participants, one white Afrikaner woman and one Northern Sotho black man, were sampled – the race and gender depended on the availability of participants.

In the section that follows, the manner in which the research data was gathered in this study is described.

2.2.4.4 Data collection

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) have postulated that, within qualitative research, researchers frequently apply various data gathering techniques in one study. In addition, studies conducted by qualitative researchers are known for their emerging designs. This implies that once the data has been collected, it often has an impact on the types of data gathered thereafter.

What follows is a discussion of the manner in which the data collection methods used in the study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) were replicated in this study. Thereafter, the specific data collection methods used in this study are further explored.

a. **A replication with extension study**

In line with the goal of developing universal truths through research, a replication study enables the expansion and refinement of theories (Easley, Madden & Dunn, 2000). Replication enables the development of existing theories, as it builds a body of knowledge on a specific phenomenon with the aim of enhancing understanding of its properties (Hubbard & Vetter, 1996).

De Gouveia et al. wrote an article on the typology of workplace gossip in 2005. Their study aimed to explore the individual understandings of gossip in the workplace through a qualitative, modernist research approach. The data collection techniques they used were a structured interview and a card-sorting exercise. These data collection techniques led to findings that yielded a comprehensive theory and a detailed typology and definition of gossip within the workplace. In the current study, the data collection techniques used in the research by De Gouveia et al. (2005) was replicated in the following manner: The questions used in the structured interview were replicated in a semi-structured interview, but some questions directly relevant to the focus of this study were added by the researcher; the card-sorting exercise was replicated directly. This implies that the type of replication study that was done is a *replication with extension* study. This means that the original study was replicated, but with slight alterations to the research design (Hubbard & Vetter, 1996). Alterations to the research design include the data analysis technique, the sample size, the sample population, and a less structured approach to the interviews.

The motivation for doing a replication of the study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) included the following considerations: Firstly, the study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) was conducted in South Africa. Seeing that little research has been conducted on office gossip, especially in South Africa, the data collection methods used by these authors enabled the researcher to utilise methods that had already been *used successfully within the South African context by experts*. Secondly, the findings of the study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) could be validated in another sample population and could

therefore possibly *expand on the theory* already developed by them. Thirdly, the data collection methods had already been established as *practicable* and had been *subjected to a pilot study*. Fourthly, the research objectives of De Gouveia et al. (2005) could be amended into research questions applicable to the aim of this study. Lastly, one of the recommendations of the study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) was that perceptions of gossip should be explored across cultures; therefore this study was a *direct response to their call for further research*. The research conducted by De Gouveia et al. (2005) is regarded by this researcher as being groundbreaking in terms of research on workplace gossip. Therefore, this study aimed to add to the excellent research already conducted by these researchers, but with a more direct focus on racial perceptions, by making use of their detailed data collection techniques.

The successful replication of this study will enhance confidence in the reliability of the growing knowledge base on office gossip, ensure that only empirical results that have been critically scrutinised are incorporated into the existing literature, and establish the range and boundaries of empirical findings (Hubbard & Vetter, 1996).

b. The data collection process

In this study, a semi-structured interview and a card-sorting exercise were used to gather the research data. The data collection was done in the space of a week at the workplace of the participants. The data collection for the main study was done after the pilot study was conducted. In this study, the researcher personally collected the data from the participants. Both the semi-structured interview and the card-sorting exercise yielded primary, verbal data which was recorded with an electronic recorder. The recorded interviews and card-sorting exercises were transcribed to facilitate effective data analysis.

The data gathering techniques were very appropriate as they were quite structured and therefore minimised the possibility that the researcher's biases could have influenced the answers supplied. Through the use of the semi-structured interview and the card-sorting exercise, the researcher gathered detailed perspectives from the participants, which enabled the development of a detailed description of their cultural and gender specific perspectives on office gossip. The structured questions that were asked during the data collection process and the card-sorting exercise are included in Appendix A and Appendix B distinctively.

In this section, the researcher's rationale for using the specific data collection techniques is provided.

i. **Pilot study**

A pilot test is carried out to identify possible weak points in terms of the research design and the research techniques (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). The data collection process commenced with a pilot study, which was conducted to identify broad themes and to enable the researcher to become more confident with the research process to be followed in the primary study. The results of the pilot test were evaluated and the data collection techniques were refined to ensure that the collection techniques adhered to the highest possible standards of quality.

ii. **The semi-structured interview**

This study aimed to gather rich, in-depth information from the participants. True to the underlying principle of qualitative, interpretivist research, the subjective perceptions of the participants allowed for *detailed information* to be elicited. In this regard, the individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interview was deemed most appropriate to achieve this objective. According to Saunders et al. (2007), a semi-structured interview is also known as a qualitative research interview. In this type of interview the researcher has predetermined questions and topics to be addressed, but these may differ across

interviews and in their sequencing. A semi-structured interview enables a researcher to leave out or add questions as necessitated, based on the quality of information gathered. This data collection technique enabled the researcher to probe further throughout the data collection process and to resolve any uncertainties as they arose.

Advantages of an interview are that the participants are able to offer background information and that the researcher has power over the questions asked (Creswell, 2009). This is very beneficial in the case where specific information is required of the participant and where certain aspects need to be clarified. A limitation of an interview might be that the cultural differences between the researcher and the participant could influence the responses given by interviewees and the conclusions drawn by the interviewer. If trust is not developed between the researcher and the participant, as emphasised by Nieuwenhuis (2007), the participant will not supply answers as truthfully and comfortably as desired, leading to the collection of insufficient information. To overcome this concern, the researcher made a concerted effort to ensure that each participant was comfortable with the interview process before the interview began. The interviewer used active listening techniques and her interpersonal skills, and ensured that the asking of questions and probing was done with sensitivity and gentleness.

iii. **The card-sorting exercise**

De Gouveia et al. (2005) have asserted that card sorting is a qualitative type of exercise in which participants have to sort given case studies from most to least important, for example, and then have to explain the criteria they used to sort the case studies. It is a non-invasive way of establishing the manner in which a person perceives a specific phenomenon and how the person organises these perceptions (Spradley, 1979, as cited in De Gouveia et al., 2005). According to Tullis (2010), card sorting is a powerful tool that can be used to determine the manner in which participants perceive the relationships between the different elements of a phenomenon. Card sorting can be divided into closed and open card sorting. Open card sorting implies that the participants are given the opportunity to generate and label their cards into categories according to

their own discretion. Closed card sorting takes place when the participants are given specific category names that have to be used to arrange the cards.

In this study, a mixture of *open and closed card sorting* was utilised. First, the participants were allowed to decide for themselves what the different categories should be, and they were therefore not forced to group the cards into specific categories. Then, if the participants found it difficult to sort the cards, they were advised that the cards could be sorted as stipulated by De Gouveia et al. (2005) – according to 'not gossip', 'slight gossip', 'quite a bit of gossip' and 'very much gossip'. The card-sorting exercise as it was given to the respondents is supplied in Appendix B. Note that the separate case studies were split and laminated and given as eleven separate case studies for the participants to sort.

A limitation of this data collection technique is that English might not have been the first language of all the participants, which could have been a barrier to them fully understanding each case study. In light of the fact that the study of the differences in cultural and gender specific perceptions was the objective of the study, this cultural barrier might have been detrimental in collecting accurate information. In response to this, the researcher encouraged each participant to ask if any uncertainties arose regarding the content of the cards. The cards might also be interpreted differently, but this fortunately is the very objective of qualitative, interpretivist research.

After the pilot study was conducted, it was analysed and the main themes were established through thematic analysis. Any shortcomings in the data collection process were rectified before the actual study was conducted and the main themes that had been elicited were used to explore other possible questions in relevant avenues during the main study. This was followed by the actual data collection process, which was followed by data analysis.

2.2.4.5 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data collection leads to a comprehensive dataset, which has to be sorted, categorised and divided into abstract, underlying themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Qualitative researchers apply inductive reasoning to aid this process – by eliciting research results that emerge from recurrent, central or important themes found in the unprocessed data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

In qualitative research, data analysis is “...an ongoing, emerging and iterative or nonlinear process” (Smit, 2002, p. 66). This implies that the gathering, processing, analysis and reporting of data are entwined and do not constitute separate, consecutive steps (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The iterative process of data analysis in qualitative research was demonstrated by Seidel (1998), as illustrated in Figure 2.3. This model comprises three critical entwined and cyclic features: noticing, collecting and reflecting. When analysing qualitative data the process can be explained as follows: one reads through the data and notices different features within the data that stand out; one then assigns codes to the data; and after reflection one clusters the codes into themes.

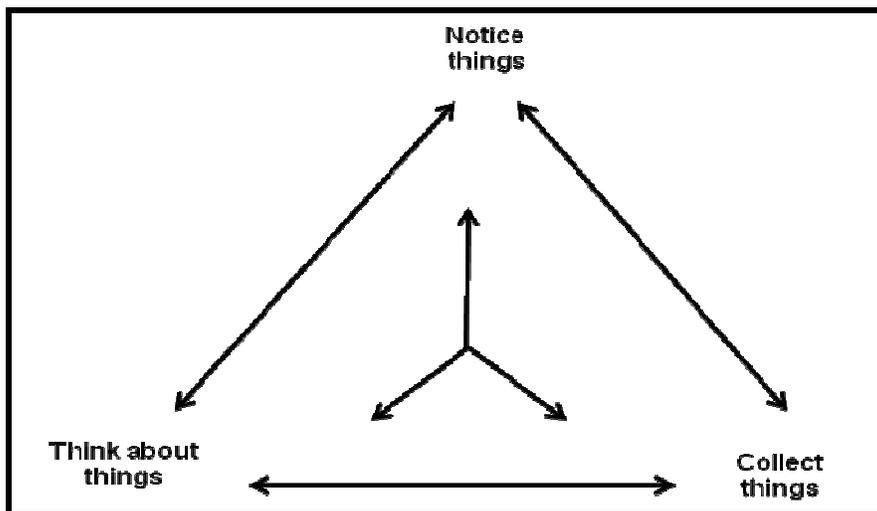


Figure 2.3. The data analysis process (adapted from Seidel, 1998, p. 2).

a. **The data analysis strategy: content analysis**

The data analysis strategy must suit the research design and the research approach (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The most appropriate data analysis strategy in terms of the chosen research design and research questions was identified as content analysis. Content analysis is focussed on social reality (Bos & Tarnai, 1999) and was defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p. 142) as “a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases within that material”.

Content analysis is a qualitative data analysis method, which systematically identifies and sums up qualitative data through an intense examination and analysis of the data and which can include written text, transcripts, public documents and qualitative elements of interviews, focus groups and surveys (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Content analysis is a non-linear and inductive process, where the main aim is to find correspondence and contradictions in the data, which will ultimately prove or disprove theory (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Stemler (2001a) asserted that content analysis makes it possible for researchers to filter a large body of data methodically. In addition, content analysis can be used to study patterns and trends that emerge from the data. Stemler (2001a) explained that content analysis does not simply entail frequency counts, but also relies on the coding and classification of data into categories bearing the same meanings. In this sense, it is critical that the categories that are developed are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. *Mutually exclusive* categories are created when one unit only occurs in one category. *Mutually exhaustive* categories refer to units being representative of all the data.

According to Cooper and Schindler (2006), an advantage of content analysis is that it ensures that a selective perception of the content does not occur and hence the data is explored from different angles. Despite the criticism against content analysis as being fundamentally subjective in nature, this form of analysis seemed to be appropriate for the purpose of this study due to its *descriptive* nature (Bos & Tarnai, 1999). The study

aimed to critically evaluate the perspectives of participants from different cultural backgrounds and genders. Content analysis gave the researcher the opportunity to identify key themes in the transcriptions and to compare them across the participants.

Content analysis comprises different approaches. Bos and Tarnai (1999) asserted that content analysis includes hermeneutic and empirical approaches; the choice between these depends on the research question, the textual data and the analytical options available. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) asserted that qualitative content analysis approaches include conventional, directed and summative approaches. The choice between these approaches is determined by the researcher's proficiency and the research problem. The coding methods, sources of the codes and trustworthiness of these approaches are their distinguishable elements. The approaches proposed by Bos and Tarnai (1999) received precedence, as their approaches were explained more thoroughly and suited the needs of this study.

In the section that follows, a rationale will be given for why hermeneutic content analysis was the most suitable approach for this study.

i. Hermeneutic content analysis

Bos and Tarnai (1999) have stated that content analysis comprises different approaches, which include hermeneutic content analysis and empirical content analysis. *Empirical content analysis* is more quantitative in nature and is focussed on certain categories and the counting of frequencies in an attempt to describe manifest content. In contrast, *hermeneutic content analysis* is focussed more on comprehending the meaning of the text, as it is based on the premise that texts cannot only be read, but should rather be read, explained and interpreted. It is for this reason that hermeneutic content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method in terms of the requirements of this study.

It was explained by Bos and Tarnai (1999) that, in hermeneutic content analysis, the analyst tries to elicit the original meaning from the text as it was meant to be understood by the subject, and attempts to make it understandable to the reader through a process of modernisation. Hermeneutic content analysis is viewed as a scientific procedure, since the approach is rule oriented and attempts to understand what is meant by the text. Understanding in this instance refers to the comprehension of intricate contexts and sense structures within the text.

Heidegger (1984, as cited in Bos & Tarnai, 1999) suggested a “circular structure” of understanding, which means that individual information can be understood solely in terms of the whole, whereas the whole can only be understood once the individual information is comprehended. This process is based on the premise that the text is approached with a preliminary understanding, which is based on the person’s personal experience and knowledge. Throughout the process of comprehension, this preliminary understanding is verified, modified or expanded. If deemed necessary, a new preliminary understanding is developed, which leads to a new stage of theoretical cognition. This individual understanding, in conjunction with the consideration of historical context, societal language, and the context and position of the interpreter, ultimately leads to an improved level of interpretation.

Now that we have looked at the “what” in terms of content analysis, we turn to the “how” – the manner in which this method of analysis was applied.

ii. The process of content analysis

In this section, the *process* of content analysis is explored. In this regard, a broad illustration of the process was proposed by Leedy and Ormrod (2005), while more detailed steps in this process were suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005).

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) asserted that when a researcher conducts content analysis, the research problem or research question is typically defined at the commencement of

the study. In addition, the sample to be researched and the manner in which the analysis will be conducted are determined early on in the research. The process of content analysis is fairly systematic. Various processes are followed to ensure that the content analysis is objective. The steps illustrated in Figure 2.4 are typical of the process followed in content analysis.

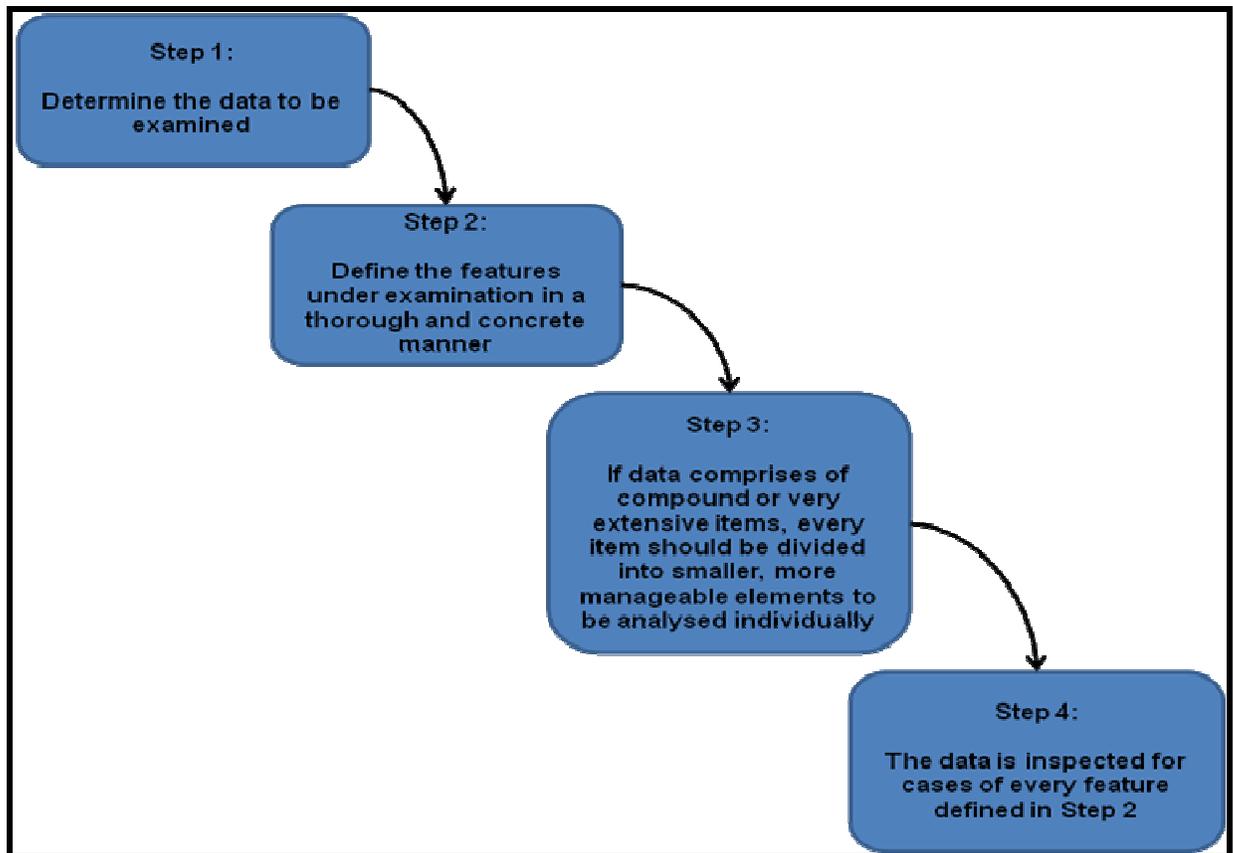


Figure 2.4. The process of content analysis (adapted from Leedy and Ormrod, 2005).

It is important to note that content analysis has both quantitative and qualitative elements, as the frequency with which each feature is prevalent in the text is tabulated and used for interpretivist purposes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In relation to this study, the qualitative aspects of the data analysis were the qualitative semi-structured interviews. The card-sorting exercise was more structured in nature and frequency counts could therefore be added together with the interpretation of their meanings.

The more detailed steps to be followed when making use of a conventional approach to content analysis are as follows (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005):

- 1) Start the data analysis by reading through the data carefully to obtain a broad picture of the data.
- 2) Analyse the data thoroughly to elicit codes. This can be done by highlighting the relevant words in the data that indicate the main ideas.
- 3) The preliminary impressions of the researcher are documented.
- 4) Throughout this process, code labels will be identified that comprise different main ideas. These code labels signify the initial coding scheme.
- 5) The codes are then grouped into various categories, based on relatedness.
- 6) The categories elicited can now be sorted into meaningful clusters or sub-categories, which can be subdivided if necessary. A tree diagram is often used to depict the hierarchical arrangement of the categories.
- 7) Each category, sub-category and code is defined.
- 8) Linkages between the categories and sub-categories are described by the researcher.

When analysing the data by making use of content analysis, it is of critical importance to ensure that the units analysed assist in answering the research questions (Cooper & Schindler, 2006).

b. Coding the data

Coding can be defined as “...the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 171). According to Creswell (2009) the categories have to be given a label after the data has been segmented into categories.

Codes can be differentiated in three ways (Nieuwenhuis, 2007):

- 1) Codes are objective, transparent gathering points for meaningful data.

- 2) Codes are markers or pointers to the manner in which the researcher rationalises what is understood from the data.
- 3) Codes enable continuous unearthing of deeper realities in the data.

There are different types of coding relevant to a particular stage in the coding process. Those that were used in this study are described in the remainder of this section.

Open coding represents the initial phase in the coding process. During the process of open coding, "...data are divided into segments and then scrutinised for commonalities that reflect categories or themes. After the data is categorised, it is further examined for properties that typifies each category" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 141). The emphasis in this coding technique is the establishment of an understanding of the significance of the phenomenon studied, based on the participants' inputs and the context in which the study took place (Saunders et al., 2007).

Creswell (2009) has stated that researchers often label codes and categories using the same language used by the participant. This is referred to as *in vivo* coding. When a qualitative researcher develops a code while the coding of the data is being conducted, it is called *inductive coding* (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Thomas (2003) said that, when inductive or emergent coding is conducted, the researcher closely examines the text for meaningful segments and then creates new codes and categories linked to these segments. Extra relevant segments of text are added to relevant existing codes or categories, or new ones are created. Codes therefore emerge from the data – indicating an inductive approach to the data. As opposed to inductive coding, *a priori* coding refers to codes that are developed from a theory, before the analysis takes place (Stemler, 2001b).

For the purposes of this study, open coding was done. Open coding enabled the researcher to compare interviews and card-sorting exercises, based on codes and categories that were identified in the diverse racial groups and genders - which codes

were common and which codes differed. Inductive coding, as opposed to a priori coding, was used as there was limited literature available on the topic.

c. **Computerised analysis of qualitative data**

The computer can be used to analyse qualitative data. Different computer-supported qualitative data analysis programs have been made available for researchers. These programs make the coding and retrieval of text simpler, and also provide added functions (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Some well-known qualitative data analysis programs are Nvivo, Ethnograph and Atlas.ti.

Saunders et al. (2007) indicated that an advantage of using computer-supported qualitative data analysis programs is that, if they are used methodically, they can enable permanence and enhance transparency and procedural thoroughness. In contrast, a disadvantage of these programs is that the program chosen by the researcher potentially might not be appropriate for the analysis required by a particular study. In terms of this study, the available programs were thoroughly evaluated and Atlas.ti was selected due to its suitability in terms of the research questions and the research design. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis programs have certain functions in common (Saunders et al., 2007). These programs enable:

- effective management of the research project and efficient organisation of the data;
- data to be easily and instantly accessible after it has been entered;
- effortless exploration of the data through text search tools;
- flexibility regarding the utilisation of deductive, inductive or a combination of coding plans to assign codes, recover, recode, and output information;
- searching and questioning of the language utilised and the relationships among codes, to develop theories;
- making of notes, adding of comments and memos to document thoughts related to the data;
- reporting by allowing access to hard copy products or exporting it to other programs, and making of tabular reports.

The qualitative data analysis software package, Atlas.ti, was used to analyse the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, the rankings of the card-sorting exercise and the explanations given by the participants for sorting the cards in a specific order. According to the developer's internet homepage, Atlas.ti is a flexible instrument that can be used in qualitative analysis because it offers different tools to carry out activities related to qualitative analysis (Atlas.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2011). Atlas.ti makes it easier for the researcher to do qualitative data analysis, ensures quality and allows access to the audit trail for the reader. Willig (2001) stated that Atlas.ti allows the analyst to achieve more than simply coding and retrieval. Atlas.ti also enables "...visual displays of the hierarchical relationships between codes and the construction of conceptual diagrams or networks" (Willig, 2001, p. 151).

Smit (2002) explained that transcriptions of the data are made into word processing documents before commencing with data analyses. Atlas.ti is then used to analyse the transcriptions by organising, reducing and describing the data. The focus of the analysis is not on explaining the evidence based on the frequency with which certain themes emerge, but rather to derive meaning from the data.

In the section that follows, the strategies used to enhance the trustworthiness of the research study are described.

2.2.4.6 Strategies employed to ensure the quality of the research

It is quite common that naturalistic researchers favour terminology other than that used by positivist researchers (Shenton, 2004). A major concern in terms of the trustworthiness of a study is whether a researcher can convince his or her readers and peers, as well as himself or herself, that the results of the research should be taken seriously (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Different standards apply to establishing the quality of different research designs. Quantitative researchers aim to enhance the validity and reliability of their research, whereas qualitative researchers seek to enhance the

trustworthiness and credibility of research findings – seeing as they themselves are the research instruments (Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

In this sense, *qualitative validity* refers to the researcher's use of specific procedures to ensure that the results are accurate, whereas *qualitative reliability* refers to the consistency of the researcher's approach across a variety of researchers and projects (Gibbs, 2007, as cited in Creswell, 2009). Despite the fact that qualitative data collection – which involves intense participation, thorough responses from participants, and multiple data collection techniques – enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the research results, it does not provide sufficient grounds to advocate the quality of qualitative research findings (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007).

Four criteria have been proposed by Guba (1981), Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Denzin and Lincoln (2003, as cited in Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007) to determine whether qualitative research can be evaluated as fair and scientifically sound. Whereas the quality of quantitative research would traditionally be judged according to its internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, the trustworthiness of qualitative research is rather evaluated according to its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Trochim, 2006c). These four quality criteria, as well as the manner in which they will be taken into account throughout this study, are described in this section.

a. Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) postulated that, in qualitative research, the quantitative quality criterion, “internal validity”, should be replaced with a “credibility” criterion. Credibility has been defined by Saunders et al. (2007, p. 319) as “...the extent to which the researcher gains access to their (sic) participants' knowledge and experience, and is able to infer a meaning that the participant intended from the language that was used by the person”. Therefore, the researcher will attempt to prove that a true representation of the phenomenon under study was given (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative approaches enable highly credible results, since interviews enable probing, where questions can be asked

in a precise and clear manner and themes can be explored from different angles (Saunders et al., 2007).

To implement the credibility criterion, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), two criteria have to be met: (1) the researcher should conduct the research in a way that will improve the likelihood that the results will be regarded as credible, and (2) the participants who conveyed their multiple realities should agree with the results of the study.

In relation to this study, the following techniques were used to improve the credibility of the study: prolonged engagement, triangulation (also referred to as crystallisation), referential adequacy, well-established research methods, researcher credibility, analysis of negative cases and frequent debriefing meetings.

Prolonged engagement implies that the researcher has invested ample time to understand the context in which the phenomenon is found, to investigate whether misinformation could have been caused by distortions of the researcher or the research participants, and to build trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In relation to this study, the researcher already had an in-depth understanding of the context in which the research was conducted as she had previously worked in the specific department. Also, due to the fact that she was no stranger to the particular department, she could begin her research as an accepted member of the department – eliminating herself as a particular distortion in the research process. In terms of the distortions of the respondents, the researcher particularly attempted to limit misconstruction of what was asked in the interviews and thereby in the answers given by explaining the questions differently if she picked up that the respondent did not understand a question. Iterative questioning, in which the researcher goes back to previously raised issues and elicits relevant data by rephrasing questions, was also used to uncover lies or highlight where a respondent gave ambiguous answers (Shenton, 2004). Lastly, to ensure that the researcher built trust between herself and the research participants, she ensured that the following suggestions provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Shenton (2004) were adhered to:

the respondents were allowed to decline participation in the research – only research participants who demonstrated a willingness and interest to participate in the study for free were used; the research participants were asked to be honest when answering the questions and assured that there were no correct or incorrect answers; the research participants were allowed to withdraw at any time during the research process and would not have been expected to give reasons for withdrawing; the researcher continuously proved to the participants that the information they provided would not be used for any purpose other than the research; the researcher respected the pledge that she had made to honour the participants' anonymity; the researcher did not have any hidden agendas; the researcher respected the interests of the participants; and the participants were able to influence and give inputs into the research process.

The process of *triangulation* implies that the researcher uses numerous and variant sources, methods, investigators and theories in the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As stated by Voce (2005, p. 2), "...by combining multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources, researchers can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-methods, single observer, and single-theory studies". The researcher prefers to use the concept "crystallisation", which was introduced by Richardson (2000), rather than "triangulation". The conventional triangulation approach is used in quantitative research to enhance the reliability and validity of the research, to boost the appraisal of the research results, and to corroborate and generalise the research results. Since the aim of qualitative research is not focused on testing hypotheses, but rather on building or modifying theories, the term crystallisation is more appropriate. *Crystallisation* refers to the "...practice of 'validating' results by using multiple methods of data collection and analysis" (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007, p. 40). The term crystallisation emphasises the multi-faceted realities different people assume for a similar phenomenon, unlike triangulation, which emphasises finding a fixed reality as the outcome of a study (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007). With regard to this study, crystallisation of the data findings was achieved through the use of multiple data collection techniques, data sources and theories. By using more than one data collection technique, the errors and biases associated with each data collection technique were

minimised (Voce, 2005). In addition, the weak points of each data collection technique were compensated for, and the strengths of each data collection technique taken advantage of (Guba, 1981). Different data sources or respondents were used to enable the verification of statements made by an individual against those made by others (Voce, 2005). A broader demonstration of the perceptions and experiences of different sources was the end result (Shenton, 2004). Various theories were used when the data was interpreted (see Chapter 5) so that the impact of these theories on the interpretations of the data could be emphasised (Voce, 2005).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that *referential adequacy* refers to the recording of raw data as a point of reference for other data analysts to test the data for sufficiency. In terms of this study, referential adequacy was proven as the raw data was archived for any future analysts to access. The use of *well-established research methods* enhances the credibility of a study. If the data collection and data analysis techniques used in a study have been used successfully in the past to measure a similar concept, the reader will have more confidence that the operational tools used in a study are correct (Yin, 1994, as cited in Shenton, 2004). Seeing that this study was a replication with extension study, the data gathering methods had already been tried and tested. The *researcher's credibility* was enhanced through concerted efforts by the researcher to document any professional or personal issues that influenced the gathering, analysis and interpretation of the data (Voce, 2005). The researcher *looked for and analysed negative cases* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This implies that any meaningful cases that did not fit the patterns and trends that emerged from the data were highlighted (Voce, 2005). *Regular debriefing meetings* were held with the researcher's supervisor to broaden the researcher's vision, consider different approaches and revise the plan of action if necessary (Shenton, 2004). In addition, the researcher and the supervisor regularly *emailed* one another to report on progress made, gain feedback and improve the research process.

b. Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that, in qualitative research, the quantitative quality criterion, “external validity”, should be replaced with a “transferability” criterion. This is due to the fact that the external validity of the research cannot be specified in qualitative research. According to Trochim (2006c), transferability in qualitative research is known as the degree to which research results can be generalised to other people and contexts. The researcher should give *adequate information on the context* in which the research was conducted to enable other researchers to determine whether the research setting is comparable to another context in which they wish to repeat the research (Firestone, 1993; Shenton, 2004). The onus lies on the person performing the transfer to determine the rationality thereof, seeing that the results of a qualitative study apply only to a specific context and participants, and the researcher only has knowledge of the “sending context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

In this study, the transferability of the results was made possible for other researchers, as the researcher provided an in-depth description of the research setting and the assumptions on which the research was based. In addition, the units of analysis were defined clearly.

c. Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that, in qualitative research, the quantitative quality criterion, “reliability” or “consistency”, should be replaced with a “dependability” criterion. Unlike the quantitative quality criterion, reliability, which is concerned with the replicability of results, dependability is concerned with the manner in which the researcher accounts for changes in the research context and how these changes influence the manner in which the researcher conducts the study (Trochim, 2006c). Seeing that qualitative phenomena are constantly changing and that the researcher’s observations are relevant only to a specific situation, it is quite difficult to prove dependability in qualitative research (Fidel, 1993; Florio-Ruane, 1999, as cited in

Shenton, 2004). The researchers should however make every effort to enable future researchers to repeat the study (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have asserted that dependability is concerned with the auditability of the decisions made by the researcher. This implies that, in order to meet dependability criteria, *comprehensive records* should be kept of every phase of the study.

In this study the researcher was attentive to any changes in the research context and thoroughly documented these changes, as well as their implications and the manner in which the research approach was affected. In addition, the researcher thoroughly archived all the documents relevant to the research process and reported on all the different phases of the research process.

d. **Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have stated that, in qualitative research, the quantitative quality criterion, “objectivity” or “neutrality”, should be replaced with a “confirmability” criterion. According to Saunders et al. (2007), the confirmability of qualitative research is based on the extent to which other researchers would find similar results and come to the same conclusions as the researcher. Here the emphasis falls less on the qualitative investigator, who could potentially influence the objectivity of the research, and more on the characteristics of the data. Therefore, the researcher should provide sufficient confirmation that the results emerged from the data and were not influenced by the researcher’s biases (Shenton, 2004). In order for the criteria of confirmability to be met, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested that an audit trail can be established, a reflexive journal can be kept, and triangulation can be ensured. An *audit trail* “...allows any observer to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described” (Shenton, 2004, p.72). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), keeping an audit trail implies that everything is archived by the researcher so that an enquirer can have access to all the raw material, notes, schedules and products of the data analysis and integration phases. A *reflexive journal* is a diary that is kept by the researcher and that includes an assortment of information, such as information

about the researcher, the methodological choices made and the rationales for them. *Triangulation*, referred to as crystallisation in this study, was discussed in the section on credibility. Crystallisation will aid in decreasing the impact of researcher bias (Shenton, 2004).

In relation to this study, documentation of each phase in the process was done to enable the establishment of an audit trail. As far as was possible, the researcher attempted to highlight any preconceived ideas, justify the methodological decisions made and admit to possible weak points in the tools used (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Shenton, 2004). The data analysis tool, Atlas.ti, helped in this process, as various raw documents, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes and additional materials could be kept on Atlas.ti and saved on the CD provided with this paper. Atlas.ti was also very helpful with regard to keeping a reflexive journal, as it has a memo feature that enabled the researcher to keep a journal of all her impressions and of the relevant information while the data analysis was being conducted. The memos made by the researcher are also provided on the supplementary CD. Crystallisation was ensured, as different data collection techniques, data sources and theories were used.

2.2.4.7 Research ethics

Research ethics refers to "...questions about how we formulate and clarify our research topic, design our research and gain access, collect data, process and store our data, analyse data and write up our research findings in a moral and responsible way" (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 178). The researcher has to foresee any possible ethical issues that could arise in the course of the research study (Hesse-Bieber & Leavey, 2006). In addition, the researcher has to ensure that the research participants are protected, that mutual trust is developed, that the integrity of the research process is maintained, that he or she behaves ethically, and that all problems are dealt with effectively (Isreal & Hay, 2006). In this study, the researcher adhered to the following ethical considerations (Saunders et al., 2007):

- *Informed consent.* The research participants were briefed on the nature of the study and were allowed to decide whether or not they wished to participate. The respondents were also given a detailed description of the research procedure to be followed and how it would impact on them.
- *Voluntary participation.* Participants participated in the study voluntarily and were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable, or for any other reason. The participants were also assured that there would not be any detrimental outcomes if they decided not to participate in or to withdraw from the study.
- *Cross-cultural and gender specific sensitivity.* The researcher was sensitive to the customs, beliefs and perceptions of the participants, specifically in terms of their respective racial groups and genders.
- *Prohibition of the use of incentives.* Incentives were not used as a means to gain participation from potential participants.
- *Confidentiality and anonymity.* The names and identity of the participants were kept private and safeguarded at all times.
- *Permission from the tertiary institution.* The researcher first obtained permission from the gatekeepers at the tertiary institution before prospective participants were contacted in any way.
- *Researcher's honesty, objectivity and integrity.* The researcher was as honest and unbiased as possible when she reported on the findings. The researcher did not mislead others about the nature of the study and reported the findings in a thorough manner.
- *Respect for all participants.* The researcher treated all the participants with respect, sensitivity and dignity. The participants' right to privacy was protected at all times (Leady & Ormrod, 2005).
- *Plagiarism.* The researcher properly acknowledged all the literature sources that were used.
- *Protection from harm.* The researcher did not in any way risk the physical or psychological wellbeing of the research participants (Leady & Ormrod, 2005).

- *Respect for research sites.* The researcher respected the research sites to ensure that they were left without disruption at the conclusion of the research study (Creswell, 2009).
- *Reciprocal benefits of the research.* Both the researcher and the participants benefited from the study. To ensure that there was no unequal division of power, the researcher ensured that the participants were able to ask questions concerning the research and they would also be given a copy of the report on conclusion of the research to add value to their participation (Creswell, 2009).
- *Honesty with professional colleagues.* The researcher ensured that the reported findings were conveyed in an honest and inclusive manner, and that the results were not misrepresented (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

2.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the research design and research methodology that formed the backbone of this study. In addition, it was used to state my ontological and epistemological position. The ethical issues to which attention were paid in this study were also explored.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Gossip has been referred to as potentially both beneficial and detrimental to the workplace and to individual employees. Its outcomes could vary greatly, depending on the perspective from which they are viewed. On average, workers seem to spend a lot of time gossiping at work (Armour, 2007; De Gouveia et al., 2005). These are hours spent away from tasks at hand, which could thus have a detrimental impact on productivity and the bottom line. In addition, gossip could be damaging to an employee's work life and compromise ethics in the workplace, cause segregation among a workforce, lead to escalated risk management issues, aggravate employee anxieties, compromise the implementation of change initiatives, and have a negative impact on the authority and professionalism of employers (Armour, 2007; Bruce & Bruce, 1997; De Gouveia et al., 2005; Dunn, 2002; Holland, 1996; Joyce, 2002; Matthews, 2007; Picarda, 2008; Schultz, 1994).

In contrast, other researchers disagree and rather view gossip as constructive hours spent improving camaraderie among employees and regard gossip as signifying the effective use of informal channels of communication (Holland, 1996; Kellaway, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Yerkovich, 1977). Also, gossip could enable management to spread information faster than through formal communication channels, inform employers of what is going on in a company, test the initial reaction to new policies and procedures that are implemented, facilitate tension and stress relief, enhance staff morale, destroy the reputation of rival companies, promote the sharing of information and understanding of the actions of others, lead to the achievement of professional and personal agendas, and even enhance team effectiveness and productivity (Dunn, 2002; Holland, 1996; Hughes, 2006; Kellaway, 2000; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Michelson &

Mouly, 2004; Mishra, 1990; Picarda, 2008; Therrien, 2004). This emphasises the fact that viewpoints on this phenomenon in the workplace differ dramatically. Figure 3.1 schematically illustrates the format that will be followed in this chapter.

This chapter provides an in-depth overview of the relevant body of knowledge available on the topic studied. It will commence with a discussion of the diverse South African workforce and follow with a conceptualisation of communication, gossip and office gossip. Each conceptualisation will include a critical overview of theories on the subject under discussion; definitions of the concept; and the scope, functions and outcomes of each concept. Lastly, in an attempt to build on the available body of knowledge, the focus of the study will be discussed in the conclusion.

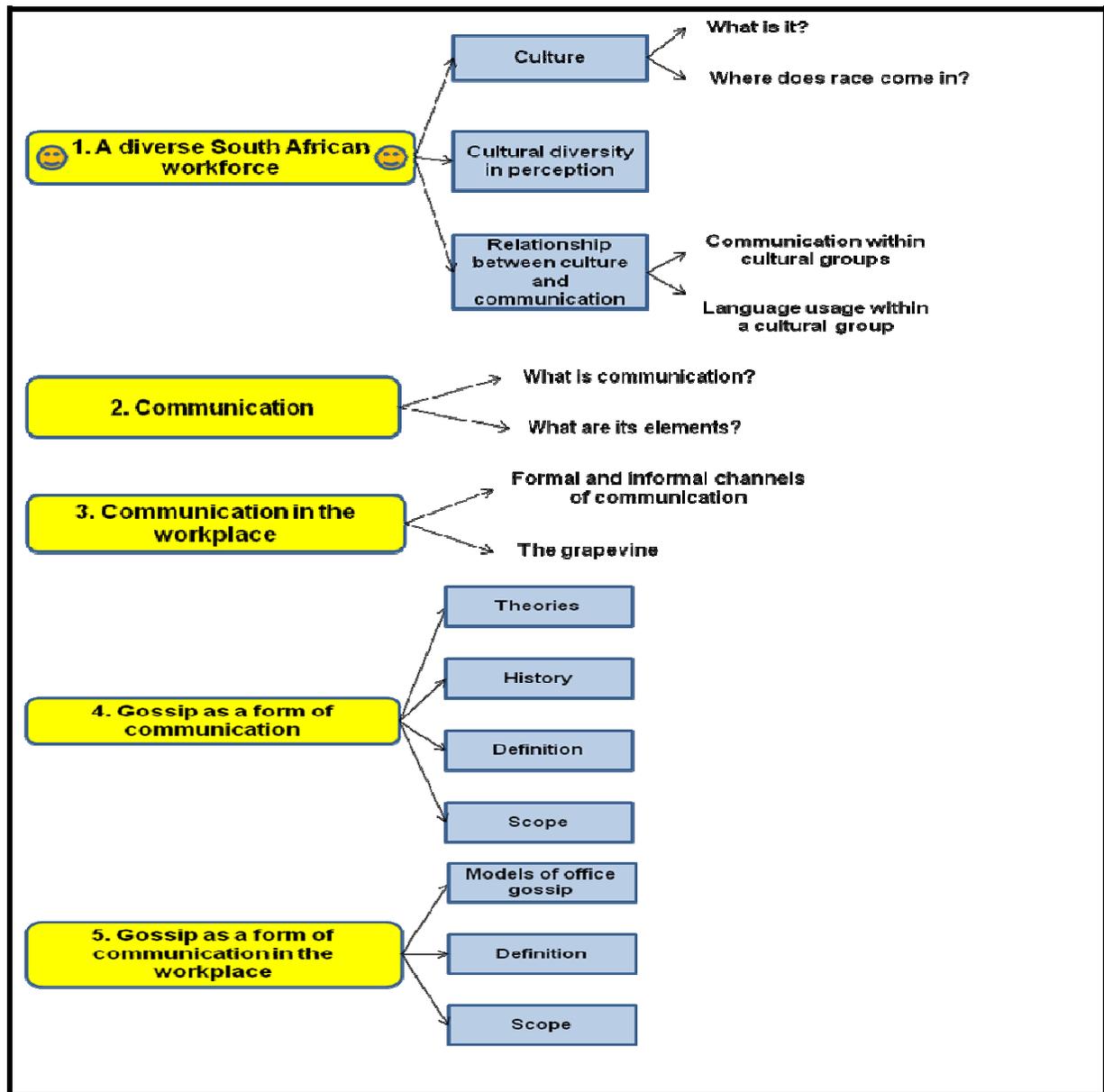


Figure 3.1. Schematic illustration of the literature review.

3.2 A DIVERSE SOUTH AFRICAN WORKFORCE

“If South African business is to succeed, it must recognise the emergence of the diversified workforce and find the means to harness its energies, talents and differences for tomorrow’s challenges” (Grobler, Wörnich, Carrell, Elbert & Hatfield, 2006, p. 70).

South African organisations are faced with the challenge of adapting to and managing a workforce that has become increasingly diverse (Robbins, 2005). Employers will therefore have to value, manage and accommodate employees who behave differently and have dissimilar perceptions and value systems. This will enable an organisation to better keep up with its multicultural and changing clients. According to Grobler et al. (2006) diversity can be understood in terms of primary and secondary dimensions. Primary dimensions refer to characteristics a person is born with and that have a substantial impact on a person’s perceptions. These include gender, age, race, ethnicity, physical talents and attributes, and sexual orientation. Secondary dimensions refer to features that make a person unique and include a person’s academic background, salary, work and military experience, religion, marital and parental status, and where a person is from. In terms of diversity, this study focuses on the diverse perspectives of people of different races and genders.

According to estimates by Statistics South Africa in 2010 (as cited in SouthAfrica.info, 2010), the population of South Africa comprises 49,9 million people. South Africa is home to four ethnic groups: white people, Africans, Indians/Asians, and coloured people. The African population in South Africa can be subdivided into the Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Shangaan-Tsonga and Venda ethnic groups (Explore South Africa, 2010; SouthAfrica.info, 2010). The white population in South Africa comprises Afrikaners, English speakers, immigrants and the descendents of immigrants (SouthAfrica.info, 2010). The coloured population are people who have mixed roots (SouthAfrica.info, 2010). Most of the Asian population are Indians, whereas Chinese South Africans are

also prominent in this group (SouthAfrica.info, 2010). South Africa has eleven official languages (Grobler et al., 2006).

The influence of diverse cultural backgrounds on the definition of and the propensity to partake in office gossip is explored in this study. Since cultural background, in terms of race, is a main consideration in this study, culture, the impact of culture on perception and the relationship between culture and communication will be explored briefly.

3.2.1 Culture

An understanding of culture is important as cultural perceptions were explored in this study. Culture has dissimilar connotations in various fields of study (Groeschl & Doherty, 2000). There is not consensus among researchers on the precise definition of culture, whereas there is consensus on the complexity of defining the concept. The available definitions of culture range from very broad to very narrow. Earlier definitions of culture argued that culture affects all areas of an individual's existence (Swidler, 1986) and focused more on the manner in which cultures differ from one another than on how they are alike. One of the earlier definitions of culture was "...all the understandings that are socially learned and transmitted and that are shared by two or more actors who consider themselves to belong to some common grouping, whether that be based on kinship, ethnic, political, occupational, neighbourhood, or other ties" (Swartz, 1982, p. 316). More recent models and definitions of culture are less complex. Martin and Nakayama (2007, p. 81) defined culture as "learned behaviour and attitudes shared by a group of people". In addition, culture has also been defined as consisting of "implicit" and "explicit" elements described as "...behaviours, values, norms, and basic assumptions" (Groeschl & Doherty, 2000, p. 14). These shared values and behaviours are found "...among people who most often speak the same language and live in proximity to each other. These values are transmitted for generations, and they provide guidance for everyday behaviours" (Brislin, 2000, p. 4).

The anthropologist Haviland (1993, as cited in Samovar & Porter, 2001) suggested that culture is maintained by people to enable them to resolve problems. Nanda and Warrms (1998, as cited in Samovar et al.) asserted that culture enables humans to adapt to their surroundings and give their lives purpose. According to Samovar and Porter culture hence facilitates the transition from the womb-to-life through the provision of meaning to people, objects and events. In addition, life is made less confusing by culture, as most of culture is automatic and subconscious.

According to Hofstede (1994) the elements of culture can be categorised into 4 categories:

- i. Symbols, which comprises of verbal and non-verbal language;
- ii. Rituals, which are the combined activities undergone by a culture;
- iii. Values, which are those things regarded by a culture, most of its members or its members of authority as acceptable and unacceptable;
- iv. Heroes, which refers to an individual, whether existent or made-up, who forms part of a culture and is regarded as someone to model behavioural conduct after. Cultural heroes are found in a culture's myths.

A culture has specific practices and beliefs on which it is grounded and which distinguishes it from other cultures. Swidler (1986, p.273) described culture as "...symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life". Through these symbolisms acceptable behaviours and viewpoints are conveyed through social interaction. Therefore, the scope of culture is very comprehensive and each culture differs substantially from another.

Jandt (2010) stated that groups that are cultures but live in another culture are referred to as subcultures or co-cultures. For a co-culture or subculture to be identified as such, its members have to identify with each other as a group. According to Jandt, a subculture is similar to a culture, as it comprises of quite a big group of people and has

unique values, norms and behavioural laws. However, they are found within a dominant culture and are typically grounded on:

- economic or social class;
- ethnicity;
- race; or
- geographic area.

Race can be regarded as a subculture. Race can be understood both from a biological and a socio-historical point of view. From a biological point of view, race can be seen as natural and founded on observable, physical features – including skin colour and other facial and bodily characteristics. In a socio-historical sense, race does not merely imply skin colour, but is also based on social debate, such as the categories into which groups of individuals fall.

3.2.2 Cultural diversity in perception

Perception and its relationship with culture is discussed as it forms part of the theme of this study. According to Robbins (2005, p. 134), perception is “...a process by which individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment”. Therefore, perception is a process through which people make sense of external stimuli and turn them into significant internal experience.

Samovar and Porter (2001) have pointed out that a linkage has been drawn between culture, perception and behaviour. The manner in which a person perceives reality will direct a person’s behaviour (Robbins, 2005). There are two key characteristics of perception in terms of culture: it is both selective and learned. Perception is *selective*; therefore what is internalised is affected by a person’s culture. The manner in which a person perceives is also *learned* and stems from his or her cultural upbringing. As with culture, perceptions are held by individuals in the form of convictions, attitudes, values and cultural patterns.

3.2.3 The relationship between culture and communication

Culture represents a lifestyle (Samovar & Porter, 2001) and touches all aspects of human life (Swidler, 1986). The way in which cultures define and apply communication differs. As stated by Alfred Smith (1966, as cited in Jandt, 2010, p. 37), “...culture is a code we learn and share, and learning and sharing require communication. Communication requires coding and symbols that must be learned and shared”.

Despite the fact that communication and culture are two different concepts, theorists have drawn a direct link between them. This link is so strong that many anthropologists regard culture and communication as practically one and the same (Jandt, 2010; Samovar & Porter, 2001). Through communication, culture is “learned, acted out, transmitted, and preserved” (Samovar & Porter, 2001, p. 21). Communication is therefore used as a method to acquire knowledge about a culture and to pass on and maintain a culture’s norms, values and legacy. Different cultures adopt different communication practices. Communication and culture are hence interchangeable.

The influence of a culture on communication and of communication on a culture is intricate. A *dialectical perspective* views culture and communication as interconnected and in a reciprocal relationship (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). This study will determine whether the dialectical perspective can be applied to cultures and gossip – therefore whether a reciprocal relationship can be established between them.

3.2.3.1 Communication within cultural groups

According to Ross (1978), human cultural traditions have been studied from a holistic perspective ever since Boas emphasised that one can only truly comprehend an alien cultural tradition if one thoroughly understand the culture’s communication systems. In addition, Ross (1978) indicated that Sapir and Whorf stated that the manner in which

one perceives reality could be influenced by the language in which one speaks. Hence, if one seeks to understand a community, studying its communication systems could be a very helpful starting point. Fredrik Barth wrote a volume named *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) about the social organisation of cultural differences (as cited in Ross, 1978). According to Barth, if a person belongs to an ethnic group, he or she will share that group's criteria for assessment and judgement. In contrast, the marginalisation of a person as belonging to another ethnic group would imply the recognition of limited shared understanding. A person's ethnic identity tends to be absolute and quite encompassing. Communication between or among ethnic groups is affected by cultural elements prevalent in their ethnic identities. Therefore, a person's ethnic identity will have cultural footprints that will affect the manner in which he or she communicates with others.

In summary, communication within various cultures will differ and researchers studying communication within these cultures should recognise the various factors influencing communication patterns within a specific cultural group. One of these factors is language, which will be explored in the section that follows.

3.2.3.2 Language usage within a cultural group

Language has three important functions which impact on human interaction (Samovar & Porter, 2001):

- *Labelling*. The labelling function enables identification or naming of someone, something or an action so that it may be mentioned during communication.
- *Interaction*. The interaction function of language refers to its ability to enable communication of thoughts and feelings.
- *Transmission*. The transmission function of language enables information to be transmitted to others.

In addition, language also serves the purpose of emotive expression; sharing of thoughts and non-factual information; to control one's reality; for the recording of historical facts; and to express an identity to a particular institution or social group (Samovar & Porter, 2001). Therefore, language plays a critical role in communication and will impact on discourse among individuals.

The language spoken by a group of individuals will have an impact on the nature of the communication that takes place between them. Age, academic background and cultural background have an impact on the language used by a person and on the understanding of specific words (Robbins, 2005). Language is an important feature of culture as a whole. In addition, language focuses perception and enables a person to habitually analyse incidents into specific categories of meaning (Hoijer, 1954, as cited in Jandt, 2010). Hoijer (1954, as cited in Jandt, 2010, p.66) stated that "...to the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, so should we expect to find significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding".

According to Tebbutt (1995), gender differences in language have been studied since the early 1970s, when the first research focused on male dominance and the seemingly inferior nature of female language. Conversely, later research focussed on dissimilarities in conversational styles. Whereas male conversation was seen as individualistic, aggressively competitive and focused on things, female conversation was defined as cooperative and collective, with a concern for people and feelings. Men's talk seemed to be more self-centred and focused on facts, whereas women's talk was more about others and emotions (De Backer, 2005; Social Issues Research Centre, 2007).

In summary, literature on culture seems to focus on the differences between cultures in the manner they behave or react to similar circumstances. This is sensible as this will highlight the specific attributes of each culture that one should be sensitive to. However, the core outcomes from a study on differences between cultures should, in the researcher's opinion, be focused on the similarities of the respective cultures once the

differences have been identified. Once one bears cognisance of the differences between cultures in terms of a specific topic, one should focus on the core elements each culture has in common in terms of the specific topic, and construct an integrated version of these similarities. The focus of this cross-cultural study should be to enable researchers and organisations to find a middle ground between the views or behaviours of different cultural groups; not to segregate them even more. Therefore, the end-result of a cross-cultural study should, in the researcher's opinion, be focused on how cultural barriers could be broken down with the newly gained information from the study's findings.

3.3 COMMUNICATION

What follows is a discussion of the definition and elements of communication. This will serve as a background to the main topic under discussion, which is gossip and communication in the workplace, including office gossip.

3.3.1 Definition of communication

The word "communication" is derived from the Latin word "communicare", which means "...to share with or to make common, as in giving to another a part or share of your thoughts, hopes, and knowledge" (Jandt, 2010, p. 37). In 1975, Dance and Larson (as cited in Samovar & Porter, 2001) consulted literature on communication and discovered 126 definitions on communication, and even more definitions have been added to this list since then. For communication to be regarded as communication, a message has to be transferred and its meaning has to be understood (Robbins, 2005).

A definition by Ruben and Stewart (1998, as cited in Samovar & Porter, 2001, p. 22) is henceforth used as the definition of communication: “Human communication is the process through which individuals – in relationships, groups, organisations, and societies – respond to and create messages to adapt to the environment and one another.”

3.3.2 Elements of communication

Communication comprises different elements, which uniformly represent a process. By understanding the elements of communication, communication as a whole can be appreciated. The Berlo Model, which follows in Figure 3.2, illustrates the elements of communication, which include source, encoding, message, channel, noise, receiver, decoding, receiver, response, feedback and context.

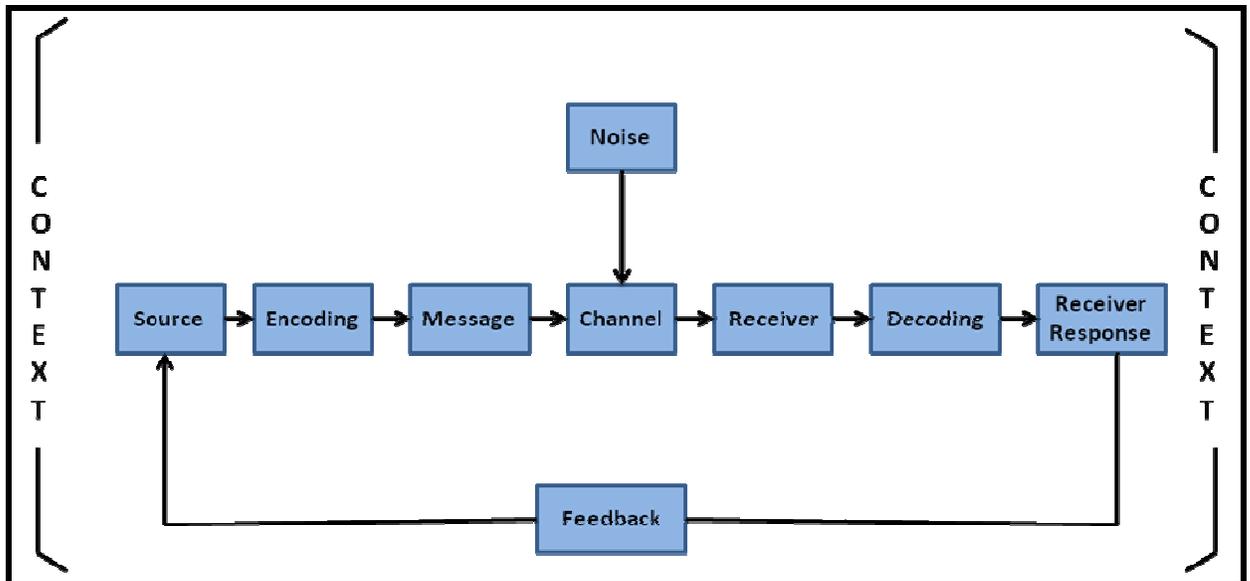


Figure 3.2. The Berlo Model (adapted from Jandt, 2010, p. 42).

The elements of communication are described by Jandt (2010) as follows:

- i. *Source* refers to an individual who has a message that he or she wishes to communicate to someone else.
- ii. *Encoding* involves a process in which the message the individual wishes to convey is transformed into a symbol signifying the message. The encoding of thoughts can be done in words or in unspoken symbolisms.
- iii. *Message* refers to the end product of the encoding.
- iv. *Channel or medium* refers to the way in which the encoded thought or symbol is sent, such as through written documents, electronic media, or face-to-face interaction.
- v. *Noise* refers to anything that alters the message encoded by the source.
- vi. *Receiver* refers to the person to whom the message is sent.
- vii. *Decoding* is a process much like encoding, but the opposite thereof. In this process, the receiver interprets the meaning of the message.
- viii. *Receiver response* refers to all actions taken, or not taken, by the receiver in response to the message.
- ix. *Feedback* refers to the part of the receiver's response that is relevant to the message that was sent by the source and is received and interpreted by the source.
- x. *Context*. The last element of communication, context, refers to the setting in which communication takes place and has an impact on communication. Culture can also be understood as context. Each culture's worldview, thinking patterns, perception of the self and social network differ from that of other cultures.

To conclude, as can be seen in the Berlo Model, communication takes place within a specific context. Successful communication of a message is ensured through the feedback given by the receiver, indicating that the message was received and its meaning understood (Robbins, 2005).

3.4 COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

According to Scott and Mitchell (1976, as cited in Robbins, 2005), four functions can be achieved through communication in organisations: (1) communication has a *controlling*

function – formal and informal communication can be used to control the behaviour of employees; (2) communication enables *motivation* – one can communicate particular goals, give feedback on the achievement of these goals and support favourable behaviour; (3) communication allows *emotional expression* – communication can be used by employees to share their feelings and to interact with others; and (4) communication can facilitate *decision making* – through the provision of information, communication can enable employees to consider different alternatives and to make decisions.

3.4.1 Formal and information channels of communication

According to Verwey and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003), communication serves as the basis for grasping most human processes that occur in an organisation. These authors also asserted that social networks within organisations are dependent on communication. Organisational theorists and researchers propose that messages in formal organisational structures follow three main directions: downward and upward (vertical), or horizontal (lateral) (Robbins, 2005). The direction of a transmitted message is the unique characteristic of every message system, each of which utilises certain channels and has different functions and unique problems to be dealt with (Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003).

Verwey and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003) have stated that communication channels comprise formal and informal channels. Upward, downward and horizontal message systems form part of formal channels of communication, whereas the grapevine forms part of informal communication. Figure 3.3 illustrates the channels of communication and their properties.

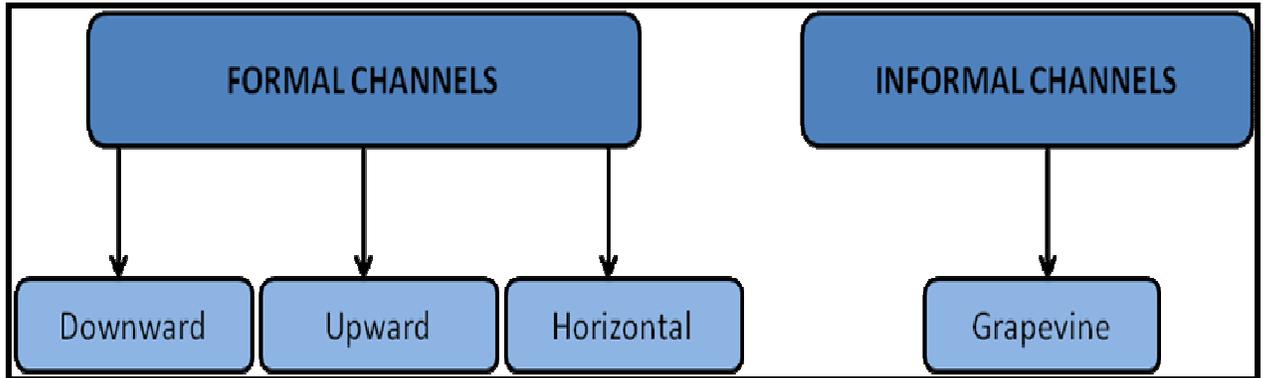


Figure 3.3. The channels of communication in the workplace (adapted from Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003, p. 164).

The elements of the formal channel of communication include (Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2003):

1. *Vertical downward communication*, which refers to the transmission of messages, especially instructions, from superiors down to subordinates. This formal channel is used to give employees goals to achieve and to provide them with performance feedback, to tell employees which tasks to perform and to highlight any issues that arise, and to convey policies and procedures to employees (Robbins, 2005).
2. *Vertical upward communication*, which refers to the sending of messages from subordinates to superiors. This type of communication would be utilised by subordinates to ask questions, to give feedback and to offer suggestions.
3. *Horizontal communication*, which refers to the sharing of messages among individuals on the same functional level of authority. This type of communication is task oriented and also enables social interaction. This formal communication channel can often facilitate quicker and more efficient and accurate transfer of messages than other formal communication channels (Robbins, 2005).

The vertical channels of communication are typically created by management to facilitate the transmission of organisation-specific messages, whereas horizontal communication channels can be formally authorised by management or created informally by employees (Robbins, 2005). Personal and social messages are often

transmitted in informal channels of communication (Robbins, 2005). Verwey and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003) stated that an organisation's inability to cater for sufficient formal communication channels will lead to the creation of informal channels. These informal channels of communication are often characterised by rumours and are also referred to as the grapevine. The *grapevine* mostly utilises horizontal communication and is regularly utilised as a channel for communicating organisational problems and policies. In the absence of the sufficient transmission of messages, the grapevine will fill the gaps as the employees' main information source.

3.4.2 The grapevine

From its initial identification during the Hawthorne studies, researchers have comprehensively studied informal communication, also known as the "grapevine" (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Akande and Odewale (1994) stated that the concept of the grapevine originated in the period of the American Civil War, when messages were distorted because the telegraph lines hung loose from trees, resembling grapevines. Accordingly, the informal channel through which often distorted and inaccurate rumours are spread has since been referred to the grapevine.

Glover (2001, p. 300) defined the grapevine as "...consisting of gossip, rumours, informal interactions between managers and workers and opportunistic information gatherers/disseminators". More often than not, employees first find out about organisational news through the grapevine ("Heard it through the grapevine", 1997). The grapevine has three core features (Modic, 1989; Newstrom, Monczka & Reif, 1974): (1) the grapevine is not controlled by management, (2) employees tend to rather rely on information in the grapevine than on formal channels of communication, and (3) the people who utilise the grapevine do so for their personal benefit. According to Akande and Odewale (1994), information spreads through the grapevine very swiftly, at a pace that has been directly linked to the supposed significance of the message and the nature of the specific situation. The authors also stated that the same information is normally

transmitted faster through the grapevine than through formal communication channels. Moreover, it is often impossible to hold someone accountable for the truthfulness of a rumour, as no formal authority relationships are present in the grapevine.

The grapevine can be used by managers to determine the morale of the employees, to establish any issues that employees are concerned about, and to establish what makes the employees anxious (Robbins, 2005). Akande and Odewale (1994) stated that rumours in the grapevine are mostly oral, whereas the written sharing of rumours mostly takes place when oral communication is inconvenient or too noticeable. In addition, the authors asserted that rumours have specific causes, such as a lack of job security, emotional disagreement or a lack of sufficient information. A lot of information that ends up in the grapevine is grounded on perceptions, deductions and how body language is interpreted (Therrien, 2004). An individual will receive and convey a rumour based on his or her personal biases and his or her perceived reality (Akande & Odewale, 1994). Akande and Odewale (1994) came to the conclusion that most information spread throughout the grapevine therefore is half-truths and not factual in nature and can have a detrimental impact on those affected by it.

Informal channels of communication are created spontaneously and not by management (Robbins, 2005). The grapevine seems to serve an important purpose in organisational communication and should be dealt with as such (Sierra, 2002). The office gossip grapevine is used by certain employers to gather information on what is going on in the workforce. According to Schultz (1994), some organisations have hired companies that assist employers in harvesting their office gossip grapevine in an attempt to enhance ethical conduct among employees. This is done through the provision of an anonymous 24-hour toll-free telephone line that allows employees to make any allegations of illegal conduct by their colleagues.

The above overview of communication and the channels of communication in the workplace create a context in which gossip can be understood. Gossip is a form of

informal communication that takes place among different individuals and serves different functions. In the discussion that follows, gossip as a form of communication will be explored.

3.5 GOSSIP AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

Gossip is extremely prevalent among informal interactions and is a reflection of the extensive fascination people have with the activities of others (Van der Merwe, 2005). The industrial revolution led to increased social seclusion due to the disintegration of conventional neighbourhoods and collective networks (Social Issues Research Centre, 2007). According to the Social Issues Research Centre (2007), social bonding is so intrinsic to all human beings that it has been confirmed that humans living in today's fragmented communities wish to re-establish communal relationships. The concept of social bonding seems to date back to the Stone Age, when women were gatherers and men were hunters or warriors and relied on one another for survival. The Social Issues Research Centre (2007) proposed that this concept appears to have evolved into the Modern Age and is still evident among humans today. Accordingly, it has been found that both genders find relationships that are reciprocal and comprise of trust to be of significant importance.

Hereafter follows different theories of gossip, the history of gossip, and the specific manner in which it will be defined in this study. This will be followed by a discussion of the scope of gossip.

3.5.1 Theoretical perspectives on gossip

Various theoretical perspectives on gossip have evolved within the literature on gossip. The key theories of gossip are explored in greater detail in the section that follows.

3.5.1.1 The classification of gossip according to a functional design

In the thesis of De Backer (2005), she proposed that gossip be classified into smaller subcategories to allow simple conceptualisation of each subcategory. It is valuable to explore De Backer’s proposed classification of gossip, as this illustrates the possible different types of gossip and how they are related. Also, this classification of gossip emphasises that gossip as a concept can be understood as meaning different things to different people. Hence, an exploration of what gossip means to individuals from diverse groups would be a significant subject matter to explore in this study. Figure 3.4 provides a graphical illustration of the categories and subcategories proposed by De Backer (2005).

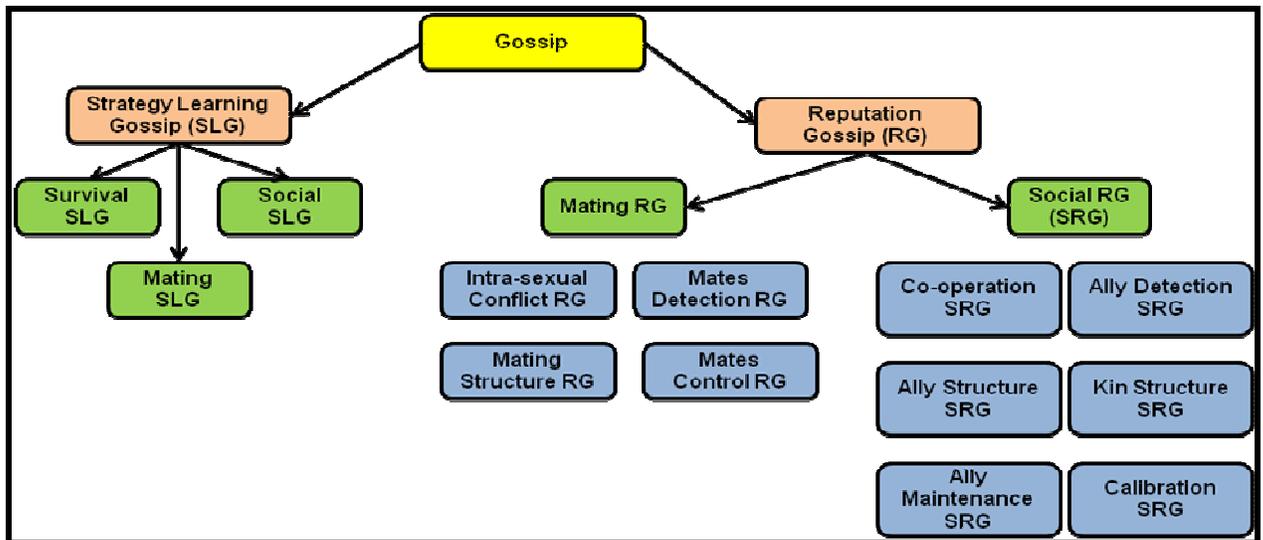


Figure 3.4. De Backer’s classification of gossip (adapted from De Backer, 2005).

According to De Backer (2005), gossip can be divided into two main categories: strategy learning gossip and reputation gossip. These categories will be discussed in this section.

a. **Strategy Learning Gossip**

According to De Backer (2005), *Strategy Learning Gossip* (SLG) occurs if behavioural information plays a central role and the gossipee does not play a significant role. This would include gossip, for example, focused on situations rather than on a specific gossipee. This gossip category provides information about relevant behavioural fitness strategies applied by others; behavioural fitness strategies imply that those engaged in the gossip can learn from these strategies and use them as a reference for future behaviours. Strategy Learning Gossip can be divided into Survival SLG, Mating SLG and Social SLG.

i. **Survival Strategy Learning Gossip** is based on information that describes the manner in which a person can develop or safeguard his or her survival. Survival in this case refers to continued existence or fitness. Gossip dealing with this type of information will provide strategies beneficial to a person's fitness or strategies that should be steered clear of, as they will be detrimental to a person's fitness. For example, a strategy beneficial to a person's survival would be gossip focused on the drawbacks of smoking to one's health.

ii. **Mating Strategy Learning Gossip** provides information that could assist a person in dealing with problems related to mating. Mating in this instance refers to courting or ways in which one should approach matters related to the opposite sex. The "trail-and-error" mating strategies utilised by others can be informative and teach a person the actions to take or not to take in dealing with mating issues. For example, this form of gossip could relate to a discussion focussed on "pick-up lines" that work well with the ladies.

iii. **Social Strategy Learning Gossip** can offer information of the type of behavioural strategies that are helpful and harmful in the social context in which a

person lives and interacts. This information includes the values, norms and social conventions of a society. For example, a group of people might discuss acceptable and unacceptable table manners.

b. Reputation Gossip

De Backer (2005) asserted that *Reputation Gossip* applies if the gossipee is the main focus and the behaviour or attributes of the gossipee under discussion cannot be distinguished from the gossipee. This gossip category provides those involved in the gossiping with information about a particular person(s). The participants in the gossip can therefore learn about people through Reputation Gossip. In addition to the learning that Reputation Gossip can provide, it also serves the function of manipulating the gossipee's reputation. Reputation Gossip can be divided into Mating RG and Social RG. In turn, these subcategories can be divided into further categories.

i. Mating Reputation Gossip provides a sexual partner with information concerning the reputations of relevant others in order to use this information for the manipulation of these reputations. For example, a male would use Mating Reputation Gossip if he knows that another male, who is a potential rival wooing the same female, uses Steroids to look as well-built as he does. Also information such as a person's reputation as a lover, a person's relationship status or a person's loyalty or disloyalty towards his or her lover would also be typically discussed under this form of gossip. Mating Reputation Gossip can be subdivided into: mates detection RG, mating structure RG, intra-sexual conflict RG and mates control RG.

(a) Mates Detection Reputation Gossip is focused on information that resolves the problems of finding promising prospective mates. The reputation of men and women as good or bad sexual partners, therefore their "mating skills", applies in this form of reputation gossip.

- (b) **Mating Structure Reputation Gossip** refers to providing people with information regarding the sexual relations of those within their social system. Whether a person is single, or who he or she is dating, is the main point of concern in this form of reputation gossip.
- (c) **Intra-sexual Conflict Reputation Gossip** provides information about sexual rivals and accordingly manipulates the reputation of these sexual rivals. This form of gossip can be further divided into (1) sexual rival detection and (2) sexual rival slander. *Sexual rival detection* is used to notify an individual about who can be considered a sexual rival. *Sexual rival slander* is used to lessen the reputation of a sexual rival of the same gender as the gossiper.
- (d) **Mates Control Reputation Gossip** provides information about the deceptive behaviour of both genders. This information is used as a warning of the deceptive behaviour of an individual's sexual partner or of the partner of a friend.
- ii. **Social Reputation Gossip** was proposed by De Backer (2005) to be used to provide information to individuals regarding the reputation of other individuals within their social system. In addition, this form of gossip is used to manipulate the gossiper's own reputation and those of the members of his or her social system. Social Reputation Gossip can be subdivided into: co-operation SRG, ally detection SRG, ally structure reputation SRG, kin structure SRG and ally maintenance SRG.
- (a) **Co-operation Social Reputation Gossip** refers to information used to inform others about who can be regarded as a cheater and who can be regarded as an altruist, and to influence the co-operative reputation of the gossipee. A cheater is assumed to be disciplined by reducing the co-operative reputation of the cheater, which in effect reduces his or her chances for prospective co-operation. An altruist is rewarded through an increase of his or her co-operative reputation, which in effect increases his or her chances for prospective co-operation.

- (b) **Ally Detection Social Reputation Gossip** provides an individual with information regarding the skills of others in his or her social environment. This information can then be used to identify friends/allies, rivals/enemies and individuals who do not fit into one of these categories – hence neutral individuals.
- (c) **Ally Structure Social Reputation Gossip** refers to information about who is allied with whom in the gossiper's social context. When an individual does not know a person, this information will enable him or her to quickly categorise the person as a friend or an enemy.
- (d) **Kin Structure Social Reputation Gossip** is used to provide information regarding the familial ties between individuals.
- (e) **Ally Maintenance Social Reputation Gossip** is information used to enhance the gossiper and his or her allies' reputations and to decrease his or her enemies' reputations. The gossiper's ultimate aim is to enhance his or her reputation. This form of Social Reputation Gossip is manipulative in nature.
- (f) **Calibration Social Reputation Gossip** deals with information about traits and/or behaviours of others that are out of the ordinary. If someone does not behave in a manner that is typically expected of him or her, the predicted behaviour of this person has to be calibrated. This calibration is important, as future interactions with the person who behaved differently would be changed. Calibration Social Reputation Gossip can be subdivided into: other deviance calibration SRG and self-deviance calibration SRG.
- (i) **Other Deviance Calibration Social Reputation Gossip** provides information about someone whose traits and/or behaviour are different

from those in his or her social context. Therefore, the other members of this person's social context cannot be used as a reference for predicted behaviour.

- (ii) **Self-deviance Calibration Social Reputation Gossip** refers to information about unforeseen changes in a person's typical behaviour pattern. Therefore, the person's typical behavioural pattern cannot be used as a reference for future behaviours.

The theory proposed by De Backer (2005) still has to be researched further to determine whether this functional design is appropriate and whether all the categories are prevalent in gossip conversations. De Backer (2005) did research on 103 respondents of different age groups and genders, and some of the categories were prevalent from the interviews with the respondents. Some categories were not prevalent in the findings, however, which means that this theory is still in the embryo phase of development.

3.5.1.2 **The functionalist and transactionalist perspectives**

According to Handelman (1973), anthropological research has established two general perspectives of gossip: the functionalist and the transactionalist perspectives. Handelman (1973) stated that the *functionalist perspective* aims to explore gossip's underlying functions among various social entities. For example, gossip can be used as a method to clarify the morals governing a society. This perspective seems to be focused more on the collective function of gossip in terms of a society or entity at large. From the *transactionalist perspective*, gossip is used as a tactic to impress others, or to gather or spread information for personal gain. The underlying motive of gossip from this perspective seems to be more individualistic in nature, as it stresses the manner in which individuals use gossiping to satisfy personal agendas.

These theoretical perspectives are still relevant, as researchers still seek to find the underlying functions of gossip (functionalist perspective) and also seek to understand its

use as a tool for personal gain (transactional perspective). These perspectives do not, however, take into consideration the entire process or context in which gossip takes place or the factors that might lead to the occurrence and typology of gossip. The underlying factors that might influence the propensity to gossip, such as cultural background, have not been explored sufficiently.

3.5.1.3 Gossip from an evolutionary perspective

Evolutionary psychologists have proposed that in the process of human brain development during the Stone Age, people whose faces could be recognised were regarded as part of the in-group (Social Issues Research Centre, 2007). In turn, gossip was used to strengthen the ties between the in-group whilst classifying people who were “bitched” about in the out-group. According to the Social Issues Research Centre (2007), this was especially relevant among women who, as gatherers and carers, took part in discussions with other women while the men were out hunting. In addition, this perspective reinforced the stereotype of men as providers of information versus women as gossipers.

a. The gossip-as-grooming theory

From the perspective of the gossip-as-grooming theory, developed by Robin Dunbar, gossip is an innate human instinct (Fox, 2001). According to Dunbar (1993), language evolved to enable humans to gossip. In this theory a comparison is made by evolutionary psychologists between gossip evolution in human beings and the “social grooming” that takes place between chimpanzees (Fox, 2001). Chimpanzees reportedly spend an excessive amount of time cleaning each other’s pelts, despite the fact that their pelts have already been cleaned extensively. This signifies a form of social bonding, during which these animals continue with the task of cleaning one another for the mere purpose of bonding and togetherness.

Dunbar (1993) proposed that unity and effectiveness were maintained in primate groups through social grooming. The limitations of social grooming are that it is time consuming, as only one primate can be groomed at a particular time, and social grooming cannot be done in conjunction with other activities. In addition, as social groups started increasing in size, social grooming was not effective enough to service all the relationships within these groups. This necessitated the development of speech, as people can speak while engaged in other activities and more than one individual can be spoken to at a particular time. In addition, bigger social groups could be formed and a group could therefore have more power (Dunbar, 2004).

There are two reasons, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, why language can be used as a form of social bonding (Dunbar, 1993):

- 1) Language affords people time to connect with their preferred social associates. This will permit them to learn more about one another's behaviours through direct observation.
- 2) Language allows people to gain more information about the behaviours and traits of third parties. This will enable an individual to learn about the behaviours of other members of the social circle, without the need to observe a person directly. This enables a person to have more extensive social knowledge than would have been the case if the person relied only on direct observation of others.

Through gossip, humans can be cognisant of happenings within their social networks – often necessary for survival (Barkow, 1992, as cited in Foster, 2004), they can enhance their reputations, manipulate information and others for their own benefit, and they can punish those who infringe the implicit and explicit social norms of a group (Dunbar, 2004). Dunbar (1993) stated that humans gossip because it serves an important and communally therapeutic purpose. It has been found that “shared grooming” fuels endorphin production, thereby reducing stress levels (Brennan, 2009; Dunbar, 2004; Fox, 2001). It is also assumed that “vocal grooming” most probably will have the same effect on humans (Fox, 2001; Tebbutt, 1995). Supporting this theory is Sally Yerkovich's

(1977) statement that talk is sociable to the extent that what is talked about is not as significant as the interaction it facilitates. As emphasised by the concept of social grooming, gossip therefore does not merely seek to convey a message, but also to develop relationships and trust, and to express loyalty among its participants (Tebbutt, 1995).

Dunbar's theory (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 2004) was also supported by Wilson et al. (2000), who found that groups tend to find group-serving gossip, used as a social control mechanism when norms are violated to protect the group as a whole, acceptable, whereas self-serving gossip is frowned upon. The focus of gossip, according to Dunbar's theory (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 2004), therefore seems to be on the group or society as a whole, which would be a socially acceptable form of gossip according to Wilson et al. (2000). In this light, gossip can be viewed as a type of cultural learning, as gossip can assist a society's members to become more skilled, to understand the implicit and explicit rules of a group and to bond with those gossiped with (Baumeister et al., 2004). Especially positive gossip seems to be associated with cultural learning (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, as cited in Brennan, 2009; Levin & Arluke, 1985).

b. Gossip-as-status-indicator theory

In his book titled *The mating mind: how sexual choice shaped human nature*, Geoffrey Miller (2000, as cited in Fox, 2001) proposed that gossip can also serve to emphasise a person's status for the purpose of serving as a courtship device. Miller concurred with Dunbar's (1993, 2004) perception of language comprising mainly of gossip, but also stated that the functions of gossip were broader than merely enabling the building of social networks. Gossip can also serve to point out social status and social intelligence. Miller therefore expanded on Dunbar's theory (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 2004) of gossip by emphasising other possible functions of gossip.

3.5.1.4 **Gossip as a form of social comparison**

The Social Comparison Theory of Buunk and Gibbons (2000, as cited in Brennan, 2009) and Festinger (1954) seems to be essential to understanding gossip (Brennan, 2009). Wert and Salovey (2004) proposed a theory focused on the six types of social comparisons made when people gossip. People can compare themselves with different people in their social contexts – depending on the intent of the comparison (Wood & Taylor, 1991, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004). According to Wert and Salovey (2004), negative gossip can be used by an individual in an attempt to protect his or her self-esteem. A person therefore finds it important to view himself or herself as superior to others, and this can be achieved through (negative) gossip. The six types of comparisons people can make when gossiping are: (1) comparison with others who are similar to oneself; (2) downward social comparison; (3) upward social comparison; (4) comparison of the in-group with the out-group and comparison among in-group members; (5) constructed social comparison; and (6) emotional comparison.

a. **Comparison with similar others**

Wert and Salovey (2004) stated that comparisons are made with one's peers in an attempt to gather more precise information about oneself. Consequently, by comparing one's feelings and perceptions with those of comparable others through gossip, one will be able to gather meaningful information and validate one's own beliefs and competencies (Festinger, 1954).

b. **Downward social comparison**

According to Wert and Salovey (2004), comparisons are made through gossip with those who are not as privileged, competent or influential as oneself in an attempt to view oneself in a more positive light. The authors proposed that this form of social

comparison would be especially prevalent when a person feels at risk within a specific field.

c. Upward social comparison

Wert and Salovey (2004) asserted that one compares oneself with others who are more privileged, competent and influential than oneself through gossip, for the purpose of self-improvement. Hence, a person will compare himself or herself with and gather relevant information about superior others by gossiping about them, as this will avoid the embarrassment of making such comparisons in their presence.

d. In-group/out-group comparisons and in-group member comparisons

Comparisons through gossip of the in-group with the out-group will enable the in-group members to establish the lines that delineate the in-group from the out-group (Wert & Salovey, 2004); that is, the norms of the in-group and what they stand for as opposed to the out-group. In-group members can also compare themselves to other in-group members through gossip. This will provide the in-group member with detailed information about the opinions and viewpoints of other in-group members.

e. Constructed social comparison

Wert and Salovey (2004) proposed that people compare themselves with make-believe others who possess characteristics and abilities they picture to belong to these others. When a person gossips, they therefore implicitly compare the gossipee with the imagined behaviour of a personified version of the group norms. This will enable the group norms to be shared and upheld.

f. **Emotional comparison**

When a person wants to understand his or her own emotional responses to specific events and stimuli, he or she will gossip with others to acquire information about their emotional responses to similar situations (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

In summary, people can use gossip with or about similar others and their in-group members in order to gather information about the legitimacy of their views and competencies. Individuals can also gossip about others who are viewed as superior for the purpose of self-improvement. In order to feel superior, individuals can compare themselves with others considered to be inferior. The gossipee can also be compared with an imaginary entity in order to evaluate his or her adherence to group norms and acceptable behaviours. Comparisons with others are also needed to validate our emotional responses to particular events. Lastly, social identity within a group can be developed by comparing the in-group with the out-group.

All of these theories form a critical background to understanding gossip. They emphasise either the focus or the function of gossip. As can be derived from the above discussion of gossip, it is clear that it is a very complex phenomenon to study and understand. The multifaceted nature of gossip and the different theories that have aimed to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon emphasise the need to contextualise it more specifically to fully appreciate its nature and possibly build on existing theories of gossip.

3.5.2 History of gossip

Melanie Tebbutt (1995) reported in her book, *Woman's Talk? A social history of "gossip" in working-class neighbourhood, 1880-1960*, that when other people were talked about in the past there was a hierarchy of judgement; which ranged from casual comments to inflated talk. She also asserted that the content of the gossip was focussed more

frequently on “real characters”; meaning those individuals who were the subject of amusement, affection or admiration of others within a specific community. Gossip was often linked to the gender and literacy of individuals.

Although, historically, deeds were linked to men and words to women, Tebbutt (1995) stated that there was no evidence supporting the widespread perception that women more often engaged in gossiping. According to Tebbutt (1995), in the past women’s talk was discredited as an inferior version of actual language. Conversely, when men’s talk constituted a similar purpose as women’s gossip, it was referred to as talk of another nature. As stated by Spender (1985, as cited in Tebbutt, 1995, p. 1), “[i]t is not surprising to find that there are no terms for man talk that are equivalent to chatter, natter, prattle, nag, bitch...and, of course, *gossip*...It is because when they do it is called something different, something more flattering and more appropriate to their place in the world.” According to existing research, almost everyone engages in gossip, and the likelihood of someone being held responsible for it is based on whether they break the rules governing the in-group in any way, such as through spreading false rumours or talking maliciously of others (Tebbutt, 1995).

According to various sources, the occurrence of gossip has been prevalent for centuries and has mostly been referred to in a negative light (Besnier, 1989; Handelman, 1973; Holland, 1996; Ramos, 2000). This was due to the negative outcomes of malignant gossiping. Gossiping was perceived to be used solely for personal gain and for building the gossiper’s own status, or for the destruction of the status of others (Gelles, 1989). Gossip was criticised for its harmful nature and immoral connotations by philosophers and religious entities, and also in literature (Gelles, 1989).

In more recent years, authors have differed in terms of their perspectives on gossip. Some proclaim its possible beneficial outcomes on social relationships, while others see it as purely detrimental due to its malignant nature; others, again, assert that it can have positive and negative outcomes on those involved in it or on the target of the gossip

(Gelles, 1989). The content, motives, functions and outcomes of gossip will have an influence on the manner in which gossip is defined. Therefore, it is a very complex phenomenon to define, as it is so dynamic in nature.

3.5.3 Definition of gossip

“We all ‘know’ what gossip is, but defining, identifying, and measuring it is a complex enterprise for practical investigation” (Foster, 2004, p. 80). It is quite difficult to define gossip due to the vast array of perceptions and understandings associated with the concept. In addition, the negativity of a statement is dependent on the situation at hand, the “insider” norms of those who gossip, the discussant’s tone, and private jokes shared by a group (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Abrahams (1970), Hannerz (1967), Rosnow (2001, as cited in Foster, 2004), Spacks (1982) and Yerkovich (1977) have stated that the context plays an important role in determining whether gossip is taking place or not. Therefore, the understanding of gossip differs across individuals, contexts and groups.

The word “gossip” was derived from the old English word “godsibb”, which means “godparent” or “godfather” (De Backer, 2005). Gossip is often regarded as almost synonymous with female talk (Eckert, 1990; Foster, 2004; Spacks, 1982), whereas men’s talk is more often referred to as “shop talk”, “shooting the breeze” (Fine & Rosnow, 1978) or “killing time together” (Foster, 2004). Gossip seems to involve what others do and their standing within a group (Bromley, 1993, as cited in De Backer, 2005; Hannerz, 1967). Some researchers view gossip as a discussion that takes place when the gossipee is not present (Besnier, 1989; Hannerz, 1967), whereas Rosnow and Fine (1974) have postulated that it can take place whether the gossipee is present or not. Hence, in exceptional cases gossip can even take place in the gossipee’s company (Gluckman, 1963; Handelman, 1973). Other researchers state that a person can even gossip about himself or herself (Dunbar, 1992a, 1992b; Fox, 2001).

Before the 19th century, gossip was regarded as a form of pleasant discussion (Spacks, 1985, as cited in De Backer, 2005). In the 19th century, gossip had an overriding negative connotation due to the perception of its inappropriateness and its subjective nature. Gossip was ethically condemned, seeing that it was perceived as violating the privacy of others (Bok, 1983, as cited in Foster, 2004) and often contained misinformation (Harrington & Bielby, 1995). Lanz (1936) associated gossip with the devil. Gossip was construed as unsuitable and evil and was defined as "...the telling of lies, the disclosure of secrets that one is pledged not to tell, the exercise of conscious malice" (Gelles, 1989, p. 667). It was regarded mostly as discussions of the scandalous behaviours of others in the absence of the subject under discussion (Flannery, 1934; Gelles, 1989). Bruno (n.d.) described the intent of gossip as a means to maliciously damage the reputation of another person by not including correct, essential information.

As the academic interest in gossip started to increase, the definitions thereof also evolved. Although the general public and some researchers still seem to view gossip from a negative perspective, as can be seen from most of today's dictionary meanings of gossip, recent literature and research emphasise gossip as more impartial in nature – with both the beneficial and detrimental functions of gossip being stressed, and not merely its possible negative outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Rosnow, 2001, as cited in Foster, 2004; Sabini & Silver, 1978). A more neutral perspective on gossip was provided by Eder and Enke (1991) and Sabini and Silver (1982, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004), who view it as an evaluative discussion of a person in his or her absence. A broader definition of gossip was supplied by Noon and Delbridge (1993), who regard gossip as a process in which information of importance is informally conveyed to others within a social context. In conjunction with this, De Gouveia et al. (2005) recently developed a model of workplace gossip, which classified informal communication as comprising of both harmful and harmless content. An important aspect that seems to be prevalent in most definitions of gossip is the evaluative nature of this concept. The definition of Wert

and Salovey (2004, p. 123) emphasises this aspect: “...gossip is informal, evaluative talk about a member of the discussants’ social environment who is not present.”

As can be seen from the above definitions, the conceptualisation of gossip has changed over time from a traditionally negative connotation to a more impartial connotation. This study adopts the view of gossip as potentially comprising both positive and negative outcomes, and concurs with the model developed by De Gouveia et al. (2005) that gossip can be both harmful and harmless in content.

Gossip does not necessarily lead to negative consequences and can have beneficial outcomes or no outcomes at all. Hence, for the purposes of this study, gossip is defined as “...informal, evaluative talk about a member of the discussants’ social environment who is not present” (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 123).

The above definition is accurate, as it emphasises that gossip is informal; that it can include different forms of communication; and that a wide variety of people can be gossiped about – including the person sharing the information. The definition does not, however, seem to make provision for celebrities, who are normally not part of the social context of those who gossip (Fox, 2001). Hence, in light of this, celebrities are also assumed to be included in Wert and Salovey’s (2004) definition of gossip.

3.5.4 Scope of gossip

Gossip is a very complex phenomenon that can be better understood if its characteristics, functions, elements that distinguish it from other forms of communication, possible outcomes and social functions are explored in greater detail. In the sections that follow, these features of gossip will be explored.

3.5.4.1 Characteristics of gossip

Although there is not a commonly agreed upon definition of gossip, the typical characteristics of gossip can be used to develop a clear picture of its properties. The characteristics of gossip are manifold:

- Both men and women spend most of their time in conversation gossiping (Allen & Guy, 1974, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005; Arbor, 1995; Bergmann, 1993, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005; Fox, 2001);
- Gossip requires the presence of the following three elements: a gossiper, a subject and a recipient (Gelles, 1989);
- Gossip entails some form of social comparison – the gossiper compares the gossipee with a societal or self-centred form of reference (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004) and the gossiper can also use gossip to gather information about himself or herself – to validate his or her emotions, opinions and competencies in relation to similar others, superior others, inferior others, imaginary entities or in-group members and to establish social identity and group norms through comparisons with the out-group (Wert & Salovey, 2004);
- Gossip is a tool used to publicise information that is or was private or personal in nature (Gelles, 1989);
- Gossip primarily takes place through oral communication. However, modern technology enables the use of electronic media to gossip (Fox, 2001), but the risk in terms of blasphemy is increased (Van der Merwe, 2005);
- For gossip to be successful there preferably has to be consensus and collaboration among the participants about the topic under discussion (Besnier, 1989);
- The topic of gossip is often some aspect of a third party that is abnormal to the standards or norms of a society (Van der Merwe, 2005). This includes aspects such as the conduct, abilities, personal attributes, negative behaviour or appearance of a third party;
- The context in which gossip takes place is usually both intimate and private in nature (Harrington & Bielby, 1995);

- As is the case with any other form of informal communication, the participation of the listener is imperative in maintaining the flow of the conversation (Van der Merwe, 2005). In addition, those involved in gossip generally know one another relatively well or have at least developed a common understanding and share social values and attitudes (Van der Merwe, 2005). An audience enables gossipers to spread rumours, therefore those who listen to gossip are part of the gossiping (Bruno, n.d.);
- The more elite a group of individuals, the more its members will engage in gossip about each other (Tebbutt, 1995);
- Gossip is utilised as an indirect form of confrontation (Bruno, n.d.);
- A cause of gossip is often envy (Therrien, 2004);
- Non-verbal communication plays a role in gossip (Van der Merwe, 2005). This will include visible communicative elements such as facial expressions, body language and gestures, as well as non-verbal, audible communicative elements such as the person's tone of voice, the volume of his or her voice, and conversational noises;
- The following characteristics were also identified by Nair (1989): the content of gossip includes mostly only part of the story and is focused on the weaknesses of a person; the story is told from the perspective of an onlooker who was not part of the action under discussion, but who criticises and judges it nevertheless; the information shared must sound credible; and, lastly, trust must be implicitly prevalent among the participants, seeing that intimate information is confided.

In summary, the characteristics of gossip are wide-ranging and can differ according to individual perception. These characteristics have, however, been generally regarded by researchers as accurate descriptions of the features of gossip.

3.5.4.2 Elements of gossip

Gossip comprises elements that distinguish it from other forms of communication. The general building blocks of any gossip discussion comprise the following three elements (Eggins & Slade, 1997, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005):

- *Focus on the target of the gossip.* Attention is drawn to the third party, namely the party who will serve as the target of the gossip;
- *Behavioural confirmation phase.* Information and speculations are conveyed, putting the third party mostly in a negative light. During this phase, the gossiper elaborates on the social behaviours, values or conduct that are not regarded as appropriate or acceptable in terms of societal norms;
- *Pejorative evaluation.* Not all gossip discussions reach this phase. During this phase a negative judgement is made of the third party.

In addition to the elements identified by Eggins and Slade (1997, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005), *people* are always involved in gossip. Brennan (2009) stated that a gossiper and the recipients of and participants in the gossip are needed for gossip to take place successfully.

All of the stated elements do not necessarily have to be present for gossip to take place successfully, but they are typically present in this form of informal communication. In addition, it is not only the infringement of societal norms that is the subject of gossip – any other topic can also be discussed (De Backer, 2005). Further, the evaluative phase does not necessarily have to be negative in nature, and can also include a positive evaluation of others (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Van der Merwe, 2005).

3.5.4.3 The forms of gossip

Two forms of gossip have been distinguished by Van der Merwe (2005): (i) *positive gossip*, which is light-hearted, idle and meaningless chit-chat about colleagues, neighbours and other people for interest's sake and to satisfy the participants' curiosity, and (ii) *classic gossip*, which is better known among South Africans and refers to purposefully speaking ill of another person, where false rumours or negative facts of a third party's character, appearance or behaviour are spread behind the person's back. In

this type of discussion the participants display a negative, disapproving attitude towards the third party and convey a critical judgement and moral evaluation of the person. This form of gossip can often be equated to blasphemy.

3.5.4.4 Elements distinguishing gossip from healthy communication

According to the literature, gossip can be distinguished from other forms of “healthy” communication that are not construed as gossip. To distinguish between gossip and healthy communication, the following factors were indicated by Holland (1996) for consideration:

- The information conveyed in gossip is usually personal in nature;
- During gossip the actions or conduct of others is criticised and evaluated;
- The superiority or distinction of the gossiper from the target of the gossip is implied in some manner; and
- The motives behind gossip appear to be mainly self-serving in nature, to boost the self-image and status of the gossiper.

In addition, Peterson Turner (2007) stated that a person’s motives would determine whether a discussion had turned into gossip. If his or her motive for sharing information was the promotion of the gossiper’s interests or to acquire attention, gossip had taken place. Conversely, if the gossiper’s motive was to promote the best interest of the person discussed, the discussion was merely conversational.

3.5.4.5 Functions of gossip

Gossip has a greater purpose than merely the divulgence of information to pass the time. Participants in gossip are not always consciously aware of the underlying motives at play when they gossip, except if they were planned consciously (Stirling, 1956). The power of gossip does not lie only in its content or in the sharing of information, but also in its underlying motives and social functions, which can have adverse outcomes (Van

der Merwe, 2005). Van der Merwe (2005) stated that there seems to be a discrepancy in society regarding gossip. On the one hand, people are hesitant to take part in gossip, as such discussions are often discredited and regarded as immoral, as they could be blasphemous and compromise a person's character. On the other hand, people are generally very interested in hearing about what is said of others. It is due to this discrepancy that various strategies are used by speakers to hide the fact that they are in fact gossiping, such as referring the content of gossip to the original source and context in which it originated and hence shifting the focus from the person gossiping.

Gossip therefore has various functions. Some of these functions are that:

- Gossip is an *instrument used to exchange information* with another person(s) (Stirling, 1956; Van der Merwe, 2005) about the actions of a third party in his or her absence (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004; Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989);
- People experience gossip as an *exciting form of risk-taking*, as it symbolises taking part in something that is slightly wayward, seeing that one discusses the private affairs of others (Fox, 2001);
- Sharing information through gossip can have a *healing and therapeutic effect* on a person (Dunbar, 1993; Medini & Rosenberg, 1976);
- It *builds intimacy and friendships* among those involved in the gossip (Emler, 1990; Stirling, 1956), due to the sharing of information that is confidential in nature (Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989). Gossip is functional if one needs to form, confirm and reconfirm social relationships for the purpose of enhancing one's social standing, status and power (Van der Merwe, 2005);
- Gossip serves as a *hallmark of membership* through the establishment of group norms and can accordingly implicitly and explicitly exclude members of the out-group by showing them that they do not belong (Dunbar, 2004; Eckert, 1990; Loudon, 1961; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Stirling, 1956; Tebbutt, 1995);
- Gossip is used to *define and emphasise the rules* governing the behaviours of an in-group, and also plays a formative role in the *development of social values* (Besnier,

1989; Gelles, 1989; Tebbutt, 1995). As a social mechanism, gossip can be used to alter or dishonour the behaviour of a member who did not adhere to the norms of a group (Cox, 1970; Dunbar, 2004; Stirling, 1956). If one listens to gossip, one can hence learn about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in a social group (Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956; Wert & Salovey, 2004);

- *Cultural learning* can take place through gossip – through gossip a person can learn about the social norms of the in-group, become more competent, and bond with the in-group members (Baumeister et al., 2004);
- It is a tool used for the *manipulation of the views of others* (Abrahams, 1970; Bleek, 1976; Cox, 1970; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Paine, 1967; Sommerfeld et al., 2007) to boost the public status of the gossipier (Baumeister et al., 2004; Bergmann, 1993, as cited in Foster, 2004) or for the destruction of the status of other people (Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989). Gossip can therefore be used to manage a person's reputation (De Backer, 2005; Emler, 1990; Gelles, 1989; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Sommerfeld et al., 2007);
- It is in some people's *nature* – they have a tendency to discuss others (Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 1994, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004);
- It can be used as an *outlet for aggression or hostility* by someone who is angry or has fallen victim to someone else's actions and who then attempts to get even with words (Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989). This is also referred to as "letting off steam" (Gilmore, 1978; Levin & Arluke, 1985; Stirling, 1956). Gossip can be useful to *belittle another person* if one seeks revenge or is jealous or envious of another person (Van der Merwe, 2005);
- It is utilised for *entertainment and recreational* purposes, as it grasps the attention and interest of those participating (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, as cited in Foster, 2004; Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989; Gilmore, 1978; Rosnow, 1977; Spacks, 1982; Stirling, 1956);
- Gossip is often used to *project the gossipier's own weaknesses* onto someone else (Stirling, 1956);
- Through gossip, *social comparisons* can be made to make gossipers feel good about themselves by perceiving that the person gossiped about is worse off (Van der

Merwe, 2005) and to enhance a person's self-esteem, his or her self-development and to validate his or her opinions and competencies (Wert & Salovey, 2004);

- Gossip is a means to *indirectly increase and uphold power* (Bruno, n.d.). Chesler (2001, p. 465, as cited in Bruno, n.d.) viewed gossip as follows: "Some...cannot bear to experience themselves as lesser lights; in order to shine more brightly, they must rid the stage of greater lights."

For the remainder of this section, the social function of gossip is explored. From a comprehensive study of the available literature on gossip, relationships were found to be consistently drawn between gossip and cultures. Diverse cultures have been researched to demonstrate that gossip ties cultures together through its strengthening of societal norms and execution of social control (Abrahams, 1970; Bleek, 1976, Colson, 1953, as cited in De Backer, 2005; Cox, 1970; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963, 1968; Handelman, 1973; Haviland, 1977; Percival, 2000). Most of the literature focused on the manner in which gossiping can establish and enhance a cultural entity, whereas little research has been found on the inverse relationship – whether cultural differences can influence the perception and definition of gossip. Social constructivism "...aims to understand and describe human behaviour within specific cultural groups based on the assumptions that (1) human experience is subjective, (2) human behaviour is creative rather than determined or easily predicted, and (3) culture is created and maintained through communication" (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 56). From this perspective, communication is a tool through which cultural values, assumptions and behaviours are established and emphasised. Gossiping can be seen from a social constructivist perspective, as it entails the discussion of subjective human experiences and meanings and is used for the establishment and maintenance of cultural perspectives and values.

The implicit social standards of a community's members can be inferred from the content of gossip (Van der Merwe, 2005). According to Ramos (2000, p. 889), "[t]he act of gossiping is the act of creating communities". Gossip plays an instrumental role in the identification of shared characteristics and the development of a "community identity"

(Ramos, 2000, p. 907). Relationships have been identified between the functions of gossip and social relations for centuries (Flannery, 1934; Gelles, 1989). Stirling (1956) stated that the incentive to and content of gossip differ among individuals and across contexts and cultures. Gossip can be seen as a positive relationship builder among its participants and therefore has a strong social function in establishing cohesion among group members. It serves to reinforce and express the behaviours, values and rules that distinguish one group from another, and in this manner enforces intimacy and a common social understanding among group members. Gossip therefore provides one with a reflection of the morals, values and social characteristics of a social group (Gelles, 1989).

The function of gossip in terms of a specific group of two or more individuals can be described as "...a social set...directing alliances, monitoring, perhaps protecting its members, advertising rules, adjudicating behaviour, relieving anger and frustration, building reputations and egos, providing social cohesion..." (Gelles, 1989, p. 678). It is exactly this social function of gossip that can be detrimental within the workplace. Those who do not belong to the in-group will be alienated and the subject of discussion by others, and the rules governing the behaviours of the in-group might not be aligned with the rules and values of the organisation in general.

The stated functions highlight the complexity of gossip. There could therefore be many diverse functions at play when gossip takes place, emphasising the earlier statement that gossip is not always merely a means to pass the time.

3.5.4.6 Consequences of gossip

Gossiping can have both detrimental and beneficial outcomes for those involved in or affected by it. According to Gelles (1989), gossip could be *detrimental* should it elicit some of the following outcomes: when it distracts people from the tasks at hand; when a gossiper loses his or her credibility as someone who can be trusted; when the reputation

of the target of the gossip is damaged and the target is alienated from the in-group; when the reputation of the gossiper is harmed; when it has a manipulative element that exploits the established bonds within a group for personal gain and affects the ensuing behaviour of those who gain access to the gossip (Sommerfeld et al., 2007). The manipulative nature of gossip has been emphasised by Abrahams (1970), Besnier (1989), Bleek (1976), Cox (1970), Kurland and Pelled (2000) and Paine (1967). In addition, gossip could lead to the victimisation and undermining of others (Tebbutt, 1995).

Gossip could be a *positive force*, as it enables the establishment and development of intimacy between the members participating in the gossip and boosts the status and power of the gossiper (Gelles, 1989). Its social function can hence be constructive in building relationships. Gossip can also enable an individual to vent his or her frustrations and could make it less difficult for the gossiper to interact with the person who was discussed (Holland, 1996). If gossip is satisfactory and successful, it increases the self-satisfaction of those involved (Holland, 1996). Research conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre (Fox, 2001) found that gossip fuels endorphin production, leading to stress relief and the strengthening of the immune system. Gossip can hence have different outcomes for those involved or affected by it.

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to understand and define gossip within the work context. Gossip outside of the office is uncontrollable and will inevitably be prevalent in informal conversations; this also holds true for gossip in the workplace. Gossip in the workplace can have dire consequences for the work environment, work outcomes and overall productivity of the workforce (De Gouveia et al., 2005). In this sense, it is of pivotal importance to examine office gossip so that management is able to draw a clear line between acceptable and malicious communication in an attempt to protect themselves from the potentially detrimental consequences of workplace gossip.

3.6 GOSSIP AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Burke (2004, p. 48) has stated that organisations can be conceptualised as “patterns of conversations” that evolve dynamically. Since conversations play a critical role in the functioning of an organisation, it is justifiable to investigate workplace gossip as a form of conversation in greater detail. Despite the fact that gossip is a phenomenon that takes place on a daily basis and that is very prevalent in informal communication, it has received little attention in the workplace (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Gossip serves as a reflection of the health of an organisation’s functioning and culture. Nigel Nicholson, a professor at the London Business School, stated when interviewed by Powell (2005), that gossip and rumours are what keeps an organisation alive, but that they can also have harmful consequences. He also stated that gossip will always be prevalent within the workplace and a clear indication of the organisation’s culture can be derived from the quality of the content of the gossip. Within a healthy organisation there should be transparency in terms of office politics and also receptiveness to issues raised by employees.

Role conflict, role ambiguity, communication gaps and economic uncertainty are elements that can increase the prevalence of gossip in the workplace, as employees will try to compensate for the lack of available information (Akande & Odewale, 1994). Gossip also seems to reduce boredom among employees who work in monotonous environments – it can easily stimulate employees (Roy, 1958). According to Sulkowicz (2007), gossip should not be entirely banished from the workplace. This ever-present human pastime could potentially enhance managers’ understanding of employee uncertainties. Gossip falls within a spectrum ranging from its most malicious form through to less harmful discussions of others in their absence (Sulkowicz, 2007). Gossip in its most malicious form is spread for the purpose of gaining support from others or to hurt others. Such gossip should be eradicated before employees or the company culture is affected detrimentally. Conversely, less harmful gossip could be instrumental in spreading news quickly and enhance informal work relationships.

What follows are the models of office gossip that have been developed, the manner in which office gossip is defined in this study and the scope of office gossip.

3.6.1 Models of office gossip

Models and definitions of office gossip are scarce. Even though researchers have studied the prevalence and functions of gossip in society at large, there is still a lack of available knowledge on office gossip. Two key models have been developed by Kurland and Pelled (2000) and De Gouveia et al. (2005) respectively in an attempt to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon of gossip in the workplace. Both of these models recognise communication as consisting of both formal and informal communication. The model developed by Kurland and Pelled (2000) is fundamentally based on a combination of the two general one-way and two-way communication models, with a specific focus on the influence of power on the outcomes of gossip. The model of De Gouveia et al. (2005) is fundamentally based on the informal communication channel, which can be divided into the harmful and harmless sharing of information. These two models will now be discussed in greater detail.

3.6.1.1. A proposed model of gossip and power

General communication models can be categorised into linear, one-way models and convergence, two-way models (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). A *proposed model of gossip and power* was developed by Kurland and Pelled (2000), which served as a bridge between these two models of communication. According to its developers, it is fundamentally based on the linear model, but also pays attention to the context or culture in which the gossip takes place and allows for the recipient to participate more actively throughout the process. The model is illustrated in Figure 3.5, followed by a discussion of it.

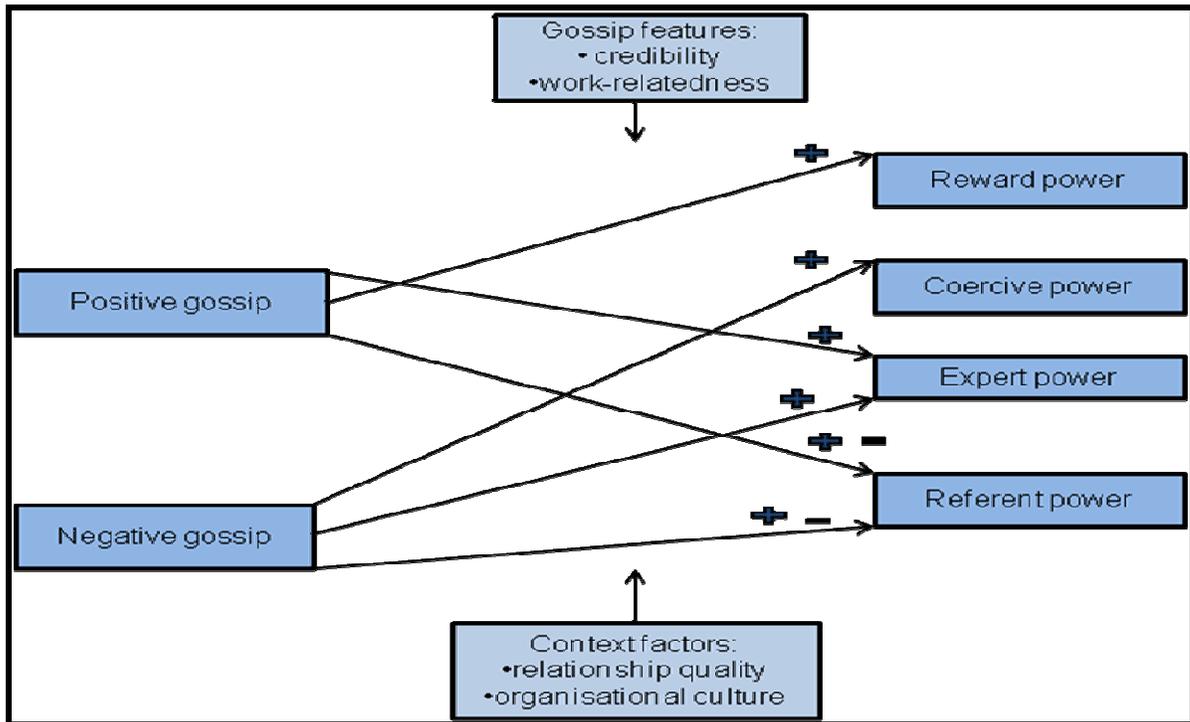


Figure 3.5. Kurland and Pelled’s proposed model of gossip and power (adapted from Kurland and Pelled, 2000, p. 431).

The model of Kurland and Pelled (2000) focused on the power that gossip has over its participants and subjects. Power has been defined by Kurland and Pelled (2000, p. 430) as “...the ability to exert one's will, influencing others to do things that they would not otherwise do”. French and Raven (1959) proposed that five different forms of power can be distinguished. These are coercive, reward, expert, referent and legitimate power. The definitions of the different types of power are supplied in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Definition and Types of Power

Type of power	Definition
Coercive power	Coercive power surfaces when a person is of the conviction that another person is capable of reprimanding him or her.
Reward power	Reward power emerges when a person believes that another person can offer him or her outcomes which are longed for.
Legitimate power	Legitimate power is instilled when a person perceives that another person has legitimate authority over him or her due to the person's hierarchical position in the company.
Expert power	Expert power arises when a person is convinced that another person has special competence that he or she desires.
Referent power	Referent power emerges when a person is drawn to another person and wishes to be allied with him or her.

Note. The definitions of the different forms of power are those proposed by French and Raven (1950) (adapted from Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 430).

The model developed by Kurland and Pelled (2000) drew a distinct line between positive and negative gossip and its resulting influence on four of these five power types. Legitimate power was not included in the model as, contrary to the other forms of power, it was regarded by the authors as grounded in hierarchical status, whereas the other power types were seen as based on social processes. Kurland and Pelled (2000) said that positive gossip leads to positive outcomes, such as the improved reputation of the person under discussion. Conversely, negative gossip leads to negative outcomes, such as the destruction of a person's reputation.

According to the model, the features of gossip and contextual factors could have an influence on the interplay between gossip and power, and hence serve as moderators of the relationship between gossip and different forms of power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Gossip can be construed as comprising three main *features*: sign, work-relatedness and credibility (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). In addition, contextual factors refer to the *culture of*

the organisation and the quality of the relationship between those engaged in the gossiping. Kurland and Pelled (2000) proposed that gossip credibility, work-relatedness, relationship quality and organisational culture will moderate the impact of gossip on coercive, referent, reward and expert power.

It was also postulated by Kurland and Pelled (2000) that negative gossip may lead to increased coercive power over the victim(s) of gossiping, as the information spread by the gossipers could be detrimental to a person's career and/ or reputation. Conversely, positive gossip could have a positive impact on a gossipers' reward power; if a person demonstrates the ability to deal sensitively with important information of others, which typically would lead to positive outcomes for them, that person's reward power would increase. In addition, the authors proposed that a gossipers could improve his or her expert power if he or she demonstrated that he or she was in possession of useful information that could be shared with others. Gossip could have an opposing influence on referent power; in a workplace it could have a debilitating effect on referent power especially if it is negative, whereas it can have a positive effect on referent power until it reaches aggravated levels, which will lead to decreased referent power.

The model put forward by Kurland and Pelled (2000) contributed to the academic domain, as it was the first conceptual model to be developed to explain office gossip and its possible outcomes. In addition, this model suggests that gossip could have practical implications for an individual's position of power in an organisation. It could enhance an individual's power status, but also not go as planned and have negative consequences for the individual's power status (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). A broader appreciation of office gossip and the implications it could have on the workforce will enable an organisation to evaluate and control this phenomenon more effectively. This model therefore focused specifically on the relationship between gossip and power in the workplace.

3.6.1.2 A model of the typology of gossip in the workplace

A more comprehensive *typology of gossip in the workplace* was developed by De Gouveia et al. (2005). According to its creators, this model focuses on informal communication and distinguishes between the disclosure of harmful and harmless information. The disclosure of harmless information consists of either communication not characterised as gossiping or “good gossip”. Good gossip is possibly well intended, does not cause any harm or negative outcomes and can be classified as “need-to-know information” (De Gouveia et al., 2005). Furthermore, it can be divided into four categories, namely information that falls within the public realm; typical day-to-day events; need-to-know information; and day-to-day blowing off steam and rumours. The harmful disclosure of information or “classic gossip” is damaging, hateful and shameful to an individual or collective entity, and therefore leads to negative outcomes and a difference in the manner in which the person under discussion is viewed (De Gouveia et al., 2005). Classic gossip can be subdivided into the discussion of issues that are either related to work or of a personal nature (De Gouveia et al., 2005). The developers of the model proposed that the harmful disclosure of information could have various detrimental consequences. Furthermore, the model illustrates that gossip can manifest itself in diverse ways. The typology of gossip developed by De Gouveia et al. (2005) is illustrated in Figure 3.6.

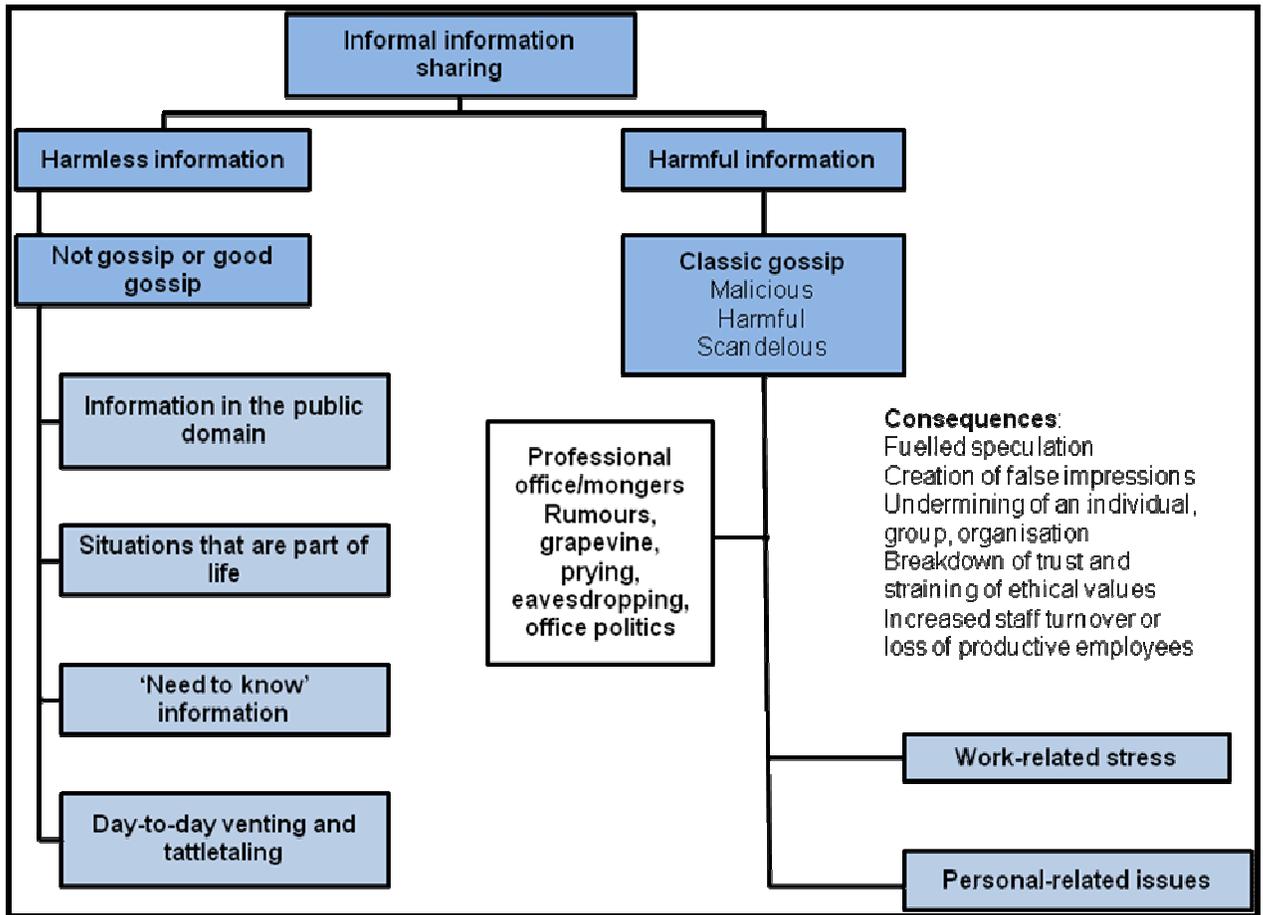


Figure 3.6. The typology of gossip in the workplace proposed by De Gouveia, Van Vuuren and Crafford (adapted from De Gouveia et al., 2005, p. 64).

The model of gossip and power developed by Kurland and Pelled (2000) focuses too much on power as a construct and hence was not beneficial for the purposes of this study. The study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) aimed to develop a general typology and definition of gossip in the workplace. The present study aimed to determine whether cultures and genders differ in terms of the typology, definition and understanding they attach to gossip by using similar data collection techniques to those used by De Gouveia et al. (2005). A difference in perceptions would necessitate that the typology and definition of office gossip developed by De Gouveia et al. (2005) be re-evaluated and redefined within cross-cultural organisations.

3.6.2 Definitions of office gossip

Office gossip is still a relatively new field of study; therefore the available definitions are scarce. It seems as though earlier definitions of office gossip were simpler in nature, such as the one supplied by Burke (2004, p. 49), describing office gossip as a “...method that retains both inclusion and exclusion of people in the organisation and elsewhere...” The following, more recent definition of office gossip supports the earlier observation that the perspective on gossip has become more neutral: “...informal and evaluative talk in an organisation, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of the organisation who is not present” (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429).

The most detailed definition of workplace gossip, according to the researcher’s knowledge, was that by De Gouveia et al. (2005, p. 67), who defined office gossip 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.

The definition by De Gouveia et al. (2005) seems to evaluate gossip as a negative occurrence in the workplace, which has detrimental consequences. This definition will be used in this study, as it is a recent, comprehensive definition of workplace gossip and because the study from which this definition arose is the framework on which the present research study is built. An important factor that was taken into consideration was that all informal conversation within the workplace is not necessarily harmful and malicious (as illustrated in the model by De Gouveia et al. (2005) in Figure 3.6). Hence, only gossip that can be considered as malicious and leads to false assumptions and a decrease in trust is defined as office gossip in this study.

3.6.3 Scope of office gossip

Office gossip seems to have been viewed mostly from a negative perspective by researchers. Although some have suggested that it can be used to achieve political and social agendas (Dunn, 2002), from a management perspective the negative outcomes of gossip in the workplace seems to outweigh its potentially beneficial outcomes. Hereafter, some of the *critical elements* of office gossip are discussed, that include the dimensions and the consequences of office gossip.

3.6.3.1 Dimensions of office gossip

Gossip has three dimensions, namely the “sign” of the gossip, therefore whether it is positive or negative in content; the “credibility” of the gossip, therefore whether the information conveyed can be deemed to be authentic and reliable; and the “work-relatedness” of the gossip, therefore the extent to which the content of the gossip has relation to the work context of the subject (De Gouveia et al., 2005, p. 57; Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 430).

3.6.3.2 Consequences of office gossip

In the sections that follow, the disadvantages and advantages of office gossip are discussed.

a. Disadvantages of office gossip

Office gossip could have a harmful impact on the workplace and on employees. The potentially *damaging consequences* of office gossip are emphasised by the following:

- Gossip in the workplace could be *detrimental to the perceived job security* of the *employee under discussion*, alienate him or her from the ‘in-group’ and negatively

affect relationships and trust (Holland, 1996). In addition to this, the target of the gossip could experience increased job stress and anxiety (Joyce, 2002);

- Gossip could raise *ethical issues* within the workplace, leading to increased suspicion and distrust, disrespect, and disregard for others (De Gouveia et al., 2005);
- *Segregation among the workforce* is another potential outcome of malicious gossip on the workforce, leading to damaged interpersonal relationships and reduced respect, hampered motivation levels and morale, and a less productive workforce (De Gouveia et al., 2005). Such segregation could lead to a hostile working environment (Joyce, 2002);
- Office gossip is becoming an escalating *risk management problem*, which could be considered as damaging to a person's professional standing and status within an organisation and accordingly harm a worker economically (Bruce & Bruce, 1997). The organisation could be held liable for not providing a healthy work environment for its employees because of the hostile and discriminatory work environment potentially caused by gossip (Armour, 2007; Dunn, 2002). Organisations therefore could open themselves up to legal action should an employee claim constructive dismissal or open a human rights grievance if any personal characteristic of the employee was gossiped about (Matthews, 2007). Office gossip can spiral out of control and could reach levels of victimisation or bullying, which could become a *health and safety or human rights concern* (Matthews, 2007). From an employee's perspective, gossip can be dangerous because personal information shared between employees can be and has been used against them in *labour courts* (Schultz, 1994);
- Gossip leads to *decreased productivity*, as people waste time spreading and listening to rumours rather than doing their work (Armour, 2007; De Gouveia et al., 2005);
- Through office gossip, partly false or imprecise information is distributed. Should an organisation hence suffer severe breakdown, the *employees' anxiety* over losing their jobs will be *aggravated* through gossip (Matthews, 2007);
- Gossip can have a debilitating effect on the *implementation of change initiatives*, as employees could be so preoccupied with the gossip that they are not able to embrace change (Picarda, 2008);

- Employers who gossip could compromise their *authority and professionalism*, as they are supposed to provide adequate, accurate and objective information. They could lose the respect of their employees and make employees question what is said about them behind their backs (Joyce, 2002).

b. Advantages of office gossip

Office gossip could potentially also have advantageous outcomes. The potentially *beneficial outcomes* of office gossip are emphasised by the following:

- It is used by management to *spread information faster* than through a formal communication system (Michelson & Mouly, 2000, 2004);
- It enhances *interaction, intimacy, group cohesion and social bonds* between those involved in the gossip and enables the conservation of *formal constructions* in the workplace (Holland, 1996; Kellaway, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Yerkovich, 1977);
- Malicious gossip can benefit the gossiper(s) by allowing him or her to achieve both *personal and political agendas* (Dunn, 2002);
- Gossip enhances the *understanding* of the actions of other people, promotes *information sharing* and could facilitate the *destruction of the status* of rival companies (Kellaway, 2000);
- Gossip facilitates *tension and stress relief* and enables the gossiper to *vent* his or her frustrations (Holland, 1996; Kellaway, 2000);
- Employers who are aware of the content of the information being spread along the office grapevine could learn a lot in terms of *what is happening* in the company. The grapevine is often a very valuable source when an employer seeks to determine what the organisation is doing right or wrong (Picarda, 2008);
- Managers can use the grapevine as a means to quickly determine what employees' *initial reactions* would be in terms of new policies, procedures and specific proposals (Mishra, 1990; Picarda, 2008);

- Gossip can ensure that employees are *reluctant to bend the rules*, as disregard for collective standards could lead to criticism from others (Gluckman, 1963);
- Gossip has been found to be positively linked to *staff morale* (Hughes, 2006);
- *Team effectiveness* can be improved, based on the “safety in numbers” theory (Therrien, 2004). If an employee therefore feels part of a team and the team agrees with the topic gossiped about, teamwork in a group can be enhanced.

Employers would ultimately have to take a stance in relation to gossip and decide how it would be dealt with should it arise. Organisations that wish to enforce policies or discipline in terms of office gossip outside the workplace might be faced with difficulties, as some American states have legislation in place that does not allow employers to regulate conduct outside of working hours (Armour, 2007). In addition, employers cannot forbid employees from talking about work-related issues, and even if they could ban gossip, one would question where the line would be drawn in terms of acceptable and unacceptable topics of discussion. Organisations should ensure that the manner in which gossip is handled does not lead to the destruction of informal communication channels and realise that, regardless of one’s take on gossip, the grapevine is a crucial element of communication. If employees do not have adequate access to management to have questions answered and concerns raised, they will turn to gossip for this purpose (Matthews, 2007; Wert & Salovey, 2004). This emphasises the fact that employers should ensure that they are available and able to answer any questions and to listen to all concerns of their employees in order to counter the spread of inaccurate information within the organisation. Furthermore, employers have to be credible and honest in their communications with employees to ensure that their word is trusted as true and reliable (Jacobs, 2009).

As can be seen from the above discussion of office gossip, and the little information there is available on the subject in comparison with information that is available on gossip in general, more research on this subject will make an academic contribution to

the existing body of knowledge and also enable practitioners to understand this phenomenon more precisely.

3.7 CONCLUSION

There is an old saying that says, “loose lips sink ships”. This study aimed to determine whether this viewpoint on gossip is true from the perspective of diverse groups in the workplace. The reason why the perception of gossip among people from different racial groups was considered was because it seemed that people generally tend to interact more regularly with people from their own ethnic in-group (Gumperz, 1977, as cited in Ross, 1978). According to Gumperz, although individuals do interact with members from other ethnic groups on a regular basis, they go about with their daily activities surrounded by their own family and friends; they hence communicate with them more often and are influenced by these communications more readily. In addition, relations with the out-group or people from other ethnic groups tend to be more instrumental or goal-oriented in nature. Perceptions of communication between different ethnic groups was therefore not considered for the purposes of this study, as gossip forms part of informal communication, which does not seem to form the primary purpose of communications between ethnic groups.

It was evident from the above literature review that the influence of gossip on the social component of cultures has been researched for centuries. A notable gap was identified in research to establish whether cultures also have an influence on gossip, therefore whether there is a reciprocal relationship between gossip and culture. Numerous researchers have emphasised the need for further research on gossip as a form of informal conversation against the backdrop of the South African context, especially in the world of work (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Van der Merwe, 2005).

CHAPTER 4

PSSST!

UNPACKING PERCEPTIONS OF OFFICE GOSSIP

“I think we need to create a culture of Ubuntu – where we know that I am because you are. That we never forget that at the end of the day, no matter how different our skin tones are; no matter how different our hair colours are, our eye colours are, our noses are – we all are human beings... We all have hearts; we all feel pain; and we all come from a mother and a father.... So I think in us continuing to educate one another about each other and our differences – where we come from, and why we do things the way we do them, and why we aspire for certain things that other people don’t – then you can understand. And when you understand something you treat it differently; because when you don’t fully understand something you talk about it, because a part of you fears and misunderstands it. And so until you do understand – maybe not 100 percent but a certain aspect of it – then it makes life easier.” (Evelyn)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of this study came to the fore when I was sitting in my open-plan office with some of my work colleagues. After some of my colleagues left to run errands, I found myself sitting alone with one of my female colleagues. She started complaining intensely about always having to buy milk for the coffee and the others never volunteering to buy it – although they drank the milk with their coffee every day with no obvious trepidation. A few minutes later the other ladies came back into the office, and, to my surprise, this lady who had been complaining just a few minutes previously, cheerfully volunteered to make coffee for everybody. This drew my attention to the facts that, firstly, people do not always voice the way they feel; secondly, that gossip is something that takes place in

offices everyday; and thirdly, I started wondering what the impact of malicious gossip could be on the employees and on the organisation as a whole.

After I started reading up on gossip in the workplace, I found that quite a lot of research has been done on the topic – especially on gossip in general. It was clear that researchers firmly planted themselves in two camps – those for and those against gossip. Although the literature overwhelmingly leaned towards claiming the maliciousness of gossip, some authors offered interesting reasons why gossip could in fact have beneficial outcomes. This encouraged me to do some research of my own within a South African context, to see what the perceptions of diverse employees were on the matter. In my research I focused on the manner in which diverse individuals conceptualise office gossip, the characteristics that they identify to distinguish between healthy communication and malicious gossip, and the point when communication is regarded as gossip. I therefore explored the way in which individuals define office gossip, their perceptions thereof and what exposure they have had to it in their work. In addition, I probed the respondents on related matters, such as what they experienced when others spoke in a language they did not understand, their perceptions of other cultures regarding gossip, and also whether they thought that gender influenced the likelihood that a person would gossip. In this chapter I share my interpretations of these perceptions, following the principles of content analysis.

I would like to thank all the respondents who took part in this study, for their openness and willingness to explore this fascinating topic with me. At times, the discussions led to some discomfort, the exploration of painful memories and new insights for the respondents and the researcher alike.

4.2 THE PILOT STUDY AND INSIGHTS ARRIVED AT

In the first phase of the study I conducted a pilot study. The pilot study enabled me to ‘dip my toes in the water’ and explore the research process, before jumping in with the main study. Two participants were interviewed for the pilot study before the main data collection commenced. The participants included one African Northern Sotho man and one white Afrikaner woman. The semi-structured interviews held with them comprised of the questions aimed to be asked during the main study. This enabled me to determine which questions were not clear and which questions could be added while probing. Before the data analysis of the main study took place, I analysed the results from the pilot study. The main codes and accompanying themes were elicited and offered a solid foundation for the analysis of the results of the main study. In the second phase of the study, the main study, I interviewed four male and four female employees of a non-academic department in a tertiary institution. The participants included two African, two white, two Indian and two coloured respondents. One male and one female subject were chosen from each race group. In this chapter pseudonyms are used when the respondents’ words are quoted in order to ensure anonymity. The pseudonyms and the accompanying gender and racial information are summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Pseudonyms and Biographical Information

Name	Gender	Race
Sanjay	Male	Indian
Amina	Female	Indian
Albert	Male	White
Andrea	Female	White
Donovan	Male	Coloured
Lindsey	Female	Coloured
Samson	Male	African
Evelyn	Female	African

Note. The pseudonyms are used in Chapter 4 to protect the anonymity of the respondents in this study.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the themes that will be discussed in this chapter.

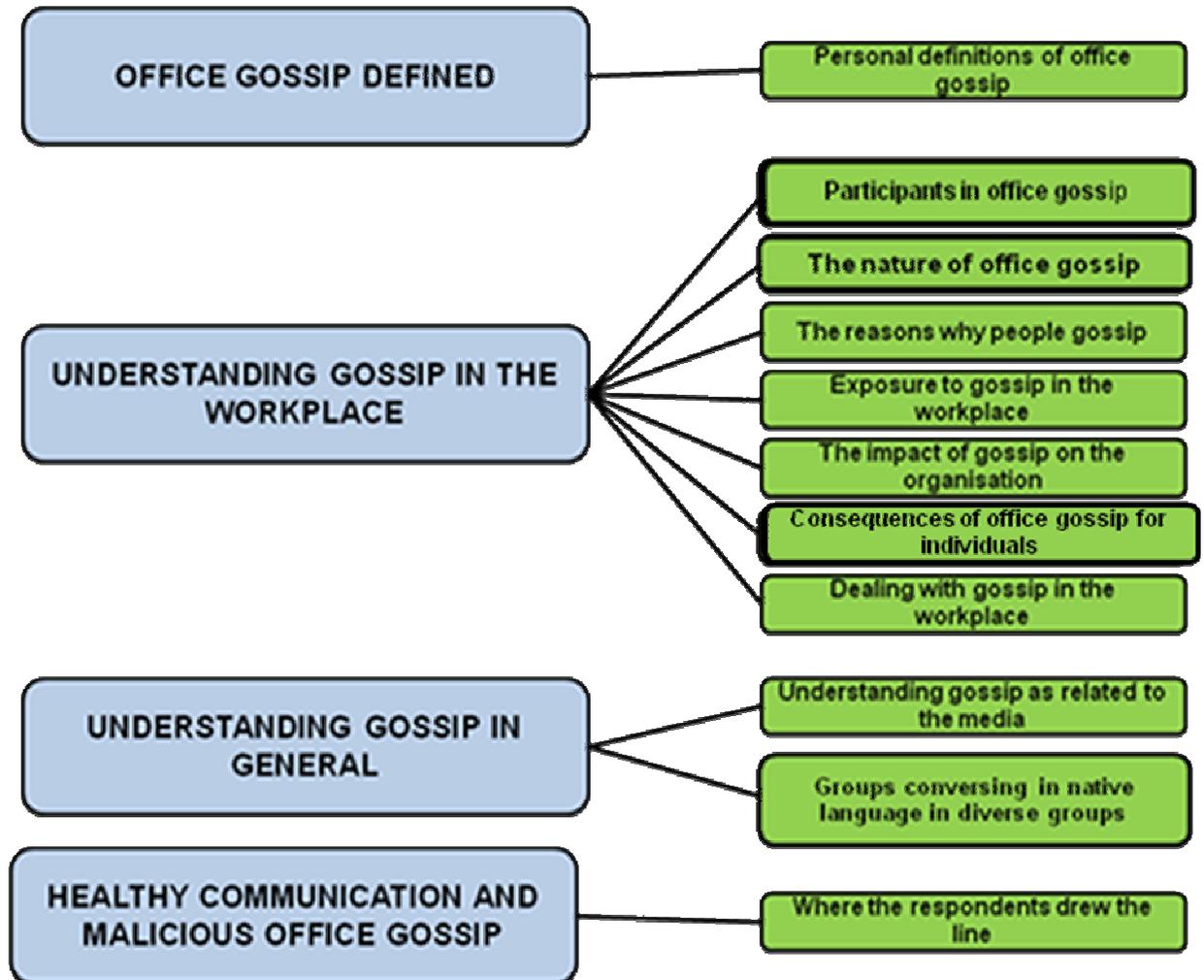


Figure 4.1. Graphic illustration of the themes and subthemes elicited during the data analysis.

In this chapter, the themes relating to office gossip that were elicited from the data will be unpacked. In all cases a clear indication will be provided whether the responses were given by the majority of the respondents, or whether it was only given by some of the respondents. Firstly, the theme ‘office gossip defined’ will be discussed. This entails the respondents’ understanding of office gossip as a concept. Then the theme ‘understanding gossip in the workplace’ will be explored, during which the respondents’ thoughts on gossip in the workplace are investigated. Thereafter, the theme

‘understanding gossip in general’ will be discussed, which entails the respondents’ perceptions of gossip with regard to media and language differences. Lastly, the theme ‘healthy communication and malicious gossip’ will be explored, where the characteristics used to distinguish between healthy communication and malicious gossip will be investigated.

4.3 OFFICE GOSSIP DEFINED

In this section, the overlapping aspects of the participants’ definitions of office gossip are conveyed.

With regard to the definition of office gossip, most of the respondents agreed that:

- office gossip can be about anything;
- it is true on occasion and false on occasion;
- it involves a discussion of another individual behind his or her back;
- a gossip discussion can revolve around things that are happening in the work environment.

If these aspects are taken into account, as well as the findings that will be reported in the other themes, office gossip can be defined as the discussion of any possible topic that involves the spreading of false or truthful information. Personal information about another individual of no relevance to the gossiper can be discussed behind his or her back, or things that are happening in the work environment can be talked about. The disclosure of information in the workplace leads to undesirable consequences, such as a negative impact on the organisation, a company with a tarnished reputation, segregation of and conflict among the workforce, a negative impact on an employee’s career or position, and negative feelings experienced by the gossipee as a result of the gossiping.

The **all-encompassing** nature of gossip was often stressed by most of the respondents, who stated that gossip in the workplace could be about almost anything:

“Yeah gossip is not contained or related to just one issue – it can be many things. Gossip can be personal; it can be work-related; it can be... I mean, it can be anything.”

(Sanjay)

“Gosh, you know people gossip about anything. They can gossip about the hair colour that you have naturally or that you went and put in [at] a salon. They can gossip about the clothes you wear; you weight – whether you gained or you lost or you’re constant; the guy that you’re dating; the places you go and visit or party; and how you party; the car you drive; whether you drive or you don’t drive; the suburb you live in; the friends you have. People can gossip about each and every aspect of your life...The same applies [to people in the workplace – they gossip about the same things]... people in the workplace are people at the end of the day. But you’re just gathered together, because of working in one environment.”

(Evelyn)

The majority of respondents agreed that gossip was **on occasion true and on occasion false**. The women especially emphasised this point. These perceptions are highlighted in the excerpts that follow:

“It [gossip] can be true, because sometimes it’s facts and it is a reality. But sometimes it can be false – some people just have their own understanding about things and it is not necessarily true...”

(Lindsey)

“...sometimes it’s true and sometimes it’s false...it’s totally false. Yeah you get both sides. Sometimes what they say is really true...if you delve and you see it is true. But sometimes it’s just mere gossip; it’s just lies... They don’t do their homework, they just blab. You know and then it’s not true.”

(Amina)

“...a lot of the things are true and a lot of them are not true. So it’s both [true and false]...in any workplace it’s both. Especially when there are a lot of people in one office...where they share an office, you always get that problem. Always.”

(Andrea)

The majority of the respondents stated that gossip often revolved around other employees' **private lives**. It is interesting to note that most of the women highlighted the role of others' private lives in gossip conversations. The excerpts that follow demonstrate that gossip revolves around personal issues of others:

"Gossip is where employees are getting together in offices and start discussing private things about other employees in the company." (Albert)

"Otherwise even sometimes some people would talk about some person in the office, even that's not really related to work... Sometimes you talk about, for example, did you see Jenny's hair is like this today. You know simple things.... So there's all types of info – things that people would talk about – anything that triggers them for that day, I guess." (Lindsey)

"...it could be about a person that maybe we feel is not good enough...whatever...according to whatever degree or terms that we think they're not good enough – maybe the way that they dress, maybe the way that they talk; or you know, whatever that according to that group or society that we...People can be discriminated whether, you know, that person lives wherever: 'Oh look at her, she's always late, because she comes from Soshanguve.'... It can be very personal. It can be about things that the person cannot change, you know, [like] how a person smells – like their body odour; what the person eats...So it can be a range of things." (Evelyn)

According to most of the participants, office gossip takes place behind the gossipee's back and therefore in the gossipee's absence. Amina added that office gossip translates into behaviour that is inconspicuous:

"I think gossip is talking about somebody when they're not present; whereas you can be transparent. And if you really want that person to know, go up to that person straight – no use talking to me about a person, you know, that said something. But you couldn't...you couldn't tell that person then and there, you know what, you were wrong

and this is how it should be. But then you come to someone else and say that. You know that's gossip."

All the respondents emphasised that the **work environment** and **work-related issues** were often pivotal topics of discussion in the workplace:

"I believe office gossip is normally the discussion that takes place in offices; especially regarding the work environment or whatever that is happening at [the] workplace."

(Samson)

"...it [office gossip] would normally be about a boss, possibly who's unreasonably demanding or that you don't understand; or it could be about a colleague, that is, maybe we see them as incompetent or lazy or not pulling their weight maybe in a team..."

(Evelyn)

4.4 UNDERSTANDING GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

Specific questions regarding gossip in the workplace were raised to explore the perceptions of this phenomenon in depth. In order to understand office gossip, some relevant questions regarding gossip in general were also asked. Hence some answers specifically relevant to the workplace, and others regarding gossip in general, were given. This section deals with the participants in office gossip, the nature of office gossip, the reasons why people gossip in the workplace, exposure to gossip in the workplace, the impact of gossip on an organisation, the consequences of office gossip for individuals, and dealing with gossip in the workplace.

4.4.1 The participants in office gossip

Most of the participants concurred that gossipers are both men and women from all race groups. The respondents gave mixed responses regarding the age groups of those involved in gossip.

When asked whether women and/or men participated in gossip, most of the respondents stated that **both sexes** do – despite the stereotype that only women engage in gossip. The men in my study concur with the opinions of the women:

“Definitely both genders [engage in gossip]. I know males do it a lot, because I’ve been privy to it. So it would be wrong to say only females do it – that’s not true... but yes it does involve both...both genders.” (Sanjay)

“I think both in our time [male and female]. I mean, a few years back maybe it was more females, but nowadays females and males both indulge in gossiping... because there are men who love to gossip. I mean they will gossip about anything. They will look at somebody who’s walking there and then they’ll just say a comment. You know? So stereotypically females yes, [I] would say they are more inclined to gossip.” (Evelyn)

“Sometimes males can also be the biggest cause of gossip... We tend to think that it’s only women, but there are men who also like to be in the forefront of gossip stories.” (Albert)

“Normally they’ll say the women gossip hey? [gossip more]... No, but it’s not like that here. It’s both.” (Amina)

In contrast to the above finding, a few respondents believed that, although men also gossip, women engage in gossip more regularly:

“No definitely the female [gossips more]... Men also do it you know in social clubs and so; but for me, they talk more truthfully than females. Because the one...the one female is colder towards, you know, towards the other one and she always wants to be better. And she wants to be the bearer of news. So definitely females.” (Andrea)

“I think there are men too, but I think women tend to talk more – maybe not gossip always, but talk more about things than men... I think men would talk, but not like women... I think men...men’s feelings are different – women are more expressive in their feelings where men would rather keep quiet about their feelings or you know be the macho men type of thing. But women would speak about things and yeah, if they can have a friend that they can confide in they will definitely speak about it.” (Lindsey)

“I had the perception previously that I believe the ladies gossip more. Although it depends sometimes – because at times you will find that men also talk. But generally speaking, I believe that the ladies are more... they’re very good in gossip.” (Samson)

In general, the respondents did not believe that one’s culture would influence the likelihood that one would engage in gossip. Therefore, **all race groups** would typically engage in gossip:

“...I can’t really say if it’s maybe more white people or more black people, because I interact with a lot of whites and with a lot of blacks. And I came across that everyone would tend to say something or even coloureds as well...would tend to say something about some issue or somebody else...So I would rather leave it on a balance where everyone is...everyone tends to gossip about somebody else.” (Donovan)

“I think it’s the same across cultures [gossip]. I think gossip is the same in every culture. And I think everybody does it – I’ve seen...I’ve seen all the different cultures do it. And I’ve seen them also interact with each other – different cultures – and also gossip. So I don’t think it would be...it would be correct to say that it’s...that one culture would gossip more than the other. I think it’s equal for all.” (Sanjay)

“I think all races gossip and I think they all gossip the same amount or some maybe more. I don’t know if there’s more or less. But I think we all gossip and I wouldn’t...I can’t say that I think someone gossips more than the other. I don’t think so at all. No. Maybe some are just more...open...about it and others less open about it.” (Lindsey)

“I think black people whether you [are] Tswana or Sotho or Zulu, you know you can...you’ll gossip just as much... I think it’s a character thing more than a racial and cultural thing... Because I’ve been exposed to all kinds of races and I’ve been exposed to all kinds of cultures.” (Evelyn)

“...the gossip is not about racial or whatever. I’m telling you, all the races as far as I know they do that.” (Samson)

Note that the two white respondents did not agree that culture does not influence the likelihood that one would gossip and gave very vague answers in terms of this question:

“Yes, I definitely think so [one’s race influences the likelihood that one will gossip]... they [blacks] hear a thing incorrectly and then they make their own assumptions and then to one another, you know, they gossip again about someone else down the hall. But as soon as...as soon as that one down the hall finds out about it no one said anything...because they can stand together.” (Andrea)

“Well I don’t understand the other race groups – their language – so I wouldn’t be able to say [whether they gossip]. Here I’m mostly talking about Afrikaans and English [who gossip], but I wouldn’t say...I can’t say for certain about the other race groups.” (Albert)

Half of the respondents believe that people from **all age groups** engage in gossip:

“I think with age groups also – I think we all gossip, whether young or old. I think they’ve come from gossiping being young and they still gossip the older people, and I think the

younger ones also. Yeah, they still do it, yeah. I don't think there is really a difference in gossiping; which age, yeah." (Lindsey)

"I think it's any age group [that will gossip]. Sometimes it may tend to [be] frus...frustrated middle years. I don't know. But sometimes young people have also start off with things they heard and then starting a spreading a story. No I think its all age groups." (Albert)

The other half of the respondents did **not** believe that people from **all age groups gossiped**.

Sanjay stated that gossip was more prevalent among younger people in the workplace:

"...it [gossip] may be more prone in younger people than [in] older people..."

Evelyn also stated that not all age groups gossiped and highlighted that people in their early twenties and people around 50 and above gossiped more often:

"I think there's an age – like maybe early twenties and maybe older people, maybe around 50 and above – that gossip more."

Samson believed that adults gossiped more than younger people:

"Normally youngsters are not a problem in connection with gossip...I'm not saying they're not gossiping; but if I have to compare them with the adults, I believe the adults gossip more."

In the remainder of this section, interesting concepts identified by some respondents to describe gossipers will be discussed.

Samson talked about “**that small puppy**” – who seems to be someone who tattletales and tries to impress his or her superior with the information he or she divulges. Samson also mentioned the term “**agterryer**” (obsequious/flattering follower), which seems to refer to a person who only talks to you to gather information that he or she can change and use against you:

“...we normally use the words ‘that small puppy’...normally those people...are always taking the information to the...to the superior. Sometimes they mention things that are not happening, because those people they are buying faces of the superior at the expense of other people.”

“We used to use – when I was still at correctional services – we used to talk about ‘agterryer’ (obsequious/ flattering follower)...They can come to you, yeah and tell you that this is basically what I’ve just heard. And from there immediately if you can just say: ‘How is it that way?’ Those people they can take the information and go somewhere. When they get to [the] superior they change the information.”

Lindsey referred to “**compulsive gossipers**” when she talked about people who gossip because they enjoy it profoundly:

“But you get compulsive gossipers who just love [to gossip] – gossip is not good, but [such] people just love talking about others.”

4.4.2 The nature of office gossip

In the interviews with the participants they mentioned various aspects relating to the nature of office gossip. These aspects will be discussed in this section.

In terms of the nature of office gossip, the majority of respondents stated that office gossip

- has an escalating character;
- is based on assumptions, one side of a story, fabrication of information and speculation;
- is subjective and based on interpretations and perceptions;
- is a discreet activity; and
- differs in relation to what men and women gossip about in the workplace.

The **escalating nature of gossip** was emphasised by most of the respondents. For example, Evelyn highlighted how gossip that initially affected only two individuals can eventually have an impact on the reputation of a company:

“...whatever you’ll be saying can affect somebody and can have a rippling effect...because sometimes, I mean, a small example, if two people are in a same office and they’re not working well together and they have to work together; that can limit that team or that Department from doing what they could do better.... And then the thing becomes big and then it can start going outside.”

In addition, Andrea highlighted how shocking information usually does not remain a private occurrence, but something that becomes public knowledge and the subject of much discussion. The escalating nature of gossip is highlighted by her when she states how, in the absence of definite facts, people speculate and add their own information to a story:

“... it’s you know like when the one person did something bad that must actually be kept secret, and then it’s that thing specifically that everyone talks about and obsesses about and wonders and thinks about – but they can’t really say what happened. Things like that come out. Or that one has a disciplinary hearing – I wonder what he did? Or when will they give him his down payment? Or I wonder why that one resigned? Things like

that...And then they make their own story and tails get added on and eventually it's such a small thing that becomes such a big thing."

The majority of respondents stated that gossip was often grounded in **unfounded assumptions, one-sided stories, fabricated information and speculation**:

"...if people came straight to you or just asked, you know, how come this is happening? ...Not talking about it when they don't know exactly." (Amina)

"I think you have to make information as transparent as possible. I think if you keep too much information to yourself and you don't disclose it, people will tend to speculate. And when they speculate, they will gossip." (Sanjay)

"...people sometimes are able to fabricate...should I use the words fabricate or to formulate...something that has never happened. So that they'll take that info and they take it somewhere." (Samson)

Samson went on to explain that the tragedy is that people sometimes act on information that is false:

"... the unfortunate part is that they're not always getting the correct information and they are acting on the information that is not correct."

Most of the participants noted that gossip was **subjective** and based on the **interpretations and perceptions** of people. Albert and Evelyn's comments highlight the subjectivity inherent in gossip:

"It all depends on how you...how you look at it and not a single person interprets that message as how I interpret it or how you interpret it. So there is some problem in that also. The message that comes over – how is it being perceived and interpreted; and

how is it being transferred to the next person; and how is it transferred to the next person – because some of the facts are definitely going to get lost... (Albert)

“... gossip in its nature is malicious; because it’s really just looking at a person from a distance – even if you do talk to that person and you just dissect them – you have no idea truly, truly what makes them do what they do, or say what they say, or live the way that they live. But you decide because of your own education or your own understanding of life to just dissect them and say ‘oh that person walks that way; that person talks that way; that person eats that way’.” (Evelyn)

The majority of the participants mentioned that gossip was a **discreet activity**. They emphasised that gossip takes place between gossipers within a private setting. Gossipers therefore seek out appropriate contexts that will facilitate gossip discussions:

“I think gossip is not something that you...that you just do in an environment where there’s a lot of people. I think you probably do it behind closed doors; [and] you do it in passages, but you’re very discreet about it... you do it very discreetly in certain places – in offices – where you have a certain group of people that you identify with or you do it while you are out of the...vicinity; for example, walking together or whatever...or you do it at...in the evenings, you know maybe if you need to really speak to somebody and you can’t...you can’t do it during the day and you really need to get this information to them. You can probably do it in the evening – you phone them or whatever, if it’s that important...there’s certain people that actually thrive on that, you know? But it depends on what the situation is...and you may even go so far as saying you know what, we can’t speak here because...walls have ears; the phone is tapped; and whatever – I’ll phone you in the evening.” (Sanjay)

“...obviously they want to have privacy. I mean, maybe speaking in their own rooms; where the next person or anyone else won’t be able to hear what they’re saying.” (Donovan)

“...people obviously would want to create a barrier between the person they’re gossiping about; because gossip in its nature is so that that person that they talk about doesn’t find out – because they obviously don’t want to know the facts. So whether they close the door; or they speak on a phone and somebody doesn’t understand; or they go into a corner; or they meet over tea in the tearoom at teatime; or it’s at bathrooms; or email...But it will always separate the people that they don’t want to hear and those who are part of the gossip circle.” (Evelyn)

The discreet nature of gossip was also highlighted by some respondents in terms of exposing the source of the gossip. Based on personal experiences, the participants indicated that gossipers do not typically expose the source of the gossip:

“Its better the person tells you directly; not a person telling you, you know this is what somebody said. And I said who is that somebody? No, no, no, you know, I’ve just forgotten now. It was so convenient to just forget who the person was.” (Amina)

“Nobody wanted to give the source up...because they’re all accomplices...they’re all guilty of spreading the rumour.” (Sanjay)

“Because you said this and the other said that and at the end of the day no one said anything and then everyone is mad at everyone; and about petty things. You know, because they stab people in the back and won’t come forward and say listen, I’m sorry [but] it’s me who said this and this and I’m sorry about it. So no one steps forward.” (Andrea)

The discreet nature of gossip was also highlighted by the respondents who said that, whenever someone was not welcome in the in-group and he or she walked in on a gossip conversation, the discussion was immediately ended:

“...when they form groups in the tearoom and in one another’s offices. You know they don’t always close the door, but when you walk in they all go quiet. So you know then something is going on now.” (Andrea)

“...they would huddle together...shh... You know, you walk into an office and you see people dispersing.” (Evelyn)

“...you know who to trust and who this information can be shared with; and if you see certain people that are not...within your boundaries, you tend to limit it... So that’s one of the...tactics as well – change the topic when somebody is not invited in your group...” (Sanjay)

According to Evelyn, gossip has to remain discreet; otherwise it creates a negative atmosphere. This perspective was based on a personal experience with gossip at her previous job, where the gossipers realised that she knew they were gossiping about her:

“Because you know when people are talking about you and they don’t know that you know that, they can act. But the moment they realise that you caught on; then it makes the environment quite tense.”

According to the majority of both the male and female respondents, the **things that men and women gossip about** differ. Overall, women seem to gossip about personal and false things during their gossip discussions, whereas men talk about factual things. Evelyn stated that the things that men and women worry about differ and, accordingly, they gossip about those things. Amina stated that things like positions in the workplace were something both genders would gossip about, whereas women gossiped more about personal things. Samson stressed that women would not merely state a fact, but also make negative evaluations of others, while men only stated facts. Andrea agreed with Samson that men are more straightforward in their communications. Sanjay proposed that men would perhaps rather talk about office gossip, whereas women would rather talk about personal things:

"...you know maybe males would be more interested in things like, for example office gossip. You know things that deal with the work itself. But females may deal with...mostly speak about things that are more personal. I don't know." (Sanjay)

"I suppose gossip would centre around things that you find important to you. 'Cause woman worry about the things that they worry about; and hence they would gossip about the things that they gossip about. And men worry about different things; so maybe they would gossip about those kinds of things. So no, I don't think they will gossip about the same things unless it's a...it's a male who's more femininely inclined." (Evelyn)

"I think it's very important here to stress the nature of the gossip – you know what they gossip about. As I said it's like positions and things [in her Department]. So it's both...it's both sexes you know that will gossip about things like that. It's not like where its gossip about, you know, you and your personal life. Then it's more females." (Amina)

"One day I was talking to ladies. I said as a man, if I see one lady here wearing a nice...a nice dress, I will say 'This lady, I like this dress'. But if you can talk to ladies, they'll say 'The dress is okay, but she's ugly'. And the issue...that is basically what I've learned. But gentleman, sometimes if we say this person I really like the shirt or I like...her car or his car; we don't have time just to check for very negative things. But especially ladies, it's very difficult." (Samson)

"Men also do it [gossip] you know in social clubs and so; but for me, they talk more truthfully than females." (Andrea)

In contrast to the above finding that gossip is concerned with gender specific topics, Albert and Amina believed that gossip topics revolved around race issues and tensions in the workplace.

According to Albert, the topics gossiped about have evolved over the years. He stated that, in earlier years, women were more involved with gossip discussions about private issues in the workplace. Men hence did not participate in office gossip as often as women. Although office gossip amongst women does still contain some elements of the previous type of gossip, gossip today seems to be centred on post-1994 tensions in the workplace and is prevalent among both men and women:

“Through the years I’ve encountered a lot of gossip was sort of centred on what happened with certain employees; like their marital status, relationships and what the one think about the other one’s haar...hairstyle and dresses and etc. etc. So it was totally a different...it’s more personalised in trying to have something to talk about. Mostly amongst women, men had another outlook on gossip; they did not actually discuss those private issues in the office setup...Certain aspects of gossip you can still pick up as the old sort of state of gossip, where they talk about relationships etc. etc.; but gossip today is more in the line of work relationships, regarding the various other cultures that are now amongst the old traditional white – how can I put it – white jobs...And they’ve got to contain...or be content with what’s happening now; changes taking place – having to deal with other cultures, such as language; certain gestures; certain ways of doing things which upset people.”

This view was supported by Amina, who stated that, in her current place of work, gossip was related to tensions regarding race and who filled certain positions:

“To me it seems like its [gossip] mostly about tensions – you know, regarding positions and who’s getting the positions and what nationality or what race is getting the position...a lot of times it’s like race...you know that they feel that...you know sometimes they feel that no, it’s because we’re black or because we’re Indian or because we’re coloured this is not happening.... You know like they say “Hey no you know what, this person didn’t get promoted because he’s not white.” Yeah you know its things like that that you hear – it’s very, very common here in HR. I hear it all the time...we don’t get

like...that other gossip that you get in other places...you know ladies gossiping about other ladies. But it's basically the race issue."

Evelyn stated that men and women from different cultures gossiped about people from other cultures and also about individuals from their own culture:

"...we do gossip a bit more about other cultures, because you don't understand them. I mean, even growing up, I remember there will always be comments about 'don't eat too much – you're acting like a coloured person'. You know, those kind of comments...'oh you're looking so colourful and so many mixed colours like, you know, a Venda person'.... I mean different cultures when they're all by themselves, will tend to gossip more about that other culture; because they don't understand them – because of also stereotypes. There are certain stereotypes that are linked to certain cultures. Yeah. But also within the same culture again; there's gossip according to class and education and your living standards... Somehow there's always going to be some kind of barrier that will then always allow gossip to come in."

4.4.3 The reasons why people gossip in the workplace

People participate in office gossip for different reasons. The intentions underlying gossip discussions and the benefits it provides to the gossipers are very comprehensive.

The main reasons why people gossip were indicated by the majority of the respondents as follows:

- gossiping provides comfort and acceptance;
- it is in a person's nature to gossip;
- gossip gets the focus off the gossipers and/or puts others in a negative light;
- it enables the gossipers to share information and express their feelings; and
- gossipers enjoy gossiping.

According to the majority of the respondents, gossiping with others provides the gossiper with a sense of **comfort and acceptance**:

“...it’s nice, because they’re feeling like they’ve got a place where they can be heard and they’re hoping that those people are not judging them; even though they’re gossiping about that person. So in that group they can vent – oh, that person is incompetent; oh, that person is horrible. And no one within that group they think is thinking they’re horrible for saying what they’re saying. And also, that group provides a comfort...because there’s a place where they can vent; there’s a place where they can let out some steam before they go back to wherever that they feel is horrible...and also, it could be that they feel like yeah, they belong there. I mean, they’re always right in that group; because everybody else is terrible, but they are always perfect. So you know we all want a place where we can go to and yeah people think that we’re wonderful...because no one in the circle of gossipers, I just I’ve never seen it, will say ‘oh stop gossiping about that one; you know, you’re also not so wonderful’. In most cases people just sit there, and agree, and they add, and they vent all together – oh that person really is terrible or really, she’s got knock knees, or she’s really so thin.” (Evelyn)

“I think [one talks with] someone that you’re more comfortable with or that you know you can confide in... I think you have to trust someone...most of the time to really speak about something specific...gossip is not really uh constructive; it’s a very destructive thing. So we should not be entertaining gossip. But I know it’s not always easy – especially in the workplace. I think we just find comfort in each other – in trying to express our feelings; because we’re working with each other.” (Lindsey)

According to the majority of the respondents, gossiping is an **innate characteristic** of most people:

“...he is you can say born to gossip.” (Andrea)

“It’s [gossip] just something that is human. I really don’t know how to put it. That is why I’m saying people normally...there is a saying sometimes in English they are saying ‘If people they are criticising or talking bad about [you] you must know that you are alive. So that is why I’m saying, it’s always there. Here, sometimes all over, or wherever you go, people will just say whatever. I can wear this jersey today – people can say...they can call me names...they can do whatever. That is why I’m saying it’s always there...that is human.” (Samson)

“...some of them...can just share...it’s their...part of their makeup...I think it’s a personality thing. Because some people you do get that are more prone to tell you something than others. He’ll promptly come to me and say this and this and this happened.” (Albert)

“I think its human nature...they give in to their feelings...in avenues like gossiping and things like that.” (Amina)

Most of the respondents indicated that people can use gossip to get the **focus off themselves** and/or to **put others in a negative light** and as a result make themselves look better:

“...trying to get the focus off me [and] onto somebody else and put him in a bad light; which...can happen when you’re trying to put the blame onto somebody else and get it off you.” (Albert)

“...they just maybe want to live in a certain level and they don’t want other people maybe to come any closer. And as a result, they’ll just make you feel bad for being however you are.” (Evelyn)

The majority of participants agreed that gossiping enables people to **share information** and to **express their feelings**:

“I think we just find comfort in each other in trying to express our feelings; because we’re working with each other. So yeah. I think people...might not really want to gossip, but it’s just a way of expressing themselves – especially when it comes to work that you’re unhappy about.” (Lindsey)

“I think people gossip, because...the information is very juicy and you must share it, you know?” (Sanjay)

Most of the respondents indicated that people gossip because they **enjoy** doing it and find it appealing:

“He gets a...kick out of it [gossiping].” (Andrea)

“...they just gossip, because they like to gossip. It’s just part of their nature.” (Lindsey)

“It’s just a difficult thing to stop gossip...people like to gossip...or certain people like to gossip and I don’t think you’re going to get that out of a system of a company or department or section or whatever.” (Albert)

According to the respondents, various feelings associated with the **gossipee** can cause others to gossip about him or her – such as jealousy, dislike or a need to get even with words:

“...she couldn’t afford that car and they were very, very jealous about the car... They were gossiping behind... ‘How can she buy the car? What did she do to buy the car?’” (Evelyn)

“... maybe I’ve got something personal against you and then I would go and speak to someone I mean, behind your back; because I dislike you or something like that.” (Donovan)

“Like they say in English, they want to ‘nail’ him; because he maybe did something to them that they didn’t want him to do and now they want to give him a go or ‘nail’ him.”

(Andrea)

The respondents stated that people who gossip may have a **hidden agenda** and could therefore use gossip to advance their own interests:

“...they’ll end up sometimes running away from you also because they know that what they said [was] for their own benefit... In my own language we say ‘a dog does not get fat if it eats another dog’. So, meaning there are some people sometimes if they want something, they can end up using you as a ladder for their own benefit.”

(Samson)

“I think people gossip...because they have a hidden agenda...gossip I believe tends to lead to certain strategies as well – in terms of what you want to achieve. For example, if your gossip entails something about your senior and now that gossip can also lead you to strategise on how will you intend to change the leadership...”

(Sanjay)

The respondents emphasised that if people have **nothing else to do**, they typically engage in gossip. According to them, busy people don’t have time to gossip:

“Basically I think people here sometimes don’t have any work to do [laughs]. You know what, if you’re busy and you have a busy day there’s no time for that gossip. But if you have the time you make every little petty thing an issue – then they tend to start gossiping. I think if you have a busy day there’s not time to gossip – there’s not time for idle chit-chat you know?”

(Amina)

“...they have nothing better to do...you just get people who only use their time to gossip.”

(Andrea)

“...normally the people who are doing nothing – they are the one who gossip. A busy person does not have time to gossip....”

(Samson)

The participants stated that people could gossip because it gives them a sense of **power and control**:

“You feel powerful...you feel like you know something that other people don’t know.”

(Evelyn)

“...she always wants to be better and she wants to be the bearer of news.”

(Andrea)

“...what is the urgency of telling this person of what happened in your meeting?... Now is that to have a nice story and to show people that you know a lot of information? That you’re up with the higher levels – higher hierarchy of management? That you are important? Is that the way you want to let them perceive you, or what is the case? Sometimes that does happen that you are telling stories or some people [are] telling stories just to create the impression that they [are] in with management; that they are there; they know what is going on; we’re part of...”

(Albert)

A person can give false information to another person to **test** whether one can trust that person not to gossip about it. Therefore if the information starts spreading, one would know that the particular person is not trustworthy:

“So sometimes when I trust...people I believe that you tell one person something that is not true and from there you’ll test it and from there you’ll see. It’s like if maybe you trust as whether the person is loyal... Like the issue of information as well...you give a person information and see...then from there you see that oh! After two months or three weeks the information will be all over...then you know that I only discuss with one person.”

(Samson)

Or is that now creating another thing – a sort of a mistrust – giving information and see where the information comes out? Who’s talking? I’m telling you this in all confidentiality to check up and see where does it come out? This is also a possibility, because I know

people who did just that...test people. It's shrewd; I'm telling you it's shrewd, but they did it..." (Albert)

Change seems to be a breeding ground for gossip in the workplace, as was highlighted by the respondents:

"I think I've noticed that here – at the University – that older people like as changes are happening around the Department, they would huddle together...shh...." (Evelyn)

"...okay especially if you look at our work environment at present. I mean, there are a lot of changes taking place and people maybe perhaps don't want to accept those changes or they don't want to be part of it. And now okay because they don't want to be in an open environment, [they] speak about it – about the fact that they're not happy about it. They will rather speak to a next person about how they feel about it." (Donovan)

"...there's a lot of changes going on in the Department...There is a lot of tension going on...so they give in to their feelings in...in avenues like gossiping and things like that." (Amina)

Donovan stated that someone who **does not have the personality to publicly voice** his or her opinions might turn to gossip to say how he or she feels about something:

"...I mean, if you don't have that personality to go and speak out about...I mean, you'll feel probably much better if you can gossip about it in well in your own room, with somebody else whose...who you know. That is basically it, yeah."

Sanjay proposed that the **organisation's culture** could play a role in facilitating or impeding gossip in the workplace. In the following excerpt, Sanjay emphasises that if an organisation does not have an organisational culture that encourages staff interaction, gossip can be impeded. The inverse of this statement therefore implies that an

organisational culture that allows staff to interact with one another might more likely enable office gossip to take place:

“So I think if there’s an environment that is...that facilitates gossip and maybe I can link gossip to culture. Because if you have a culture that is for example – I’m talking about the organisational culture now – maybe the organisational culture is one that is not conducive to having staff blending and things like that.”

Lindsey mentioned **unhappiness** about some aspect at work as the central theme around which office gossip has revolved in her work experience:

“All types – people being unhappy [types of gossip exposed to]. I think that’s the most type of gossip all over. Where I’ve been working, I think people speak the most [about that]. I think that’s basically the gossip that in our workplace, that I’ve come across; where people is unhappy with management and the work.”

4.4.4 Exposure to gossip in the workplace

When asked what gossip the respondents had been personally exposed to in the workplace, all the respondents reported that they had had experiences with gossip at work. The respondents’ personal experiences with gossip in the workplace seemed to play an important role in their positive or negative evaluation thereof. For example, Andrea had a negative experience with gossip in her work situation – in a conversation with a colleague she had stated some information and it was not interpreted by the colleague in the way that she intended. Her perception of gossip was as follows:

“There are always problems with gossiping... Because everyone interprets it incorrectly. So if you say something, the other person doesn’t understand it as it was meant to be understood.”

Most of the respondents named **negative personal experiences** that they had had with regard to gossip in the workplace:

“I’ve always been somebody who likes to dress up at work and look smart, because that’s how I was taught – you go to work, you must look smart. People would gossip about me, that you know...look at her, she thinks she’s always so smart and whatever... I’ve been exposed to that kind and what else? ...there was also an incidence at work where a lady that I worked quite closely with; she went and she told the bosses about something that I did in my work. And she was my supervisor. Instead of coming to me, and telling me about that, she went and spoke to the bosses.” (Evelyn)

“I did have a challenge where...there were certain things that were discussed behind my back. But unfortunately the person that they discussed [it] with; that particular person...she took that information – how can I put it – she did not verify that information unfortunately... But I believe she realised when I was disputing those issues that this was not true; because of one, two, three, blah, blah, blah. The person realised, but unfortunately she failed to...how can I put it? She failed to just to come and say ‘Hey! The information that they gave me...I believe that that was not correct.’ Because I believe that was very, very important. It was not good for me. Because like they said something that was not true, and the person instead of hearing the other side of the story, only took one side.” (Samson)

“...the one person was crying about the two ladies getting a bonus – because they always get a bonus and we don’t. And I then said not to worry they will most probably not be getting a bonus again this year, because they will be giving us the opportunity to get the bonus. Then they said that I said that they will never again be getting a bonus.” (Andrea)

“...when they do something wrong and you want to show them it is not done in this manner but in that manner, then you are ‘looking after them’... You are now the boss, but the – how shall I put it – University does not belong to you. You want to play the

boss – it's always a thing about you're trying to play the boss. Also, when the aircon is on, for example, the one is cold and the other is hot. When the aircon is then turned on, it's a big drama and when it's turned off everyone is happy. So he can't...he doesn't see the sun shine on another person. So he wants everything for himself. (Andrea)

"I was working half day, okay [and] then I started full day...on a monthly basis I have to go to a specific organisation...then I leave my workplace earlier...then I started to work under a new supervisor and then...what happened is like the people who was working with me okay they went to the supervisor to go explain to her that they were not happy about the fact that I was...that I was leaving earlier to go and deal with this work. But it was work-related, but under the previous supervisor there were no problems regarding that. And that was something which I felt a bit uncomfortable with." (Donovan)

"...there was this one lady [who] said hey, you know what? You know with all the movement now – people are moving offices – somebody picked on us being very preferential. 'Us' for employment relations. How come we are not getting to share offices when others have to share offices? She said you know...there have been a lot of people talking – how come you four guys are so different that you didn't get to share your offices? ... So that means [that] there are people that are talking about things, you know? Just about the office that you're not sharing and then someone else is sharing offices... Because she says you know what, people are sayings things like you guys are very...how come you are not sharing with Jenny or Sam is not sharing with Sally? Why do we have to share offices? But to me it also seemed like this person also was in the midst of that, because she's also sharing an office. You know, she could have been in that particular gossip circle as well." (Amina)

"I've had an experience of it yes, where it was malicious gossip. Where somebody...really didn't like somebody...and they used that information against them – false information – because they didn't know the full story. They took the information, they manipulated the information, and they used that information to destroy somebody else." (Sanjay)

“...certain gossip that took place actually created a situation whereby the authority of the Departmental Head was undermined; due to certain gossip by an individual towards fellow employees and to students – which created a tremendous negativity. And that case is now at the stage of being investigated and to find out whether there are grounds for a disciplinary hearing or not.” (Albert)

The participants in my study mentioned that they get exposed to gossip when they hear how people in the workplace **distort an individual’s relationships** with others in a team one is working in, as explained by Sanjay:

“Myself and Johnny...are responsible for compliance and strategy... So basically everybody that works here – no matter how senior they are – I’ll have to look to actually see if they...if they’re adhering to the policy and things like that... What they have done is they’ve seen me as a policeman...there’s a rumour going around...let’s put it that way – maybe a rumour is attached to gossip – that I’m the head boy and Johnny is the principle [laughs]. That sort of thing, you know? ...we’ve heard it...and I definitely believe that rumour is attached to gossip, because somebody is saying these things and then we’ve come to hear about it. That the head boy is around – watch out; or the principle is around [laughs]... But I don’t want to be perceived [like] that – I want to be perceived as more like a guide dog, you know? You need to do the right thing, because we have legislation; we have policy; and we have certain obligations in terms of Corporate Governance and things like that. Now...for somebody who’s not at that level; they perceive it differently. They say hey, you know what, he’s checking up on us [to] see if we’re doing the right thing and things like that. So it’s perceived differently by different types of people...they may...see me and Johnny as you know what, these are two policemen always on our case that we must do the right thing or they’re watching us and that sort of thing. And within their circles they may gossip about it and for example like what they say. You know, there’s the head boy coming or the principle is on the warpath or whatever the case may be.”

4.4.5 The impact of gossip on an organisation

Gossip can have an impact on an organisation's functioning and reputation. This is supported in the responses provided by the respondents below.

The majority of participants concurred that office gossip can have an impact on the organisation in a number of ways. Office gossip can

- have a negative impact on an organisation;
- tarnish the reputation of an organisation; and
- cause segregation of and conflict among the workforce.

Most of the respondents agreed that gossip can have a **negative impact** on an organisation:

"I think even though they say that no publicity is bad publicity; I think gossip can affect an organisation very badly – to different degrees." (Evelyn)

"Well it can affect the organisation negatively...it's going to have an affect on the performance, because maybe the quantity of work that you could have produced that day is not going to be as high." (Donovan)

"I think if it's [gossip] used incorrectly, it can...it can destroy the culture; it can cause fragmentation; it can pit people against each other; it can pit divisions against each other if the wrong things are said; it can cause conflict; and basically...it can affect the stability of the organisation... So you can really be able to destroy an organisation by gossip." (Sanjay)

The majority of the respondents indicated that gossip can have a negative impact on the **reputation** of a company or division:

“No it [gossip] can bring the organisation down really bad. It has a very detrimental effect on the organisation...it tarnishes the image of the University.” (Amina)

“And you want to build a special culture where you want to instil effectiveness and efficiency; and you want people to interact with clients in a more professional way. You may get divisions where they will compete against each other...they’ll gossip about another division and say they are useless and when clients come to you, you will even tell them that that division is useless... And that person will then go back to his place and say oh but you know what, they are useless – not really knowing the actual facts. And that will start a gossip and then whatever interaction that comes after that, or whoever that person has interacted [with] will see that division as being useless – but not knowing the true facts behind it. So you can really be able to destroy an organisation by gossip.” (Sanjay)

“Well, if for instance let’s say then in that case it was maybe between two races that there was...there was some kind of gossip. And then the thing becomes big and then it can start going outside. And then when people are talking, they don’t say ‘those two people...’ they say ‘that race and that race in that University, that’s how they deal with each other’. And then forever it will create that perception about that University or that organisation; based on two individuals or one isolated incidence. That does not really speak about the different other things that are happening at the University or different relationships that are happening at the University that people have no idea about.” (Evelyn)

“And that creates another dimension of discussing it with people outside that specific department unit or company; which is also creating a negative effect on the company in saying ‘have you heard that guy’s working there...’ and their shares drop by so much... ‘I think we must withdraw our money’ – which can have a terrible impact on the company. That’s the thing that I...said if you’ve got shares and somebody has got a negative comment on it, it can cause a hell of a big problem.” (Albert)

According to the respondents, gossip can lead to **segregation** of and **conflict** among the workforce:

"I believe it [gossip] can be detrimental to an organisation... And it can also cause racial hatred, because the one race talks about the other race – and our cultures differ profoundly. So it will lead to racial hatred." (Andrea)

"And immediately gossip sometimes is able to divide people." (Samson)

"I think gossip is has it's negative impact... you can even [have] staff fighting amongst each other..." (Lindsey)

"I think if it's [gossip] used incorrectly, it can...it can destroy the culture; it can cause fragmentation; it can pit people against each other; it can pit divisions against each other if the wrong things are said; it can cause conflict; and basically...it can affect the stability of the organisation. Especially if there are conflict and there are people working together everyday – colleagues." (Sanjay)

The respondents indicated that the workplace can be positively affected by gossip, although in the majority of cases the consequences are negative:

"I think the type of gossip can also sometimes be constructive – like for example work-related – when people are unhappy. Maybe it came out the wrong way – gossiping among each other – [but] maybe [it] fell on the right ear to attend to the problem. But yeah most of the time gossip is destructive." (Lindsey)

"I think it can cause a lot of disharmony; it can cause a lot of conflict; it can cause an uneasy situation for some. But then again it can be healthy as well, because I mean you get a lot of people you know communicating about something that doesn't really exist... but yes it can be malicious; you know it can have a bad intent. It depends how it is communicated. So it can be good or bad." (Sanjay)

According to the respondents, **teamwork** can be negatively affected by office gossip:

Samson mentioned that gossip can have an impact on unity at work – therefore gossip that initially had an impact on only a few people could later escalate into destroying teamwork:

“...immediately if my relationship with you as my manager or whatever is not okay, it simply means that the organisation is affected – because we are expected to work as a team.”

Andrea shared a personal work experience where she stressed that the other employees who were not directly involved in a gossip situation were also affected by the friction between the two employees, because those who were directly involved with the gossip did not speak with one another anymore and therefore the synergy of the team as a whole was affected negatively:

“I think the others had a problem, because...we didn’t communicate with one another...So...they had to go tell her everything that she had to do and I just kept quiet.”

Gossip can have an impact on the **productivity and performance** of those involved in the gossip:

“I mean, even just the mere fact that you’re going to gossip – I mean you’re going to make time now to go speak about that subject, where you could have done maybe a couple of files or you could have done something else. So in that sense it’s going to have an affect on the performance, because maybe the quantity of work that you could have produced that day is not going to be as high. Because you’re obviously going to make time now to gossip and that time you could have used to finalise a couple of queries or a couple of files or whatever. Yeah. So the performances will be affected...because you’re going to...find time to kind of deal with that situation of

understanding, where for instance if that person didn't gossip about you there would not really [be] a situation where you would deal with it. And I mean obviously you have to make time now to deal with that kind of feelings now – that hurt, to get over it – because somebody spoke about you. Yeah. So I think it in that sense it can have an affect on the performance, yeah, of your work.” (Donovan)

“... [gossip] can cause downtime in the sense of they're talking about a certain problem which doesn't exist or that might exist, which they don't have all the information of. And that is causing further productivity losses in time.” (Albert)

Since organisations do not realise the full impact of gossip, they allow it to spiral out of control, as Sanjay comments:

“Because I don't think they know the consequences of it [office gossip]. Some...organisations think that gossip is a low-level thing – it's just between the corridors and the passages and...it's not something that will cause instability of the organisation. They think it's something that's minor. But if they have to really think okay, what is gossip attached to? Gossip is attached with rumours. What is rumour attached to? Rumour is attached to creating disharmony in the workplace and...what does that entail? It entails people maybe not performing. You know, [if] they realise the entire process, then it's a different story. But how many organisations do that? How many organisations say that performance is linked to all these things here? There's very few of them that do...”

4.4.6 Consequences of office gossip for individuals

The interviews with the respondents illustrated that gossip can have adverse consequences for the gossipee and also the gossipers. In addition, the relationship between the gossipee and the gossipers, as well as with other employees not directly involved with the gossip, can be affected.

The majority of respondents indicated that office gossip has two main consequences: (1) Office gossip has an impact on a person's career or position – such as undermining a person's authority, discomfort at work, resignation, lack of rewards and damage to careers; (2) The gossipee experiences negative feelings as a result of office gossip – such as demoralisation, distrust, feelings of isolation, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, disappointment, hurt and anger.

With regard to these negative consequences, the majority of respondents indicated that the most noticeable negative outcome of office gossip was its impact on a person's **career or position**:

“My interactions with those people changed...in a way I sort of put them like in a corner of my mind and as much as I could in the workplace, I didn't want to interact with them unless I really had to; which just made working life difficult. Because you know when people are talking about you and they don't know that you know that, they can act. But the moment they realise that you caught on; then it makes the environment quite tense. So it was...it was quite tense; it was just difficult. I actually ended up having to resign from that particular job.” (Evelyn)

“It became uncomfortable at work; because the gossip then spread into a rumour and then everybody came to know about it, and then that person...felt very uncomfortable at work. That person's husband came to know about it and this person had to leave work... The person resigned... Because of gossip....” (Sanjay)

“...my bonus was taken away completely...I was mad, because I didn't say it like she understood it. So she completely took it the wrong way. And you know, for a whole year now I haven't spoken to her and we work together in the same office. I have not communicated with her at all... She shouldn't come close to me. No I don't speak to her at all...” (Andrea)

From the personal experiences of the majority of the respondents, it was evident that they had been detrimentally affected by gossip. As **gossipees** they experienced different **negative feelings** as a result of gossip, which had an impact on their work environment, the way in which they viewed the workplace and the relationship between the gossiper(s) and the gossipee:

“...I started asking myself that oh now how am I looking? Am I trying to impress? Am I trying too much? Am I...am I too much? Should I change something? Should I...maybe calm a bit down? And I didn’t even know what was down or how high was I or...you know? Because I was just being myself. So...for a while I was unsure of myself. I think I lost a bit of my confidence and my self esteem. And for us to get ahead...in our workplaces or to do our jobs to the best that we can, we need to be confident of ourselves... You feel let down. You feel like you don’t have a sense of belonging yourself; because the people who are part of the group of the gossipers belong, but you’re the one who’s been gossiped about...you’ve been isolated and shut out. And you feel let down, because in some instances those people who gossiped about you are your friends or you thought they were your friends; even if it’s just work colleagues... And they can actually make the morale go down and even the way that they view the workplace...You trust less...personally I come to the workplace with a...mindset that I’m here to work; this is not my playground. When I’m out and playing, then I can...I can really say that I found a friend. But when I’m here, there’s not time for play. Anyone can be the person who wants to bring me down. Because people here are trying to get up and they will use anything to make themselves better.” (Evelyn)

“...you are not in the mood to go to work and you’re also not in the mood to do things at work because your feelings are hurt... Because if you get this or that done at work today, everyone will say it’s because you sat on the boss’s lap or, you know, something like that; or that she is looking for the favours of this one. So that that type of gossip you’ll never ever get out of the workplace. Never.” (Andrea)

“...if the trust is broken you’ll end up sometimes... You can work, you can do whatever; you can be together, you can drink tea together, a person can call you instead of saying John can say Johnny [nickname]...but it’s doing nothing... You are there, I’m here. We are not fighting. When we come work-related we discuss, but we are not friends and the relationship is not good. We just operate work-related and come back and that is not healthy. But the person who will be frustrated is you [gossiper], because you know that you said something and unfortunately it didn’t work for you.” (Samson)

“I mean they just could’ve come to me and say you know what, this is how they...feel and that was the problem. So there was a bit of disappointment in that, yeah; ‘cause I thought we’ve been working [together] for a couple of years and I mean [I thought with] this kind of things they would’ve come maybe to me to speak about it... So no, there was definitely a bit of hurt in that and disappointment...the consequences was that the supervisor didn’t trust me...” (Donovan)

“No it didn’t make me feel nice, hey? It made me feel very negative in the sense that you know what, I can’t believe you know people talk to you like they’re you’re friends and then after that you know you hear something like this. Yeah it doesn’t make you feel nice... it affects you as a person because you’re a human being – you have feelings as well. To know that this, you know, idle chit-chat is going around; you know, something that’s not positive – it’s very negative.” (Amina)

The respondents indicated that office gossip can cause **distrust** between employees and hence hamper their relationships with one another:

“And by getting...incorrect information transferred to other people, you’re causing and creating a situation whereby...everybody or certain...persons become very negative. And in that negativity – amongst themselves – they...mistrust each other.” (Albert)

“...trust also plays a very important role. Then immediately if there is a gossip; I believe that the relationship and trust also is going to be a problem. Because let me put it this

way – you are my manager. Immediately if you can say something that is not true and you know deep down in your heart that what you are saying is not true; and I know it deep down in my heart that what you are saying is not true... I don't believe that I'll trust you... At the end of the day you don't trust one another. You can take us to teambuilding; you can take us all over. I'm telling you it never will resolve anything. Because the problem is the issue of trust; because trust plays a very important role in a relationship; in marriage; [in the] work situation – all over trust is very important. But if I don't trust that particular person, I believe that the organisation itself is a problem. That is why you see most of the organisations have a problem; because [of] the issues of trust. And trust; what causes the people to lose trust? Gossip.” (Samson)

The respondents indicated that if the gossiper is someone regarded as a friend or close colleague, the gossip would **hurt the gossipee even more**:

“...if somebody you thought you were close to – a friend or colleague or somebody like that – it's going to even hurt more if you know that that somebody did speak about you yeah or gossip.” (Donovan)

“Instead of coming to me, and telling me about that, she went and spoke to the bosses. And then I also felt that was very hurtful. You know, I mean, understanding the steps of how things work at work – especially when someone you're quite close to; not only on a work level, but also on a friendship level. You think that they would deal with things in a different manner; but it's like the person wants to pull you down in a way. Because when someone doesn't go through the correct procedures and steps, then it's always that the person doesn't really care about you. So that hurt.” (Evelyn)

Samson provided a metaphor that emphasised that hurting other people to get further in life will only come back to haunt you:

“In my own language we say a dog does not get fat if it eats another dog. So meaning there are some people sometimes if they want something, they can end up using you as

a ladder for their own benefit. That is basically what we mean. So you don't operate that way, because should you do that...sometimes if you use somebody then you climb the ladder then you are there...from there you just keep that ladder... Next time if you have to come down you need the ladder, but unfortunately the ladder is no longer there. It's going to be difficult for you to come down and you are going to fall, because there is no ladder. That is basically what I believe. And sometimes immediately if you do that, from there you decide...as a ladder, I just shift a little bit from you."

4.4.7 DEALING WITH GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

This section deals with the proposals the participants made for how employees, employers and organisations can deal with office gossip – firstly, how malicious gossip can be avoided in the workplace, and secondly, how gossip running rampant in an organisation can be rectified.

The majority of the respondents stated that office gossip can be avoided if all the sides of a story are heard before the employee or supervisor acts on one-sided information. In addition, most of the participants proposed that office gossip can be rectified in two ways: people can go directly to the gossipee to find out the facts or to voice particular feelings about an issue, and the gossipee, supervisors and top management can shed light on the truth and hence counter office gossip.

4.4.7.1 Avoiding gossip in the workplace

As has been shown in the previous sections, malicious gossip can have a lot of detrimental consequences in the workplace and on employees. The respondents provided some ways in which it can be avoided.

According to most of the respondents, it is vital that people do not act only when they know one side of a story and that they therefore take the time to first hear **all sides of a story**. Hence, information should be verified and not spread without any proof of its

validity. Note that many of the excerpts below relate to the respondents looking back at a gossip situation they experienced and thinking how the gossip could have been avoided:

“I think if we had all sat down together and each person had without...what’s the word...without anyone feeling that they could get into trouble or there would be repercussions; that somebody could just say [that] this is my side of the story and each person could say their side of the story. I think that could have helped.” (Evelyn)

“Well, the only way that you can do that [avoid gossip] is when something...comes your way and they’re talking about it... First thing you ask them is, is that fact or fiction? What did you hear?” (Albert)

“The boss could’ve called in both of us and I could have said what I meant.” (Andrea)

“They must have proof for everything that they [say] – you know they can’t just make statements if they don’t have proof. Evidence.” (Amina)

“...one of the elements of leadership is to hear [the] other side of the story. You are not supposed to act based on one side of the story. The person is supposed to call you and from there say Sam, I hear one, two, three, and from there you present your own story.” (Samson)

“I think the person listening to the gossip should’ve said you know what, I don’t believe this is true...can you verify this? That person should not have taken that information on hearsay and spread it to somebody else. By accepting that information, they were just as guilty – because [the] information was baseless, you know?” (Sanjay)

The respondents proposed that a **policy** could be put in place to avoid and deal with malicious gossip:

“...he [the employer] did put a policy in place saying that, you know, this type of gossip must stop – and...if it harms anybody then we’ll take serious action; because it becomes defamation of character.” (Sanjay)

“...put in some policy in place, for example, or whatever; or guidelines that if you found out you’re gossiping about A, B, C or, you know, things; or they will look at a certain case – it depends on the type of case – yeah to handle that case then. But yes, because ...some is just stupid gossip, but some things are very serious. Then yeah you’ll deal with it accordingly then. Set the rules – set the ground rules.” (Lindsey)

“... maybe if you have to combine documents and put it there; my recommendation will be I believe that if people can check and look up and check this documents, I believe that it can change the organisations. Because I believe that is very important and people that [are] afraid to talk about such things.” (Samson)

According to the respondents, by stopping gossip in its tracks or separating oneself from a gossip discussion, one will **not entertain gossip**:

“...don’t be the person that people come and throw their garbage on, because it’s like loading all the garbage. You can tell people not to talk about it and to go speak to the person and stopping them...before they even start talking about it. Yeah. Not entertaining gossip from anyone.” (Lindsey)

“...if you cannot say something good about somebody just keep quiet – don’t start with that. And if you’ve got a problem regarding certain aspects of the company or the department happening – if you’re not happy with what’s happening – don’t blunder it out to everybody. Go and submit a grievance and work through the normal channels and find out exactly...or go to your HOD and find out or if it’s the HOD tell him to go to your director or whoever. Go and find out what the actual facts are if you don’t know it. But don’t go telling stories... So that’s where I cut it off.” (Albert)

“...I think that gossip in its nature is just not right. And where we can, I mean, we must just not. We must... just if somebody comes to you and wants to gossip; if you can't stop them, walk away. Or just tell them that I don't want to hear, you know, because the moment you keep quiet you are part of the gossip – because you heard the story and you might not say anything, but you were there.” (Evelyn)

According to Sanjay, gossip can be minimised if management are as **transparent** as possible and give their employees information in a **timely** fashion:

“I think you have to make information as transparent as possible. I think if you keep too much of information to yourself and you don't disclose it, people will tend to speculate. And when they speculate, they will gossip. So I think... Max has a good motto – he says 'I want to prevent the gossip out here. That is why I will tell you the information before anybody else. So if somebody asks you, you'll say I know about it already'. So that's what you need to do – you need be to in the information race, where you make the information reach everybody before it...comes a case where somebody says you know what, I don't know about this...let me ask this person or let me tell this person about it... But as far as possible, tell everybody everything – don't willow information. I mean...if it's information that's not secret, I mean, that doesn't affect the stability of the country, why keep it? You know it doesn't affect the stability of the University, you know? Why keep it to yourself. Rather tell your staff so...they're better informed in that way and then that will prevent gossip.”

Sanjay's view was supported by Andrea, who stated that management should provide information whenever there is uncertainty:

“They [management] fill the gaps and not you who is unknowledgeable and tries to put in a gap in an inaccurate manner.”

Sanjay also stated that managers have to be willing to go through the **same changes** that they implement in their workforce, as this will help to change perceptions and perhaps lessen gossip about managers:

“So you have to level the playing fields as well, I think. So for example if you are unsettling people, then you yourself...maybe need to be unsettled as well. You show them yeah you know what, I’m... not above the law; I can be moved as well. You know, so maybe that will change perceptions, but I don’t know whether it will change perceptions in all cases. Maybe to a certain degree, yes.”

Donovan suggested that gossip can be avoided by asking an **expert on gossip to speak to the staff** about the adverse effects gossip can have on the workplace and its employees:

“... I think just speak to people...or maybe they can get in experts in explaining what the results of gossiping against somebody else could be and how it could be detrimental to the organisation.... I mean in that sense maybe just to realise from the staff members [perspective] – just to take it from a personal point of view. To see now what if I’m going to gossip about that person, that is the effect. Then I would rather not.”

From Andrea’s personal experience with gossip, she stated that employees should make sure that the messages they communicate are conveyed in a **clear, understandable** manner so that the receiver of the message can understand it. In turn, the receiver of the message should ensure that he or she understands the message as it was meant to be understood and, if he or she is not sure, to ask for **clarification**:

“Maybe I should have asked her whether she understood what I said. So you see I just spoke and I didn’t go back to the topic and ask her whether she understood... I believed that she understood what I told her; but she didn’t understand... She could’ve told me to explain to her more clearly. She could’ve asked me for an explanation.”

Albert could **not provide any suggestions** on avoiding malicious gossip and regarded any attempt to prevent gossip futile due to the fact that gossiping is part of a person's nature. Regarding the exposure that he had had in the workplace of malicious gossip, he stated the following:

"[Sighs] How do you change...the makeup of a person? How do you change the perception of a person? How do you change the interpretation of a...situation by a person? If you can give me an answer on that, I'll tell you. But those things I haven't been able to establish... Well if you can tell me how to change attitudes, assumptions, etc. etc., then there is probably some way of dealing with the problem... I don't know the makeup of that person's thinking."

4.4.7.2 Rectifying gossip in the workplace

Once gossip starts spreading around the workplace, it has to be resolved in some manner. The respondents suggested ways in which this could be done.

The gossipee, supervisors and top management can **shed light** on the truth:

"Okay, I don't know from their side how it could have been rectified, but from my side I explain to her okay this is the reason why...and... I show proof to her how effective it was for me going there...perhaps yeah the supervisor also could've played a role in that and try to rectify the situation." (Donovan)

"And I think we also need to interact with the people more – and that's what I've been doing as well. Trying to tell them exactly what my role is here, because nobody seems to understand." (Sanjay)

"...through discussion, communication and clarification of unknown aspects which the other party probably didn't know – which the other party is not au fait with; round-table discussions; and if it then persists disciplinary action should be taken. Because then

there is something wrong in the person's attitude towards the senior personnel or to the company. But investigations and communication should take place so that information being transferred and the information being made available...so that person knows and [it is] pointed out that you're perception about this is incorrect. This is what's happening; this is what was supposed to be happening; this is where we are." (Albert)

"...we can also get the Deputy Directors involved, you know, the higher...the higher line managers and things like that and then they can also step in instead of, you know, this thing going on and on. The line managers can also talk to people... It's information that we can relay. You know and say you know this is what's happening and this is not true." (Amina)

Most of the respondents suggested that people should get to know the **gossipee** or go directly to the gossipee to get the facts or to voice their feelings about a particular issue. This could help rectify gossip in some instances:

"...the person didn't tell me who exactly said it. So it doesn't resolve anything. But now you don't know whether it's the person that's telling you that somebody else said so, or whether it's coming from her, but using somebody else. You know? You'd rather know from the person straight; then you can tell the person, you know, that this is how it is... Its better the person tells you directly; not a person telling you, you know this is what somebody said. And I said who is that somebody? No, no, no, you know, I've just forgotten now. It was so convenient to just forget who the person was" (Amina)

"Hopefully if they could have seen me as a human being and just gotten to know me; or maybe if I had taken more time as well to get them to know me or understand me [gossip rectified]... If maybe she had...come to me and just said you know, you dress nicely, how are you able to do that?" (Evelyn)

"...they mustn't talk about personalised things to me. I'm not interested. If they've got a problem like that I say to them okay, you've got a problem – go and speak to that person

you've got a problem with or the person who told you the stories to verify and then you go and sort it out." (Albert)

The respondents said that, to rectify a gossip situation, the gossipers could **apologise** to the gossipee for the damage they had caused. Rectifying the situation leads to gossipees feeling positive:

"But if there is a problem but you avoid the problem, then I have a problem with that and I'm not going to trust him...sometimes when we go and a person calls me, I'll be willing also to say yes I agree here you were wrong, but you were not 100 percent wrong. I was also 30 percent wrong. And from there we'll come and discuss and from there build the relationship. But as long as we fail to resolve whatever, then we just sweep it under the carpet. I'm telling you...the relationship I'm offering...not even in the workplace; even home, friends and whatever. Should you approach things that way, you are going nowhere. That is my belief." (Samson)

"She should've come to give me an apology. I would've still been mad, but I would've accepted her apology. But she just never came to give me an apology and she just kept talking about me behind my back and she just didn't exist for me for more than a year." (Andrea)

"...whether it's her or somebody else that mentioned it to her; then she knows it wasn't a decision that I made...But I don't know how much it helped her, but it made me [gossipee] feel a bit better." (Amina)

Sanjay also highlighted that it could be **difficult to punish** someone for gossip that has spread, because it is not easy to find the source of the gossip:

"Nobody wanted to give the source up... Because you know if I told you and you told Jen and Jen told Sammy...Sammy would not say Jen did it; because Jen then has to say you know what, I've got it from you or whatever the case may be. So in the end it would

be too many people, because they're all accomplices...they're all guilty of spreading the rumour... Who do you punish? If its a few people and you can identify the source; you can punish him. If it's three or four people and you stop it before it gets down to the entire Department; you can punish that person. But if the entire HR Department is talking...who do you punish? It will take you forever to get all of the source."

4.5 UNDERSTANDING GOSSIP IN GENERAL

This section explores the perceptions of the respondents regarding the media and whether they think that people are gossiping when they speak in a native language. This section links with the next section, which deals with the results of the card-sorting exercise, as both sections focus on where the line is drawn between healthy communication and gossip.

4.5.1 Understanding gossip as related to media

When asked whether they regarded Hollywood or tabloid information as gossip, the majority of the respondents agreed that it was gossip to an extent due to its speculative in nature – therefore one never knows whether it is true or false. The respondents seemed to imply that gossip is speculative in nature.

The excerpts that follow highlight that most of the participants regarded the **media as gossip to an extent**, seeing that Hollywood or tabloid information is grounded in speculation:

"Media can sometimes build you and media can destroy you. It's not always what they are saying; like, the newspaper what you see there it's not always the truth and it's not always false. So it depends. Yeah, it's 50/50." (Samson)

"Yeah, I think some of it [Hollywood or tabloid information] is gossip [laughs]...because I've read...a lot of stuff and everything is not true. Because a lot of times people that

report stuff...it is not the true things about what really happens. And I know, we we've noticed that. You know, you when you read the tabloids and when you really come to know the truth, it's different. Journalists sometimes just publish things that, you know, that's really not true." (Amina)

"I do think so to some degree [that Hollywood or tabloid information is gossip], because where do they get all the stories from? So I do think so. I think most of it is gossip, because you don't know what is going on in that person's private life...it's a guessing game." (Andrea)

"...it [Hollywood or tabloid information] can be false information or it can be true information and usually people...sell stuff like magazines like that with gossip. It's not usually the truth. Yeah but it can be...not always." (Lindsey)

"Its gossip [Hollywood or tabloid information]...the way that I analysed gossip in the beginning; I said that gossip is whenever we're talking about somebody and they're not there...so based on that, because most of the time its speculation when you watch those channels on the satellite TV." (Evelyn)

The **reliability of Hollywood or tabloid information** was often called into question by the respondents:

"It [Hollywood or tabloid information] could mostly be about what the camera saw or what they heard. Like 'our sources' [or] 'our trusted sources say' or 'our cameras caught'...you know, whoever and whoever frolicking on a beach somewhere. So most of the time it is definitely gossip, because it's just...its speculation – they don't have hard facts. They didn't actually go and query that person and find out, you know, what exactly is going on." (Evelyn)

“Well okay, I don’t really follow a lot of that [Hollywood or tabloid information] now; but I think that is gossip, because okay it’s like sometimes they won’t reveal maybe their sources and then how can you trust I mean, that kind of information?” (Donovan)

Albert questioned the reasons why one would want to read Hollywood or tabloid information and engage in discussions about what was read, heard and seen in the media. The irony is that he proposed that a person should rather talk about sports or military news – which obviously falls within his field of interest:

“...why go and dig into somebody’s past? And into somebody’s private life? And blast it all over all the papers, over the radio and all over? Why, what for? Is that advertisement? Advertising the person? Boosting him? Running him down? ...what sensation do you get out of it? What do I get out of it in doing that? Nothing. Now why must I be part of that stupidity of talking nonsense? Because I say its nonsense in the sense of it’s got nothing to do with me. Why must I be part of it? Rather in the job situation rather talk about rugby or athletics or like the Russians and who’s that other guys now? Afghanistan’s they’re busy launching their bombs already with atomic warheads. Talk about those things. Or am I? You see I’m totally in the wrong...Is it gossip or not?”

4.5.2 Groups conversing in native language in diverse groups

The majority of the respondents indicated that the languages that others talk can often cause uncertainty and discomfort when everyone does not understand what is being said. The thoughts and feelings reported by the respondents if they were to stand outside or in a group while others were talking in another language are explored in this section. The respondents stated that if they did not understand what was being said, they would wonder whether or not the group was gossiping.

The majority of the respondents indicated that, if they were standing in a group and people spoke in another language, they would find it offensive and wonder whether they were the subject of discussion.

The majority of the respondents agreed that if they were **standing in a group** and the group started speaking in a foreign language, they would get **offended** by it and would wonder what they were talking about and if they were gossiping about them:

"...[I would feel like] an outcast, because they're talking in a different language and I would suspect that they're talking of me or about me or something like that. So you feel awkward... Especially when they look at you and they carry on talking." (Albert)

"I usually get offended by that...that is if I know the person and I was communicating with that person first, and then he turns around and speaks to somebody else in his own language. But the first thing I get is [that] he must be saying 'don't worry about this idiot here' or whatever the case may be [laughs]. That that's the first impression I get." (Sanjay)

"No you'll think that they're talking about something that could be impacting you, but they just don't want you to understand. So it could definitely be about you." (Evelyn)

"Then I will be offended yeah, because I mean, I'm there and I don't understand what they're saying...when will I think its gossip? Where for instance even though I don't understand it, if they just start to stop speaking at a specific point, where they don't really want you to hear – although perhaps maybe I can't understand it...and they just stop speaking. Then I would get the idea that it could be gossip." (Donovan)

The respondents from the **Indian culture** find it **very rude** that others would speak in their own language, as they do not converse in their home language in a diverse group setting. The Indian participants felt it was only polite for people to include individuals

different to themselves in conversation or, if the group speaks in their native language, to at least clarify to others who are not familiar with their language what is being said:

“I’ll be in a conversation with somebody that’s a black person, who will be talking to me in English. But as soon as a black person comes by, then he starts talking in his language. I mean, it’s not all of us that know all 11 official languages. And it’s very rude. And even down the passage, you know all of a sudden you get them and then he’s talking their language; but you’re standing there. You don’t know what they’re speaking [of]. They can be talking about you... I think it’s very rude, because you always get that with...with the Blacks as well [spoke a little softer]... The Indian will still speak the English language; he wouldn’t speak his home tongue no. You will never find that and even the...or maybe the coloured will just speak Afrikaans. But that’s fine still, because we understand the Afrikaans. But it’s with the black culture that where they see their black people, they want to speak in their language – irrespective of you in that little click, you know? They just don’t worry whether you understand it or not. I think it’s very rude. Maybe it’s their culture, but I don’t understand that [laughs].” (Amina)

“Because for me, if I am standing talking to you, then if I see another Indian standing next to me and if I speak in my Indian language – the right thing to do would [be to] say you know what, I just asked him this particular thing here. So that it clears the air, because you don’t understand exactly what I’m saying.” (Sanjay)

The respondents indicated that, when they are **not standing in the group** and the group speaks in a foreign language their behaviour towards them would play a role in whether they think that the group is talking about them:

“...when they are looking in your direction, you will immediately wonder: are they gossiping about me? are they talking about me? ...what’s going on? Because as they always say...where there are two or more people together, it’s like an illegal meeting you’re having. So you you’ll immediately wonder.” (Andrea)

“I’m not someone that really pays attention to people talking unless...sometimes their attitude or the way that they portray themselves would show that they are talking about you. Then...you would know that they are talking [about you].” (Lindsey)

“Sometimes dependent on where you are, you could think that they’re talking about you; especially if you look at their body language. But I mean if you’re not interacting with them in any way, then they could be talking about anything.” (Evelyn)

Donovan said the reason why people talk in their home language is because they feel comfortable conversing in that language:

“... I just think okay the reason perhaps why they’re speaking that language, is for them to be more comfortable, because all of them probably speak that language – I mean that common language...” (Donovan)

The participants in my study mentioned that talking in their native language, when the majority of group members understood the native language, was a **naturally occurring phenomenon**. As Albert states:

“...its [gossip] a natural phenomenon – if you walk around and...you know somebody is Afrikaans, to immediately carry on in Afrikaans. And somebody else walking with you that is not au fait with Afrikaans, is...either going to feel upset or whatever the case may be.”

I found that Albert contradicted himself when he mentioned that he found it uncomfortable when others spoke in their own language; whereas he previously stated that he would do the same thing and that it is a natural phenomenon:

“And then the other...aspect on that that makes it very awkward, is that once there are – I’ll put it this way – the Europeans around or other cultures whether it’s Indian, Chinese or whatever, the black people normally starts talking in their own language... So you

don't follow; you don't know what they're talking about – which is creating a sort of a mistrust, whether it's right or wrong. I don't know what they're saying, are they talking about me? Of me? About something else that I did? I don't know."

Lindsey mentioned that there were **variations in the speech tones and pitch** used by different cultures when engaging in gossip:

"And then cultures usually, like for example the Africans...they like to speak loud and that so you can always pick up clearly most of the times...if they are talking about you or not... I think Coloureds are just...they talk; they don't care [laugh] ...it's not people that really hides; most of them don't hide. Yeah. But I think the white people for example are just...different cultures would speak softer and you wouldn't really know...sometimes you wouldn't know that they're talking about you, but yes I know they...You get to know who is talking about you [laugh]."

The participants proposed that if a group talks in another language in the presence of a person who does not understand, they **do not want the person to know** what is being said:

"...there's an understanding that English is the universal language. So if you are sitting together or standing together in a certain place, then use English. But the moment that people then switch, they obviously don't want you to hear – especially when they know that you don't know that language and they're inside the same group." (Evelyn)

"But I've experienced where they don't want you to know what they say too – with regards to me and my situation – and then they speak in their language. So they know that you don't know what they're saying." (Amina)

Albert and Lindsey provided a solution to the problem of people speaking in foreign languages in the presence of others who do not understand – people should **get to know one another's languages**:

“I think the cultural acceptance or the way in which that has got to be attended to or discussions attended to – somewhere along the line attention must be given to that. Either the other cultures must be au fait with one of those languages so they can talk together – which makes the burden even bigger – and also on the other side that those cultures get au fait with Afrikaans and English or with the Indian language or whatever. Because there’s also friction; it’s very difficult.” (Albert)

“And it is very good to try and get to know the language and certain things you can pick up if you know language; or maybe not fully, but there’s certain tones and certain ways that they speak that you know that they’re speaking about you.” (Lindsey)

4.6 HEALTHY COMMUNICATION AND MALICIOUS OFFICE GOSSIP

In this section, the characteristics used by the respondents to distinguish between healthy communication and office gossip will be explored. This will entail a discussion of the results of the card-sorting exercise.

From the results of the card-sorting exercise it is obvious that the perceptions of what can be distinguished as healthy communication and office gossip differed quite significantly among the participants. The respondents were first allowed to rank the cards according to their own discretion, and they were then asked to rank the cards according to ‘not gossip’, ‘slight gossip’, ‘quite a bit of gossip’, and ‘very much gossip’ and gave explanations for their rankings.

4.6.1 Where the respondents drew the line

In general it was evident that self-serving gossip was frowned upon. The majority of the respondents agreed that discussing a person's personal life is very much gossip, seeing that it is none of anyone's business. They also indicated that some people would regard something as 'good gossip', whereas others would see it as not gossip at all. From the results of the card-sorting exercise it was also evident that "good gossip" and "classic gossip" can be distinguished. In terms of the cards, most of the participants agreed that:

- card number 1 is 'very much gossip'
- card number 4 is 'not gossip' and 'slight gossip'
- card number 8 is 'very much gossip'
- card number 9 is 'quite a bit of gossip'
- card number 11 is 'not gossip'

The reasons why they viewed these cards the way they did differed dramatically. The respondents were not in agreement in terms of the other cards.

The cards ranked by half or more of the respondents into a particular group will be discussed in this section.

Case study number 1 was regarded by most of the respondents as '**very much gossip**'. This card was not regarded by any of the respondents as 'not gossip'. The case study reads as follows:

1 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'.

Donovan, Amina, Andrea and Albert regarded this case study as ‘very much gossip’, seeing that it reflects the discussion of someone else’s personal life, which is none of the gossipers’ business:

“...this is nobody’s business. I mean, this shouldn’t be gossiped about... With regards to personal issues – when somebody is targeting somebody personally – for example somebody that’s a heterosexual or a homosexual. I think that’s gossip, because that’s somebody’s personal life, you know? Not the whole department must know about it. If somebody knows about it [it] doesn’t make it good for that person to tell everybody else...about that person.” (Amina)

“...your sex life has nothing to do with anyone else. That is also confidential – in your bedroom.” (Andrea)

“...here [refers to number 1] you’re talking about a person’s sex life which has got nothing to do with you....Have you got information on that – yes or no?” (Albert)

Sanjay also regarded case study number 1 as ‘very much gossip’, but stated as his reason the fact that it was information used in a derogatory way and based on speculation:

“...this is also gossip, because now they are talking about...her personal life and they’re using that...information in a derogatory way... You know, you’re taking that information... so you don’t have the true facts. Now you’re merely speculating.”

In contrast to these views, Samson and Evelyn regarded case study number 1 as ‘slight gossip’. Both of the respondents stated that the individuals in this case study were just talking and indicated that it was normal to speculate about the lives of others:

“...they’re just speculating. So I think that people always do that. People [are] always wondering what’s going on in your life. So it’s slight, I mean it’s sort of what we term

'normal'. We think it's actually normal, because people can speculate 'oh, are you a dyke, [or] are you not?'” (Evelyn)

"...this is why I put it the last one [least like gossip]...people always talk about you – bad or good. But I believe that what is important; you are not supposed to worry about people, because people will never stop talking about you. That is why I'm saying they will talk...you'll buy an expensive car – they will tell you you've got pride because of your expensive car. You drive an old car – they will tell you that oh shame, he's driving an old car. They'll always talk. You are educated – they'll tell you that okay, because he's educated he's looking down on us. You are not educated – they'll tell you okay, that is why his reasoning is poor; because he's not educated. That is why I'm saying they'll always talk about you." (Samson)

Case study number 4 was regarded by half of the respondents as '**not gossip**' and by the other half of the respondents as '**slight gossip**'. None of the respondents regarded this case study as 'quite a bit of gossip' or 'very much gossip'. The case study reads as follows:

4 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.

Amina, Sanjay, Andrea and Albert viewed case study number 4 as 'not gossip'. Amina said that if a person is happy and tells you why he's happy and does not say it's confidential, it is not gossip to tell someone else. Sanjay stated that card number 4 is not something that will become gossip. Albert stated that the card represents conveying a fact, and that it is good news that does not do any harm to anyone.

"...somebody's happy and he tells you why he's happy and then somebody else you tell. I don't think that's gossip, because it's not something to be hidden – it's not like

something that's bad or negative... I mean he's happy and if you told somebody that his...it was his daughter's engagement...he didn't say to you that it's confidential..."

(Amina)

"...it's not something that would turn into gossip. I mean, his daughter got engaged – he's happy. Would you really gossip? Even if he gossiped about it...I mean what...what can you really extract from it? Can you extract anything bad from it?...you would actually make him happier I think...that you also know. But what would make it gossip, would be if you were not invited to the engagement and [you] say 'you know what, Jake doesn't like me – he didn't invite me. I wonder what he's got against me.'"

(Sanjay)

"...this is a statement of fact and the fact was just conveyed to a fellow worker who said that Jake is really looking happy and a reason was given why he was looking happy... It's good news yeah. It's not detrimental to anybody's position or standing or person."

(Albert)

Evelyn, Samson, Lindsey and Donovan regarded case study number 4 as 'slight gossip'. It seems as if they viewed it as 'good gossip'.

"Okay, well gossip is gossip at the end of the day, but I think 4 is more like news. Because this worker is happy and smiling and then somebody remarks that oh, his daughter just got engaged. So I suppose maybe because...it's about a good thing, that maybe it's not so bad that it's gossip. But okay...its least."

(Evelyn)

"You see, it's not so harmful...this is good news."

(Samson)

"The last one and least important is number 4. I think it's something exciting and happy, so the gossip is something good...you know it's not really a gossip; it's about sharing ...someone's happiness. Your daughter getting engaged; I think everyone talks about it – getting married or having a baby. Yeah. Good gossip...it can be a constructive gossip,

depending on...how people see it and what they're discussing around it. But it can be a happy type of gossip also." (Lindsey)

Case study number 8 was regarded by half of the respondents as '**very much gossip**'. The case study reads as follows:

8 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.

Donovan, Amina, Andrea and Albert stated that card number 8 is 'very much gossip'. All of them concurred that the information was personal and had nothing to do with anyone else.

"Okay these were really where they touched on people's...personal lives...although he's having an affair with somebody else, I think that was not the place to go and speak about it...amongst those other people." (Donovan)

"While everyone's having tea he mentions it to everybody... I think that's gossip. If somebody's having – the manager's having – an affair, that's their business; unless they're interfering with the work. But...his concern is not them affecting...because he saw them kissing and he mentions it to all of the people at tea. That's gossip." (Amina)

"Because they are having an affair and their affair is no one's business... Because who says...it's not an innocent kiss?" (Andrea)

"Number eight is out – its also total gossip – because you don't talk about other people's private lives and affairs. If there is a policy in the company prohibiting that, then you go through the normal channels in sorting that out... Don't discuss it over tea." (Albert)

Evelyn emphasised how the disclosure in card number 8 was unnecessary and would ultimately create a scandal. She regarded the card as ‘quite a bit of gossip’:

“I mean the boss is having an affair with the new manager and somebody saw them kissing, and then they just find a way of including it when people are talking about Days of our Lives. So I think that’s just really gossip there... I mean people are talking about Days of our Lives – they didn’t have to come and talk about the boss and what’s happening in his life...because that’s just gonna create a scandal and everyone in the whole office is gonna be about that.”

Samson viewed the card quite differently and stated that, as a manager, this behaviour is especially inappropriate. He questioned how the manager would deal with work issues when it comes to his lover and what message he was sending to his subordinates. Therefore he regarded card number 8 as ‘quite a bit of gossip’:

“Although this one...that is why I just take it as serious, but not so [serious]. Because this is an affair, but its serious due to the fact that if he’s a boss – the issue of a boss and a new manager – that is not healthy conduct. Because should this thing happen [between the] boss and the new manager... Because you’re not going to be able to deal with issues. Because if they are two lovers, how are you going to control this person? That is a problem. And the message that you send as a manager; if you do such things, what about the people who are subordinates to you?”

With regard to **case study number 9**, half the respondents viewed the card as ‘**quite a bit of gossip**’. None of the respondents regarded this card as ‘not gossip’. The card reads as follows:

9 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.

Lindsey, Donovan, Amina and Andrea viewed card number 9 as 'quite a bit of gossip'. Their reasons for stating this varied. Anima stated that disclosure was not necessary and that the correct channels had to be followed to deal with the issue. Andrea questioned whether the statement could be confirmed and hence implied that it was hearsay.

"Because if she knew that, why tell people around the coffee table? You know around coffee. I mean, if she knew that, then she should take that up on her own. You know follow the avenues; to say you know why this person got...it's not the right way the person got the job. But don't mention it to everybody at coffee. That's gossip – I mean, that's petty gossip." (Amina)

"Here she heard that her boss has a relationship – but can anyone confirm it and say that it is the truth?" (Andrea)

According to Samson, the gossip was not that harmful as it only affected Jan. He hence regarded it as only 'slight gossip':

"Yeah, so although when you check [it] is not so harmful when coming to the issue. Okay it is not correct, but I'm just saying if we check the issue of distraction and whatever – at least it only affects Jan, but not the rest of the group..."

In contrast to Samson and the other respondents, Sanjay and Albert viewed card number 9 as ‘very much gossip’. Their reasons for this seemed to differ, however. Sanjay stated that the person in the case study used the information at his disposal for his own self-interest, while Albert emphasised that Jan cannot prove her statement.

“You see here Jan is disappointed and angry. Now he’s already in the state of mind where he’s unhappy... So I think this is more gossip, because you have a person who’s in a different state of mind who now has linked up with people who identify with her situation...so she uses that information to actually get their approval. Now that information would obviously then be used by them, I think; because this actually seems more gossip than anything else.” (Sanjay)

“No, she can’t substantiate this. [This] is also gossip, because there is no proof of that – it might be something else.” (Albert)

Case study number 11 was regarded by half of the participants as ‘**not gossip**’. The case study reads as follows:

11 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 percent. When Alex returns to his desk he shares the information with the other administration officers.

Amina, Sanjay, Andrea and Albert stated that card number 11 is ‘not gossip’. Their reasons for stating this differed. Amina emphasised that the document was not confidential and it was just lying there. Sanjay indicated that factual information was being conveyed. Andrea did not regard the card as gossip because if a person does not want the information to be known by everyone, he or she should not leave it lying around.

“It’s something that he saw and he felt that his colleagues should know... You know it affects all the employees, so it’s...I don’t think it’s a gossip...if it was...lying there then it’s not like something that was confidential. It just said it caught his eye and he... just told the others.” (Amina)

“Number 11 is my least... because I mean that’s factual, you know? He saw a document there stipulating that ‘...due to a loss incurred by the company, the employee pension funds will be decrease by 35 percent...’...I don’t think that’s gossip.” (Sanjay)

“...if there’s a paper lying around here...if you don’t want information to be made public, you shouldn’t leave it lying around.” (Andrea)

Evelyn and Lindsey said that card number 11 was very serious and hence ‘very much gossip’. This is due to the fact that it could have a severe impact on people’s lives. Evelyn added that there was not even any certainty whether it was true, whereas Lindsey emphasised that the information was communicated prematurely:

“I mean, these are things that are quite important – things that can make or break people’s lives. I mean, one of them is the fact that 35 percent of the employee pension fund could be decreased... And this person just comes and talks about it. They have no idea if maybe that was a typo or if, you know, this is really something that is gonna happen or what. But they’re coming and telling people something...they don’t have hard facts for. Yes it might be on a piece of paper, but it could be [for] a good reason and then somebody could have a heart attack – somebody whose pensioning next year and you know, they’ve got plans...it’s just not something that you just gossip about like that.” (Evelyn)

“...information has not been communicated, but he’s already gone and spread it around the office. It’s also something that...can bring the morale quite down in the office. Yeah. I would say so and some can be fired...” (Lindsey)

Samson also regarded card 11 as ‘very much gossip’, but because it was sensitive and confidential and the person had no right to spread the information:

“...this is sensitive information. If you come and tell me I believe [with] this information you need to sit down [and] get an experienced person so that he can counsel this people prior [to] getting the information... No, that was confidential information and...he was not entitled to pass the information.”

4.6.2 Additional findings of interest

Interesting and inconclusive findings will be discussed in this section.

Case study number 2 got **mixed responses** from the respondents. The case study reads as follows:

2 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.

Samson, Lindsey and Andrea regarded this card as ‘very much gossip’ and gave different reasons for regarding it this way. Samson and Andrea regarded case study number 2 as sensitive and confidential information, whereas Lindsey regarded it as information that could have a severe impact on the lives of those who hear about it.

“John is not reliable because this is confidential information between him and his manager; the way I understood it. And he was not supposed to disclose...” (Samson)

“Cause for example where retrenchment, [number 2] you know, people can lose their jobs. So it’s something very serious – it’s not just any type of gossip that you want people to gossip about.” (Lindsey)

“Because when you are supposed to keep a secret, you should keep it and not then tell everyone what the boss told you...because if his boss wanted him to tell anyone else he would’ve said to tell Piet and Klaas as well. But it was supposed to remain confidential.” (Andrea)

Donovan and Amina regarded case study number 2 as ‘slight gossip’, for different reasons. Donovan stated that it was natural for people to talk about things that might have an impact on their jobs and their comfort levels, while Amina said that it was because she saw the information that was shared as confidential:

“...people’s job was in jeopardy...these people were more concerned about their own comfort – their own safety zone – because they could lose their job. And that is the reason why I grouped this in the least gossip.” (Donovan)

“...if my boss tells me it’s confidential, I wouldn’t mention it at the canteen...an ideal gossip place now. You know? Where he’s mentioning it to everybody, and then he’s gonna alert everybody. Because with things like the sensitive issues of retrenchment, I don’t think that should be done. You know, in a canteen. And if the manager told you its confidential...maybe it could change you know in the interim; now he mentions it to all the colleagues...whatever he heard, yeah. That is, you know, like it’s not gossip – it’s actually divulging something that’s confidential...yeah it will be...a mild form of gossip – because he’s saying something that he’s not supposed to be saying in anyway.” (Amina)

Sanjay did not regard case study number 2 as gossip, because he stated that it simply was a rumour and not gossip:

“Yeah I think okay he said [that] retrenchment was inevitable...he did not say [that] retrenchment is definite...so I think it’s just a rumour that John has just told his friend you know what, I think that...there may possibly be retrenchments. Gossip would be you know what, we’re not going to get paid I think because this man stole the money or whatever the case may be...or he spent the money on things that he’s not supposed to purchase. And now he’s sitting with a problem, because now we don’t have sufficient budget...to run the operations in the organisation. That would be gossip.”

Case study number 3 got **different responses** from the respondents. The case study reads as follows:

3 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’.

Samson stated that case study number 3 is ‘very much gossip’, because the people were discussing another person behind his back:

“...this is purely gossip, because listen here ‘Brett I would appreciate it if in future you keep quiet about my personal life instead of sharing it with the entire office’. Meaning he was talking behind his back; so that is gossip.”

Lindsey explained that seeing that the gossip brought the gossipee’s morale down (or had the potential to bring the gossipee’s morale down) it can be regarded as ‘quite a bit of gossip’:

“And then also where the manager or someone was telling this lady about not sharing her private information in the office; I think it can also bring her morale down, because she’s confiding in people and they’re telling...stories.”

According to Sanjay, case study number 3 is ‘not gossip’, because the person meant well:

“I don’t think...he intended it in a bad way...he’s just trying to be...helpful...for lack of a better word...or sympathetic... So I don’t think... it has any malicious intent.”

Albert did not regard case study number 3 as gossip, because the person just answered somebody’s question:

“...the boss is [a] little bit unfair by saying that ‘I’ll appreciate it if in future you keep quiet about my personal life instead of sharing it with the entire office’. I don’t see it as gossip either; it’s just a matter of also giving information. Because somebody asked for it...”

Case study number 5 was **ranked differently** by the respondents. The card reads as follows:

5 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’.

Samson regarded this case study as ‘very much gossip’, as he saw the information that was conveyed as confidential and that the couple did not ask him to disclose it:

“...I believe that this was confidential information between two people and this person is the third party and...he just acted...and this people never asked him [to]...this couple never asked him to do that...that is why I’m saying he is inquisitive, which I believe is not healthy. Personal issues – he just ended up telling everybody about this and that is not healthy in a work situation.”

With regard to case study number 5, Evelyn did not think the disclosure was necessary and regarded it as bad news. Hence she said it represented ‘quite a bit of gossip’:

“...people are talking about a colleague’s daughter who got into varsity and then somebody else just finds a way of talking about someone else whose daughter didn’t get into varsity and they include it into the conversation. And that’s quite bad news for the other person, because they don’t want to talk about it. Because their daughter is not going to university and they wanted them to go there; so there’s no reason for that person to talk about that. It’s just to... I don’t know what’s the reason is actually. Why would someone say that?”

Albert stated that card number 5 was ‘slight gossip’, because it was a private conversation in which the person should not have gotten involved:

“This has got nothing to do...with Sam at all. It’s a private...conversation...she shouldn’t have gotten involved in either.”

Amina did not regard case study number 5 as serious gossip and hence said that it was ‘slight gossip’ because the information she conveyed was overheard and none of the person’s business:

“I don’t think its gossip. It’s somebody that overheard... Maybe she’s concerned...but even if it’s gossip, I think it’s very mild.... Okay maybe it’s not that person’s business ...because the person overheard Lyn talk to her husband... I don’t perceive this as very, very serious gossip no...”

A bit later on in the exercise, Amina added the following in terms of card number 5:

“...I don’t think she would also like to know that you know and mentioned it to everybody else that her daughter was not accepted at university. As much as it’s a fact; but it’s a personal issue... You know, it’s someone’s daughter...”

Sanjay did not regard case study number 5 as gossip, because he stated that the person was just passing information on to someone else:

“...this is not gossip. I mean...if you know somebody is not academically performing and you’re privy to the information...and you know that they didn’t get in...They didn’t get in so I mean it’s not a big deal... it’s not as if saying that you know what, she didn’t get in because she’s lazy and you know maybe go on and on. He said ‘no unfortunately Mary did not get in’ ... He’s just...passing the information.”

Case study number 6 was **viewed very differently** by the respondents. The case study reads as follows:

6 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.

Case study number 6 was regarded by Evelyn and Albert as ‘very much gossip’, seeing that the person relied on a source and was not certain about the facts:

“...it’s gossip. But because the person has heard from a reliable source, they haven’t seen [and] they haven’t got facts as well that truly this has happened. They haven’t gone in and counted the money and seen that money is short or not.” (Evelyn)

“Gossip – serious gossip-creating...have you got facts? You heard from a reliable source – which reliable source? And can you substantiate what you’ve heard? And you mention it to somebody else? Detrimental to the other person, because now you’re creating a sort of a situation whereby everybody thinks that this person is a crook.” (Albert)

Lindsey regarded number 6 as ‘very much gossip’ because she stated that it was serious accusations that could cause someone to lose his or her job:

“Yeah, someone else can be dismissed in this scenario, for example... So it’s not anything that you can just talk about.”

Sanjay and Amina did not regard card number 6 as gossip. According to Amina, this person meant well and was only concerned that an innocent person would get fired and hence mentioned what he or she had heard to the innocent party. Sanjay also thought that the person was concerned and wanted to alert someone.

“Okay here it’s actually a concern, because if one person is doing it then both managers are going to get dismissed. I don’t think its gossip as such. It’s that somebody knows, you know, it’s not the other one. So he mentions this. So I don’t think its gossip as such. It’s more the concern that an innocent person is gonna get dismissed. But that to me is not gossip.” (Amina)

“Okay, this could be more a concern... I think that’s more alerting somebody that you know what, this is what’s happening. I don’t think its gossip. Gossip would be in this case not going to Joan, but to somebody else and say you know what, Joan stole this money. To me that would be gossip.” (Sanjay)

Case study number 7 got **different responses** from the respondents. The case study reads as follows:

7 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.

Evelyn stated that number 7 is 'very much gossip', seeing that the person specifically asked the other person not to talk about her divorce with others. Samson also regarded it as 'very much gossip', because according to him the person was not supposed to divulge the confidential, sensitive information to others. Note how in both instances the respondents state how much divorce can affect a person personally and hence what a serious matter it is:

"And then also number 7; somebody's going through a divorce and the person has specifically asked that they don't talk about it to anyone. Because I mean divorce is something that's also quite personal...very close to people. I mean, it can cause people to have mental and emotional breakdowns." (Evelyn)

"If I'm at the workplace [and] I go to my manager and explain to him my problem; it's supposed to be between me and him and he is not supposed to disclose that information...as a manager you need to ensure that confidentiality it's very, very important. So that is why I view it that way, because he disclosed confidential information to the other people. Divorce is a sensitive issue – it affects a person's personality." (Samson)

Lindsey regarded card number 7 as 'quite a bit of gossip', seeing that she proposed that, if the secretary were to find out that others were speaking about her, her morale would go down:

“...she would feel, you know, everyone is talking about her. So her morale will be low.”

Andrea also said that number 7 was ‘quite a bit of gossip’. She stated that it was bound to come out sooner or later and that it was not speculation, but the truth:

“...everyone will find out that they are going to divorce...that they are divorced or whatever. So it’s not a case of everyone wondering what is going to happen; whether they are going to divorce or not...sooner or later it will come out.”

Amina stated that card number 7 was ‘not gossip’. Her reason for stating this was that the person was just concerned:

“...it’s not really gossip. Because he’s actually worried about her messy divorce and that her performance is lacking due to that pending divorce... He’s actually concerned...”

Case study number 10 was **perceived differently** by the respondents. The case study reads as follows:

10 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.

Samson, Lindsey and Albert agreed that case study 10 was ‘very much gossip’, seeing that Sarah had no proof and was hence not certain of the facts. Sarah therefore was making assumptions. Lindsey also highlighted that such gossiping could lead to people losing their jobs or cause the morale of the staff to decrease:

“That is fabrication as I’ve mentioned. He was not sure about this. He just saw a person; he did not see that happening, but he ended up...as I told you that people will take information – incorrect information they take it – and this is dangerous.” (Samson)

“I think there’s a more serious case, because you’re making assumptions... So people can lose their jobs...if it’s the truth. Yeah. So if it’s not the truth...it’s also not quite good to the staff morale.” (Lindsey)

“That’s also gossip. That’s misinterpreting a situation, you’ve got no proof. Nothing was substantiated so I would say its gossip. To a certain extent trying to get the focus off me onto somebody else and put him in a bad light... I’m incompetent of doing things and I think this is what our situation is.” (Albert)

Andrea regarded number 10 as ‘quite a bit of gossip’ and questioned the merits of the person making the statement:

“Can they say Sarah took the makeup? Because did anyone see her do it? So they are making their own assumptions.”

Both Sanjay and Amina did not regard card number 10 as gossip. They said the person was only making a statement:

“...she’s actually saying that because she saw him – this Jack – packing containers, she says that he could be responsible for them. She’s actually making a statement. It’s not gossip... it’s just that she’s making a statement; but she must have evidence to prove that he is the person that’s responsible for the missing stock.” (Amina)

“...she tells the supervisor that he may be responsible – he’s helping the supervisor to investigate. She’s not... spreading any rumours or anything like that or gossiping about it. I mean, she just basically saw what was happening. You know, there again it’s up to the supervisor.” (Sanjay)

4.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the themes that were elicited during the data analysis were explored. The chapter started off with a discussion of the lessons learnt from the pilot study, followed by an investigation of the manner in which office gossip was conceptualised by the respondents. This was followed by a comprehensive discussion of the participants' understanding of office gossip, which included numerous subthemes. Thereafter, the understanding of gossip in relation to the media and language barriers was looked at. Lastly, the results of the card-sorting exercise were discussed, which included an exploration of where the line is drawn between healthy communication and malicious gossip. In the chapter that follows, the main findings of this study will be compared with the available literature on the subject matter.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The findings discussed in Chapter 4 illustrate the vast array of perceptions of office gossip. The participants expressed very strong opinions on the subject matter; some of these overlapped with those of other respondents, and some were unique and differed from the others. In order to make sense of the findings in terms of the existing literature on office gossip, this chapter aims to illustrate where the findings support the literature and where the findings differ from previous research studies.

When the interviews were held I focussed on questions related directly to the research questions, and also added some additional questions for interest's sake. This chapter focuses on the findings that were directly related to the research questions and how these linked with the literature discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. An illustration is provided in Figure 5.1 of how the themes relate to the research questions. As demonstrated in Figure 5.1, some research questions are linked to more than one theme. This therefore implies that, in some instances, more than one theme answered a single question.

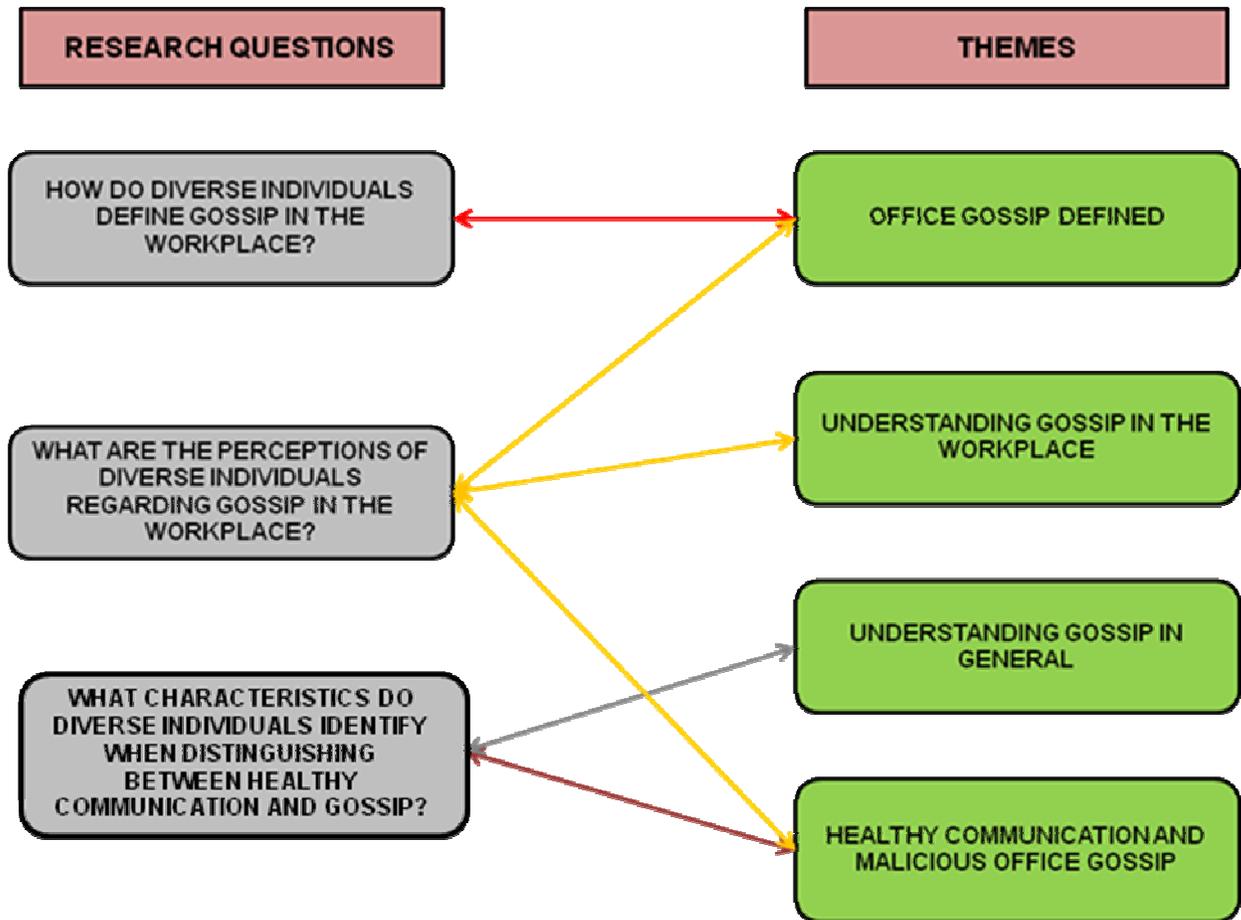


Figure 5.1. The relationships between the research questions and the identified themes.

5.2 OFFICE GOSSIP DEFINED

The theme ‘office gossip defined’ relates to the respondents’ personal definitions of gossip in the workplace. This theme will be explored in terms of the relevant literature.

The majority of respondents defined office gossip as a discussion of any topic that involves the spreading of false or truthful information. Personal information about another individual of no relevance to the gossiper might be discussed behind his or her back, or things that are happening in the work environment could be talked about. The disclosure of information in the workplace leads to undesirable consequences, such as a negative impact on the organisation, a company with a tarnished reputation, segregation of and conflict among the workforce, a negative impact on an employee’s career or

position and negative feelings experienced by the gossipee as a result of the gossiping. This definition did not overlap directly with any other definition in the literature – especially definitions that highlighted the evaluative and critical nature of office gossip or gossip in general. The definition derived from the findings of this study overlapped with the definition by De Gouveia et al. (2005) in terms of the following aspects: people spread information about a situation or about a person behind their back and the definition arising from this study concurs with the definition by De Gouveia et al. (2005), that the gossip information is not for public consumption and leads to undesirable consequences. In contrast with the definition by De Gouveia et al. (2005), this study found that the disclosure of information in the workplace leads to different undesirable consequences and that the subject of office gossip can be anything. It is important to note that the study by De Gouveia et al. (2005) was also conducted in a South African context.

For the remainder of this section, elements of the definition will be explored in terms of other related literature.

The widely held belief among the participants was that gossip can be about anything. This finding supported the research finding of De Backer (2005), who indicated that gossip is not only about the infringement of societal norms, but also about any other topic. Other literature that concurred directly with this finding was not found.

Most of the respondents stated that office gossip often involves the discussion of another person. The literature supports this finding and emphasises that other people are often the subject of gossip conversations. De Gouveia et al. (2005) indicated that “classic gossip” can involve gossip that is personal in nature. Researchers have also indicated that gossip often involves what others do (Bromley, 1993, as cited in De Backer, 2005; Hannerz, 1967), and criticises and evaluates the actions of others (Holland, 1996; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). In addition, Eggins and Slade (1997, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005) have stated that, during a gossip conversation, the gossipers’ attention is drawn to the third party – namely the party who will serve as the target of the

gossip. The theory developed by De Backer (2005), known as “The classification of gossip according to a functional design”, is also relevant in terms of this finding. De Backer (2005) proposed that gossip can be divided into Strategy Learning Gossip (SLG) and Reputation Gossip (RG). Strategy Learning Gossip, which refers to behavioural information playing a central role in the gossip and not the gossipee per se, did not seem to be prevalent in the findings of my study, but Reputation Gossip seemed to be mentioned by the respondents. De Backer (2005) asserted that Reputation Gossip applies if the gossipee is central in the gossip discussion, and that the behaviour or attributes of the gossipee cannot be separated from the gossipee. This gossip category provides those involved in the gossip discussion with information about a particular person(s).

The majority of the participants stated that office gossip could revolve around things happening in the workplace. This finding was not generally supported by the literature, since office gossip more often seems to revolve around a gossipee rather than an occurrence in the workplace. The abovementioned finding is in contrast with some of the literature, which emphasises that gossip always centres around people. Brennan (2009) stated that gossipers and a gossipee(s) are needed for gossip to take place successfully. De Gouveia et al. (2005), however, support the finding that gossip can involve the discussion of work-related aspects.

Most of the respondents stated that gossip often takes place behind the gossipee's back. This finding was also reported in the literature. Researchers who supported this view of gossip included Besnier (1989), Eder and Enke (1991), Flannery (1934), Gelles (1989), Hannerz (1967), Kurland and Pelled (2000) and Sabini and Silver (1982, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004).

5.3 UNDERSTANDING GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

The theme 'understanding gossip in the workplace' includes the nature of and participants in office gossip, the reasons why people gossip, the impact of gossip on the organisation and the consequences of office gossip for individuals, all of which will be discussed in this section in terms of the literature. The respondents' exposure to gossip in the workplace and their perceptions of how office gossip can be dealt with were discussed for the sake of interest and hence are not explored further in this chapter.

5.3.1 Participants in office gossip

Generally, the respondents in my study agreed that both men and women of all races participate in office gossip. In addition, mixed responses were obtained regarding the age group of people who are involved in office gossip. These findings will be discussed in this section in terms of previous literature studies.

My study found that both men and women are involved in gossip. This finding was accurate in terms of most of the literature available on the topic. My finding supports the research by Tebbutt (1995), who concluded that, although deeds have historically been linked to men and words to women, there is no evidence supporting the wide-spread perception that women engage in gossip more often. Other researchers have also established that both men and women utilise most of their time in conversation to gossip (Arbor, 1995; Brennan, 2009; Fox, 2001; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Van der Merwe, 2005).

The majority of the respondents gave mixed responses regarding the age groups of people who typically engage in gossip – half the respondents believed that people from all age groups gossip, whereas the other half believed that specific age groups can be linked to gossiping behaviour. The literature also reported mixed results regarding the age groups involved in gossip. Arbor (1995), Fox (2001), Michelson and Mouly (2000) and Van der Merwe (2005) stated that research studies have found that gossip

behaviour is prevalent in all age groups. However, a handful of researchers have concluded that, as age progresses into adulthood, women appear to spend more time gossiping (Levin & Arluke, 1985; Nevo & Nevo, 1993). Therefore, some studies have found a greater propensity to gossip among adult women. De Backer (2005) found that the perceptions of 300 participants from different age groups and of different sexes about the difference between men and women regarding gossip were diverse in terms of their age groups.

5.3.2 The nature of office gossip

According to most of the participants office gossip has an escalating character; is based on assumptions, one side of a story, fabrication of information and speculation; is subjective and based on interpretations and perceptions; is a discreet activity; and the content of discussion differs between men and women. These elements, which emphasise the nature of office gossip, will be explored in this section in terms of the relevant literature.

In general, the respondents implied that office gossip has an escalating character. The literature did not mention this aspect of office gossip and therefore this finding is not supported by other research findings.

The majority of the respondents indicated that office gossip was based on assumptions, one side of a story, fabrication of information and speculation. This finding was supported by the literature, as discussed henceforth. Matthews (2007) stated that partly false or imprecise information is distributed through office gossip. This form of gossip was referred to by Van der Merwe (2005) as “classic gossip”, during which false rumours or negative facts about a third party’s character, appearance or behaviour are spread behind the person’s back. In support of the abovementioned finding of this study, Bruno (n.d.) emphasised that gossip often does not include correct or essential information, whereas Nair (1989) has stated that the content of gossip usually includes only part of the story. The view of the respondents in this study hence supported this view of gossip

as often including half-truths. Information and speculation are conveyed during the behavioural confirmation phase of a gossip discussion (Eggins & Slade, 1997, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005); the speculative nature of gossip was also emphasised in the present study's findings. Researchers have proposed that gossip is a tool that can be used for the manipulation of the views of others (Abrahams, 1970; Bleek, 1976; Cox, 1970; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Paine, 1967; Sommerfeld et al., 2007), an aspect that was highlighted by this study's respondents when they emphasised that information can be fabricated when people gossip.

Most of the participants agreed that office gossip is a discreet activity and that it accordingly takes place between gossipers in a private setting. This finding supports statements made by Abrahams (1970), Hannerz (1967), Rosnow (2001, as cited in Foster, 2004), Spacks (1982) and Yerkovich (1977), namely that context plays an important role in determining whether gossip is taking place or not. This finding in the current study supports Harrington and Bielby (1995), who said that the context in which gossiping takes place is usually both intimate and private in nature.

A widely held perception among the participants was that gossip is subjective and based on interpretations and perceptions. This finding was not discussed in other research studies.

The majority of the respondents believed that men and women talk about different things. Men seem to talk more about factual information, whereas women talk more about personal and false information. Previous research studies have also found that men and women talk about different things – although what they talk about is still under debate. Earlier research studies discussed by Tebbutt (1995) also emphasised that women talk about “people”. The respondents in my study did not however state that women talk about “feelings”, as reported by Tebbutt (1995). In addition, some aspects of the studies conducted by De Backer (2005) and the Social Issues Research Centre (2007) were supported, seeing that the present study also concludes that men talk about facts and women talk about “others”. However, men's talk as being more self-centred

and women's talk as being focused on emotions was not specifically emphasised by the majority of the respondents. An aspect not regularly highlighted in previous research findings was that the participants claimed that women more readily spread false information when compared to men. This finding supported the finding of De Backer (2005), who stated that most of her research respondents, when asked about the intentions of men and women when they gossip, concurred that female gossip seems to be more harmful in nature than male gossip. The participants seemed to believe that female gossip is grounded on jealousy and accordingly hurtful, whereas male gossip is focussed more on emphasising their social knowledge.

5.3.3 The reasons why people gossip

The widely held perception among the participants was that people gossip because it provides them comfort and acceptance; because gossiping is in some people's nature; to get the focus off the gossipers and/or put others in a negative light; to share information and express feelings; and due to the enjoyment gossiping provides. The two general perspectives of gossip, known as the functionalist and transactionalist perspectives (Handelman, 1973), seem to be relevant in terms of the reasons why people become involved in gossip according to the respondents of this study. Handelman (1973) indicated that, from the functionalist perspective, the aim of gossip research is to explore the underlying functions of gossip among various social entities. From the transactionalist perspective, gossip is used as a tactic to impress others or to gather or spread information for personal gain. The findings of this study emphasise the transactionalist nature of gossip and not the functionalist perspective. Therefore, individualistic motives for gossiping, as opposed to the collective functions of gossip, were stressed by the respondents.

My study concluded that people gossip because it provides them with comfort and acceptance. This particular finding was not reported in the literature, although the membership, intimacy and bonding that gossiping provides were stressed. Research discussed by Tebbutt (1995) highlighted that people who gossip do not merely seek to

convey a message, but also to develop relationships and trust and to express loyalty to the participants. In addition, the research by Baumeister et al. (2004) found that gossipers engage in gossip to bond with those gossiped with. Similarly, Holland (1996), Kellaway (2000), Noon and Delbridge (1993) and Yerkovich (1977) have emphasised that office gossip enhances interaction, intimacy, group cohesion and social bonds between those involved in the gossip. In other words, it builds intimacy and friendships among those involved in the gossip (Emler, 1990; Stirling, 1956) as a result of the sharing of information that is confidential in nature (Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989). Researchers have proposed that gossip serves as a hallmark of membership through the establishment of group norms (Dunbar, 2004; Eckert, 1990; Loudon, 1961; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Stirling, 1956; Tebbutt, 1995).

From the results of this research it can be concluded that the respondents believed that some people gossip because it is in their nature. Numerous other researchers have also reported this possibility – some researchers have proposed that gossip is in some people's nature, whereas other researchers have stated that gossip is part of human nature. Dunbar (1993, 2004) developed the gossip-as-grooming theory, which emphasises that gossip is an innate human instinct. Nevo et al. (1994, as cited in Wert & Salovey, 2004) also emphasised the instinctive nature of gossip when they indicated that it is in some people's nature to discuss others. Other researchers have stressed that gossip is an important part of human nature and an activity that all humans engage in (Dunbar, 1993; Gluckman, 1963; Haviland, 1977; Levin & Arluke, 1985).

This study found that people gossip because it enables them to share information and to express their feelings. Other research studies have also found that gossip enables individuals to share information and express their feelings. Researchers have proposed that gossip is an instrument used to exchange information with another person(s) (Kellaway, 2000; Stirling, 1956; Van der Merwe, 2005). According to Scott and Mitchell (1976, as cited in Robbins, 2005), four functions can be achieved through organisational communication: (1) controlling the behaviour of employees; (2) motivating; (3) enabling emotional expression – by allowing employees to share their feelings and to interact with

others; and (4) facilitating decision making – through the provision of information and hence allowing employees to consider different alternatives when making decisions. With regard to the current study, point (3) and (4) are supported by the finding that people gossip because it facilitates the sharing of information and the expression of feelings. In terms of the abovementioned finding of this study, namely that gossip enables gossipers to express their feelings, researchers have stressed that gossip allows the gossipers to vent his or her frustrations (Holland, 1996; Kellaway, 2000).

My study revealed that people gossip because they want to get the focus off themselves and/or to put others in a negative light. The literature describes gossip as portraying others in a negative light and hampering the reputation of the gossipee. Therefore, only part of this study's findings – gossiping to put others in a negative light – has been specifically documented in previous research studies. This research finding could be influenced by the historically negative connotation attached to gossip (Besnier, 1989; Handelman, 1973; Holland, 1996; Ramos, 2000). According to dated literature, gossiping is used solely for personal gain and to build the gossipers' own status or destroy the status of others (Gelles, 1989; Handelman, 1973). Van der Merwe (2005) indicated that, when gossipers engage in "classic gossip", they tenaciously speak ill of and spread false rumours or negative facts about a third party. The abovementioned finding supports the theory of De Backer (2005) where it emphasises Reputation Gossip, seeing that it also highlights that people gossip to manipulate the gossipee's reputation. Dunbar (2004) stated that gossip can enhance the gossipers' reputations and manipulate information and others for the gossipers' own benefit. This was also found in my study, seeing that gossiping to redirect the focus from the gossipers and/or to hamper someone else's reputation could lead to the gossipers' reputation being strengthened and to the manipulation of information and others to achieve hidden personal agendas. According to Eggins and Slade (1997, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2005), the third party is mostly portrayed in a negative light during the behavioural confirmation phase of any gossip discussion.

The respondents in this study stated that people gossip because they enjoy gossiping. This is supported in the literature, where researchers have emphasised that gossip is utilised for entertainment and recreational purposes because it grasps the attention and interest of those participating (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, as cited in Foster, 2004; Besnier, 1989; Gelles, 1989; Gilmore, 1978; Rosnow, 1977; Spacks, 1982; Stirling, 1956). Also, gossip has been reported to stimulate employees (Roy, 1958), and also to facilitate tension and stress relief (Holland, 1996; Kellaway, 2000).

5.3.4 The impact of gossip on an organisation

The majority of the respondents stated that office gossip can have a negative impact on an organisation; that it can tarnish the reputation of a company; and that it can cause segregation of and conflict among the workforce. In this section these findings will be discussed in terms of the relevant literature.

The widespread perception among the participants was that office gossip could have a negative impact on an organisation. De Gouveia et al. (2005) indicated that the disclosure of harmful information in the workplace could lead to various detrimental consequences. This aspect has also been highlighted by Akande and Odewale (1994), Armour (2007), Bruce and Bruce (1997), Dunn (2002), Gelles (1989), Holland (1996), Hughes (2006), Joyce (2002), Matthews (2007), Michelson & Mouly (2004), Nicholson (2005), Picarda (2008), Schultz (1994) and Sulkowicz (2007).

Most of the respondents agreed that gossip can cause segregation of and conflict among the workforce. The literature reported that segregation among employees can be a negative outcome of office gossip, whereas no literature was found emphasising that office gossip can cause conflict in the workplace. Segregation among the workforce is a potential outcome of malicious gossip, according to De Gouveia et al. (2005). Holland (1996) also emphasised that office gossip could lead to alienation of the gossipee from the "in-group". The social function of gossip, highlighted by Gelles (1989), emphasises that gossip can be detrimental in the workplace, as those who do not belong to the "in-

group” will be alienated and the subject of discussion by others. The definition of office gossip by Burke (2004, p. 49), as a “...method that retains both inclusion and exclusion of people in the organisation and elsewhere...”, also emphasises the segregation caused by gossip in the workplace.

5.3.5 The consequences of office gossip for individuals

In general, the participants were in agreement that office gossip can have an impact on a person’s career or position and that the gossipee can experience negative feelings as a result of the gossip being spread around in the workplace.

Most of the respondents indicated that office gossip can have a negative impact on a person’s career or position at work – such as undermining a person’s authority, causing discomfort at work, leading to resignation, a lack of rewards and damage to careers. Some literature sources support this finding. Holland (1996) proposed the same when he stated that office gossip could be detrimental to the job security of the employee under discussion. This finding also concurs with the proposed model of gossip and power developed by Kurland and Pelled (2000), where they suggest that negative gossip may lead to increased coercive power over the gossipee as the information spread around could be detrimental to the career and/or reputation of the employee under discussion. Tebbutt (1995) and De Gouveia et al. (2005) have indicated that gossip could lead to the undermining of individuals, groups and organisations. Should an organisation suffer severe breakdown, the employees’ anxiety over losing their jobs will be aggravated through gossip (Matthews, 2007). De Gouveia et al. (2005) stated that gossip could lead to increased staff turnover and therefore a loss in productive employees. Lastly, according to Bruce and Bruce (1997), office gossip can harm a worker economically.

The majority of the participants agreed that, due to the gossip being spread around at his or her expense, the gossipee could experience negative feelings – such as demoralisation, distrust, isolation, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence,

disappointment, hurt and anger. Holland (1996) indicated that office gossip could have a negative impact on relationships and trust among employees. In addition, office gossip could lead to the alienation of the gossipee from the “in-group” (Gelles, 1989; Holland, 1996). Tebbutt (1995) stated that office gossip could result in the victimisation of the gossipee, whereas De Gouveia et al. (2005) proposed that gossip could bring about a decrease in employee morale and a breakdown of trust. The gossipee could experience increased job stress and anxiety due to people gossiping about him or her (Joyce, 2002).

5.4 DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN HEALTHY COMMUNICATION AND GOSSIP

The theme ‘understanding gossip in general’ is closely linked to the theme ‘healthy communication and malicious office gossip’, as both of these themes look at the characteristics with which a line can be drawn between healthy communication and gossip. Therefore, these themes will be discussed in the same section because of their similar focus.

5.4.1 Understanding gossip in general

The theme ‘understanding gossip in general’ relates to the participants’ perceptions of gossip as a whole and hence does not focus only on gossip in the workplace, but simply explores the respondents’ perceptions of media in relation to gossip and how the respondents would feel if they were part of a group and the group started speaking in a language they did not understand.

5.4.1.1 Understanding gossip as related to the media

To a certain extent, most of the respondents viewed media as gossip due to its speculative nature – seeing that no one knows whether Hollywood or tabloid information is true or false. One can take this finding one step further and deduce that the

participants regarded information that is speculative in nature as gossip. Very little research was found on this matter. Fox (2001) indicated that the discussion of celebrities, who are not normally part of the social context of the gossipers, is also gossip. The abovementioned finding of this study therefore concurred with the proposal by Fox (2001) that talking about celebrities can also be viewed as gossiping.

5.4.1.2 **Groups conversing in nature language in diverse groups**

The majority of the participants stated that, if they were to stand in a group and the group spoke in an unknown language, they would find it offensive and question whether they were the subject of discussion. Language barriers could thus create the perception among those who do not understand the language that gossiping is taking place. No research was found in the literature regarding language differences and the perception of gossip. Hoijer (1954, as cited in Jandt, 2010, p. 66) said that, "...to the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, so should we expect to find significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding". The abovementioned research results support this statement, seeing that language was also found to create suspicions and barriers to cross-cultural understanding.

5.4.2 **Healthy communication and malicious office gossip**

The theme 'healthy communication and malicious office gossip' relates to the results of the card-sorting exercise. In general it was evident that self-serving gossip was frowned upon by the respondents. This supports the literature, which indicated that self-serving gossip was not regarded as acceptable (Dunbar, 1993, 2004; Wilson et al., 2000). In addition, Holland (1996) and Turner (2007) indicated that one of the ways in which gossip can be distinguished from "healthy" communication is that the motives behind gossip are mainly self-serving in nature to boost the self-image or status of the gossiper.

From the results of this study it was also evident that a distinction can be made between "classic gossip" and "good gossip". From the card-sorting exercise it was evident that

the majority of the respondents regarded the discussion of someone's private life as 'very much gossip' as it is none of the gossipers' business. This finding was supported in the literature. Gossip that leads to negative outcomes and changes the way in which the gossipee is viewed can be termed "negative gossip" (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) or "classic gossip" (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Van der Merwe, 2005). Holland (1996) stated that one of the ways in which gossip can be separated from "healthy" communication is that the information conveyed during gossip is personal in nature. This view was supported by the respondents' reactions during the card-sorting exercise. The view of gossip as violating the privacy of the gossipee was also highlighted by Bok (1983, as cited in Foster, 2004), who stated that gossip was ethically condemned in the 19th century because it was perceived as violating the privacy of others. This highlights that, in terms of the respondents' views, gossip is still perceived in a very similar manner in the 21st century. Gelles (1989) also indicated that gossip is a tool used to publicise information that is or was private or personal in nature. The respondents also shared this perception of gossip as involving someone else's private life.

It was also apparent from the results of the card-sorting exercise that what some of the respondents viewed as 'good gossip' was viewed by others as 'not gossip'. The relevant literature seems to view "good gossip" or "positive gossip" and "not gossip" as one and the same thing. Van der Merwe (2005) highlighted that two forms of gossip – positive and classic gossip – can be distinguished. Half of the respondents preferred "good gossip" and the other half maintained that "not gossip" was more appropriate to describe certain situations. In this regard, "positive gossip", as discussed by Van der Merwe (2005) and Kurland and Pelled (2000), and "good gossip" or "not gossip", as proposed by De Gouveia et al. (2005) apply. "Positive gossip" or "good gossip" is light-hearted, idle and meaningless chit-chat about colleagues, neighbours and other people for interest's sake and to satisfy the participants' curiosity (Van der Merwe, 2005). It leads to positive outcomes (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) that are harmless in nature (De Gouveia et al., 2005); this explains the concept referred to by the respondents as "good gossip".

5.4.2.1 Cultural diversity in perception

Diverse cultures have been researched to demonstrate that gossip ties cultures together by strengthening societal norms and carrying out social control (Abrahams, 1970; Bleek, 1976, Colson, 1953, as cited in De Backer, 2005; Cox, 1970; Gilmore, 1978; Gluckman, 1963, 1968; Handelman, 1973; Haviland, 1977; Percival, 2000). Most of the literature focuses on the manner in which gossiping can establish and enhance a cultural entity, whereas barely any research has been found on the inverse relationship – namely whether cultural differences can influence the perception and definition of gossip. The culture-specific findings of this study have opened up this topic for further, related research. *The findings of the card-sorting exercises illustrate that there are definite cross-cultural differences in perceptions with regard to what is viewed as healthy communication and what is seen as malicious gossip. Although only a small sample was used, with two respondents from each racial group, the cross-cultural differences in perceptions were still regarded as noteworthy.*

Whereas the majority of the respondents viewed **card number 1** as ‘very much gossip’, the two African respondents viewed it as ‘slight gossip’. Most of the participants, which included the white man and woman, the Indian man and woman and the coloured man, stated that the card was ‘very much gossip’ because it involved the discussion of personal information that was none of anyone’s business. The African man and woman viewed the card as ‘slight gossip’, as they stated that the gossipers were just talking and that it was normal to speculate about the lives of others. The coloured man and woman did not report similar views – whereas the coloured man viewed the card as ‘very much gossip’, the coloured woman viewed it as ‘quite a bit of gossip’.

The African male and female and Coloured male and female participants regarded **card number 4** as ‘slight gossip’, whereas the Indian male and female and white male and female respondents regarded it as ‘not gossip’. The reasons why the Indian and white respondents viewed the card as ‘not gossip’ differed. The African and coloured participants viewed the card as ‘slight gossip’ because it was ‘good gossip’.

Once again, whereas most of the participants viewed **card number 9** as ‘quite a bit of gossip’ or ‘very much gossip’, the African male and female respondents viewed it as ‘slight gossip’. Most of the respondents viewed the card as serious gossip for different reasons. The two African participants did not view the gossip in card number 9 as very harmful.

Most of the respondents stated that **card number 11** was ‘not gossip’ or ‘slight gossip’, whereas the two African respondents and the coloured woman regarded it as ‘very much gossip’.

These findings support the literature, in which Samovar and Porter (2001) and Robbins (2005) have proposed a relationship between culture and perception. I therefore suggest that a person’s cultural background could influence his or her perception of what is regarded as office gossip and what is not regarded as office gossip. Where the line is hence drawn between healthy communication and malicious gossip could differ based on a person’s cultural background.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 has illustrated that, despite the fact that some researchers have studied gossip and office gossip, there is still a major gap in the literature regarding the subject. This chapter has provided some interesting new findings and also overlapped with the literature in many aspects. New findings in this study that receive little or no support in the literature are the following: (1) behavioural information does not seem to play as central a role in gossiping as the gossipee; (2) the age group of those who engage in gossip is inconclusive; (3) gossip has an escalating character; (4) gossip is subjective and based on interpretations and perceptions; (5) people gossip because it provides comfort and acceptance and takes the focus off or onto themselves; (6) office gossip can cause conflict in the workplace; (7) Hollywood or tabloid information is gossip; (8) language differences can influence the perception of gossip; (9) what some view as

'good gossip' is viewed by others as not gossip at all; (10) there are cross-cultural differences in the perceptions of what is viewed as healthy communication and what is viewed as malicious gossip.

The new findings will have to be explored by other researchers using bigger samples to determine whether the same results can be found in different contexts.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to explore the differences in the perceptions of diverse individuals from dissimilar racial groups and genders regarding office gossip. The lack of available research on the diverse perceptions of office gossip in South Africa stirred my motivation to undertake research in this direction. This research was also an answer to the call for further research on this subject matter (De Gouveia et al., 2005; Groeschl & Doherty, 2000; Holland, 1996; Michelson & Mouly, 2000). In addition, despite the fact the gender has been the focus of gossip research, comparisons of the perceptions within a South African context have also been found wanting. In Chapter 1 the context of the study was presented and included background to the topic under study, the research problem and research questions, the significance of the study, limitations and delimitations of the study and assumptions on which the study is based. In Chapter 2 the research methodology followed in the study was discussed. In Chapter 3 applicable literature relating to the core concepts discussed in the study was reviewed. In Chapter 4 the results of the analysis of the data was provided, following the principles of content analysis. In Chapter 5 the findings discussed in Chapter 4 were explored in terms of the relevant literature. In Chapter 6 I reflect on the main results of this research in terms of the research questions and also describe the limitations of the study, the practical implications and recommendations for future research. I conclude the chapter with a brief personal reflection of my research journey.

6.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 4 focussed on answering the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The main conclusions of this study in terms of the research questions are described in this section.

The research questions will be given separately, followed by the applicable answer based on the results of the research.

a. How do diverse individuals define gossip within the workplace?

Office gossip can be defined as the discussion of any possible topic and involves the spreading of false or truthful information. Personal information about another individual of no relevance to the gossipers can be discussed behind the gossipee's back, or things that are happening in the work environment can be discussed. The disclosure of information in the workplace leads to undesirable consequences, such as a negative impact on the organisation, a company with a tarnished reputation, segregation of and conflict among the workforce, a negative impact on an employee's career or position, and negative feelings experienced by the gossipee as a result of the gossiping.

b. What are the perceptions of diverse individuals regarding gossip in the workplace?

- **The nature of office gossip:** office gossip has an escalating character; it is based on assumptions, one side of a story, the fabrication of information and speculation; it is subjective and based on interpretations and perceptions; it is a discreet activity; and the content of office gossip differs between men and women.
- **The participants in office gossip:** men and women from all racial groups get involved in office gossip. Inconclusive responses were given regarding the age groups that engage in office gossip.
- **The reasons why people gossip:** gossip provides the gossipers with comfort and acceptance; gossip is in some people's nature; people gossip to get the focus off themselves and/or to put others in a negative light; gossip enables gossipers to share information and to express their feelings; and gossipers enjoy gossiping.

- **The impact of gossip on the organisation:** office gossip can have a negative impact on an organisation; it can tarnish the reputation of an organisation; and it can cause segregation of and conflict among the workforce.
 - **The consequences of office gossip:** (1) office gossip has an impact on a person's career or position – such as undermining a person's authority, causing discomfort at work, and leads to resignation, a lack of reward and damage to careers, and (2) the gossipee experiences negative feelings as a result of office gossip – such as demoralisation, distrust, isolation, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, disappointment, hurt and anger.
- c. **What characteristics do diverse individuals identify when distinguishing between healthy communication and malicious gossip?**
- To a certain extent, Hollywood or tabloid information is gossip due to its speculative nature, seeing that no one knows if the information is true or false. This implies that gossip is speculative in nature. If an individual is standing in a group and the group speaks in an unknown language, the he or she would be offended and wonder whether he or she is the subject of the discussion. Therefore, language barriers could cause the perception of gossip.
 - Self-serving gossip is frowned upon and discussing a person's personal life is gossip, seeing that it is none of anyone's business. Whereas some people might regard something as 'good gossip', others would perceive it as not being gossip at all. A distinction can be made between 'good gossip' and 'classic gossip'.

6.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The research results emphasise the detrimental impact that gossip can have on the workplace and also that the underlying reasons why people gossip can be more self-serving than meets the eye. In no way have I tried to imply that office gossip should be entirely banned from the workplace. I have, however, reiterated that malicious office

gossip can be very detrimental in the workplace, as continuously highlighted by the respondents. In terms of the research results I identified the following practical implications:

- The limited number of studies in South Africa that have focused on office gossip indicate how significant this study is in terms of its contribution to the academic pool of knowledge regarding the topic. Even if it is just a small step in the right direction, this study will hopefully urge prospective researchers to explore this fascinating topic further.
- The large number of themes elicited demonstrates the complexity of office gossip and should alert employers to the need for controlling this phenomenon effectively. The findings should create awareness among human resource practitioners, industrial and organisational psychologists and top management regarding the diverse perceptions of office gossip among employees. Developing awareness about the properties of, rationale for, consequences of and participants in office gossip, as well as the difference between healthy communication and malicious office gossip, will ultimately spur the relevant role players into action to counter the effects of office gossip.
- Employers should be proactive rather than reactive in terms of office gossip. The respondents stated that an organisational culture should be created in which all the sides of a story are heard before assumptions are made and speculative stories are spread. They also indicated that all the parties in an organisation should be as transparent as possible to minimise the likelihood that employees will speculate about issues and try to fill the gaps themselves. It therefore is evident that communication should be a top priority – formal channels of communication should be utilised effectively to ensure that the grapevine is not misused by employees in an attempt to compensate for the lack of effective formal communication channels.
- The definition developed from the conjoined perspectives of the respondents can be used to develop a policy against malicious gossiping in the workplace. Such a policy should not hamper a critical element of organisational communication – informal communication – but rather sensitise employees to the fact that gossip that leads to

detrimental outcomes will be dealt with accordingly. This study confirms that cultures perceive office gossip differently; in a multicultural work context such as South Africa, employers should therefore ensure that employees from different races all understand what type of gossip behaviour will not be tolerated. In addition, the policy developed should be context sensitive and detailed to ensure that employees have a clear understanding of the type of gossip that is not acceptable in the workplace.

- This study did not indicate that the propensity to gossip in the workplace is gender specific. This might therefore dispel the myth that only women engage in gossip and emphasise that it should be given attention to across gender groups.
- From the respondents' responses it is clear that there are a lot of tension and misperceptions among employees from different cultural groups – which could lead to different racial groups gossiping about one another. In response to this, employers can provide employees with culture-sensitivity training to circumvent them gossiping about other cultures and to address rampant tensions between different cultures.

6.4 LIMITATIONS

Similar to any research study, this one has noticeable limitations that should be taken into consideration when the research results are evaluated.

- The semi-structured interview and card-sorting exercise used for the data collection allowed me to deepen my understanding of the respondents' perceptions with regard to office gossip. However, the interviews did not enable me to investigate the perceptions of a large number of individuals and thus the results obtained in this study cannot be generalised to the general population, seeing that the perceptions of my respondents might not be relevant to the perceptions of other individuals in different organisations and contexts. Although the results of this study are limited to the participants and the specific work context, the findings could aid in the development of a broad survey to explore the subject matter in greater depth.

- In general, most of the findings of this study support the literature. Although I did explore some topics that were not extensively documented in the literature, it did not lead to noteworthy new revelations that could supplement the existing international knowledge base. A bigger research study will be needed to accomplish such an objective. In terms of South African literature available on the topic, I do believe that this study has added to the limited research available and set the stage for further research.
- A typical disadvantage of qualitative research is that complete objectivity could not be achieved. In response to this, I took care throughout the research process to ensure that my own perceptions, biases and cultural background did not interfere with the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process.
- In my research I focused on the genders and races of my respondents when I interpreted the data. Other factors not taken into consideration, such as personal and organisational factors, also could have influenced the participants' perceptions of office gossip.
- Seeing that the interviews had to be conducted in a face-to-face manner, I cannot say with absolute certainty that the respondents did not experience any barriers between me and them. Although I spent a lot of time attempting to build trust and rapport between me and the respondents, we often spoke about sensitive subjects such as race and gender, and my own race and gender could have hampered how open they were when answering sensitive questions.
- I did a content analysis and therefore did not attempt to develop a theory. Developing a theory could perhaps have contributed to the knowledge base of office gossip to a greater extent. However, content analysis did allow me to investigate important themes that evolved from the interview transcripts and to answer the research questions.

Despite these limitations, I regard this study as an initial effort to capture the perceptions of diverse respondents working in an organisation. Seeing that there is little research

available that is focussed on office gossip in South Africa, I believe the findings of this study make a modest contribution to the field.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Theorising on gossip as a genre of conversation is still very elementary, as there are no empirical grounds for most of the assumptions made about gossip (Foster, 2004; Michelson & Mouly, 2004; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Van der Merwe, 2005; Wert & Salovey, 2004; Wilson et al., 2000).

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations became evident:

- Among other things, my study concluded that office gossip is self-serving in nature. Group-serving intentions for gossiping in the workplace were not highlighted, but rather how the respondents maintained that gossip could benefit themselves or others individually. As Wilson et al. (2000) indicated, one of the main reasons for the lack of empirical grounds for the majority of assumptions made about gossip is that the conceptualisation of gossip is still being debated by researchers – the group-serving versus self-serving debate. Especially the group-serving nature of office gossip has to be explored further by future researchers, seeing that I only identified self-serving grounds for why people engage in gossip. If researchers keep concluding that office gossip is self-serving in nature, these self-serving intentions will have to be given attention when attempting to control the phenomenon.
- Seeing that I discovered that culture plays a role in perceptions of gossip, I advise that the topic of this study be explored further – within a similar context and other contexts and with a bigger sample size. Quantitative research could therefore enable researchers to generalise findings to the general working population.
- Researchers can also explore the reasons why people perceive office gossip differently – whether it is their cultural upbringing or whether the propensity to gossip

is influenced by other factors, such as personality traits, organisational culture, age group or job satisfaction.

- Literature sources describe how gossip can have a negative impact on employees – further research is needed in this regard.

6.6 PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

At the conclusion of my research project, I deemed it fit to share some of my personal reflections looking back at this challenging undertaking. I must say that I completely underestimated qualitative research when I decided to follow that route in my study. I knew that qualitative research suited my personality as a researcher to a greater extent, since I always find the reasons why people say what they say more endearing than the statistics. Qualitative research would enable more in-depth discovery of a topic with limited empirical foundation. Qualitative research was difficult to grasp completely at first, as my training in research was focused more on quantitative research. Regardless, I saw it a challenge to come to understand and apply this form of research. When I started the research project I was very excited about exploring a topic I myself had very little knowledge of – except for engaging in office gossip every so often. I found reading up about the topic very interesting and enjoyed it tremendously. It led to me doing a lot of introspection in terms of my own gossip behaviour in the workplace – seeing that I never realised how much damage it could do to all of the parties involved, as well as to the organisation as a whole.

My mother died on the 23rd of November 2010, which devastated me and my family. I chose to focus on my family for a few months, as I knew that my attention would not be entirely on my studies. At one point I even questioned whether I would be able to finish this project. I then realised that my mother, having been my greatest supporter, would be so proud of me if I was to finish the project. I therefore returned my full attention to the project and gave it my greatest efforts. I have learnt so much about other cultures and about informal communication within the workplace. I hope that other researchers

will also see the importance of researching this topic – seeing that despite the fact that office gossip cannot always be seen or heard, it can have a profound impact on the functioning of an organisation.

6.7 CLOSING REMARKS

In this Chapter I explored the research questions, which were provided in Chapter 1, in terms of the research findings. Thereafter, I discussed the practical implications of the findings of the study, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. I ended the Chapter with personal reflections regarding my journey throughout the research process. Although I believe that the conclusions I have come to in this study are significant, I realise that my contribution is but a small fish in a big pond of truth. Therefore further research will be needed to add to my findings. I do hope that my recommendations for future research will be followed, and that this topic will be given the attention it surely deserves in the workplace and in academia. At the onset of the study the main focus of the study was apparent – to determine whether there is a difference in the perception of office gossip amongst diverse groups in the workplace. From the findings it was evident that gossip in the workplace is viewed differently across gender and racial groups.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions

1. How would you define gossip in the workplace? / What is your understanding of gossip in the workplace?

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

2. What kind of information does gossip deal with?
3. Is gossip always true, always false or both?
4. Is Hollywood/tabloid information gossip?

Participants are also asked to describe the types of people that gossip. Questions include:

5. Who indulges (more) in gossip? Men/Women, which race group, older/younger people?
6. Do you think one's gender influences the likelihood that one will gossip?
7. Do you think one's culture influences the likelihood that one will gossip?
8. What do you think people standing in a group and talking another language are talking about? (When you are with them and when you are not with them)
9. What type of tactics do people use to gossip?
10. What type of information do people gossip about?
11. Why do people gossip?
12. How does gossip in the workplace affect the organisation?
13. How would you go about preventing and dealing with gossip in an organisation when the results are detrimental to certain people?
14. What type of gossip have you been exposed to in the workplace?
15. In your work experience, has someone been harmed by gossip? Provide the scenario.

16. How was the person harmed?

17. What were the consequences?

18. How could the situation have been avoided?

19. How could the situation have been rectified?

APPENDIX B

THE CARD-SORTING EXERCISE

Card-sorting exercise

Case studies as presented to the participants during the card-sorting exercise

1 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'.

2 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.

3 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'.

4 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.

5 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'.

6 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

11 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 percent. When Alex returns to his desk, he shares the information with the other administration officers.

- Order the case studies in a sequence from 'least' like gossip to 'most' like gossip;
- Explain the criteria you used to determine the 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').