

“Shh ... quiet! Here they come”. Black employees as targets of office gossip

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Abstract

This study explored black employees' experiences of racial profiling by their white peers through the medium of gossip at a historically white South African university. Participants consisted of 24 black employees (males = 50%, females = 50%; support staff = 50%, academic staff = 50%). The employees completed a semi-structured interview that elicited their perceptions of the settings in which gossip about black employees occurred, the perceived intentions of such gossip, and their responses to it. The data obtained was thematically analysed. Findings suggested that the gossip targeted black employees who were absent from meetings, and that such gossip undermined the work performance and morale of these employees.

Key words: Office gossip, race, black, white, in-group, out-group

Introduction

Implicit social prejudice is expressed in various indirect ways. In a workplace it can manifest through restriction of access to social networks, and expression of dislike of others by making

them targets of office gossip (De Backer, 2005). Office gossip comprises 65 percent of people's conversations (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012), implying that a large amount of time in the workplace is spent on discussing social issues and talking about colleagues. Office gossip, a form of informal communication that is present in all organisations, is defined as "informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present" (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429). Office gossip, which plays an important role in informal conversation within the workplace (De Backer, 2005), ranges from harmless communication to malicious discussions of peers behind their backs (Altuntaş, Altun, & Akyil, 2014), and can occur on an organisational or an individual level (Van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). Topics of gossip in an organisation include perceived or actual loyalties, disagreements, racism, control issues, illicit affairs, sexism, status wars, hatred, desires and jokes (Hafen, 2004; Smith, 2014). Employees gossip because they want to obtain information, influence others or socialise in the workplace, and this behaviour has become such a pervasive part of face-to-face interaction that it is hard to avoid (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to investigate experiences of office gossip by black employees at a historically white university; gossip which the black employees perceived as emanating from white colleagues. With that in view, the role that group identification played in office or workplace gossip was looked at because, as Reynolds and Turner (2001) point out, there is a strong link between the strength of group identification and the extent to which individuals positively differentiate themselves from out-groups for social interaction purposes. Individuals who regard themselves as part of a perceived in-group can be biased against members of a perceived out-group based on a variety of attitudes, ranging from hatred at one extreme to mere tolerance and appreciation at the other extreme (depending on the out-groups involved) (Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006). When investigating

workplace gossip and intergroup relations it is important to acknowledge that group affiliations shape interactions at a micro level or a person-to-person level (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010).

Context of the study

Society in apartheid South Africa (during the period 1948 to 1994) was characterised by race-based segregation, and citizens were separated by law into four different races, namely white African (of European descent), black African (indigenous people from Africa), Indian African (of Indian descent) and coloured African (of African and white descent). This separation dominated all aspects of people's lives (Ramsay, 2007). Desegregation policies implemented in the post-apartheid period (Department of Labour, 2014) prohibit separation based on race; nevertheless, social habits residual from the apartheid era linger on (Durrheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011), and in the workplace workers may cluster into race-based groups for social support (Booyesen, 2007; Carrim, 2012).

In post-segregated settings, 'subtle racism' (Chew, 2010), 'aversive racism' (Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2009), 'modern racism' (Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000), 'ambivalent racism' (Glick & Fiske, 2011), 'laissez-faire racism' (Matsueda & Drakulich, 2009) or 'prejudice with compunction' (Eagly & Karau, 2002) typically surfaces and manifests in 'micro-aggressions' against racial out-groups (Essed, 1991; Pettigrew & Martin, 1987) with damaging effects on members of these groups (Low, Radhakrishnan, Schneider, & Rounds, 2007). An out-group based on the criterion of racial difference or competitive others may be the targets of unwanted or negative gossip in workplaces (Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief, & Bradley, 2003; Duckitt, Callaghan, & Wagner 2005). Increased intergroup contact can however diminish hostilities among groups (Ata, Bastian & Lusher, 2009; Pettigrew, & Tropp, 2006). In post-apartheid South Africa, black employees in predominantly white

institutions of higher learning are prejudiced against in the sense that they still lack access to communication networks (Carrim, 2012; Senne, 2013). It has been found that differential impact of structural embeddedness (absence of networks) within the workplace results in minority groups of employees finding it more difficult to be part of dominant groups' gossip networks (Vallas, 2003).

Michelson, Van Iterson and Waddington (2010) express the view that gossip is not always negative, as talking behind someone's back does not translate into a stab in the back. Kieffer (2013) identifies a number of reasons for individuals becoming targets of gossip. First, the target embodies traits or values that are secretly envied but are openly rejected by the in-group. Second, the target threatens the power of the in-group. Third, the target is a vulnerable individual, such as an older woman among younger women. Fourth, the target is weak and disabled. According to Waddington and Fletcher (2005) and Waddington and Michelson (2007), gossip provides a safety valve – employees use it to relieve stress and gain emotional support.

Gossip about a target increases when senders and receivers agree on an opinion expressed about the object of gossip. Gossip also increases when gossip senders and receivers have a positive relationship among themselves, but a negative relationship with the target of gossip (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Grosser et al., 2010).

In many cases, targets of negative gossip are lower-level employees who tend to be ostracised by in-group members and prevented from taking part in group activities. These targeted employees are often not aware of being excluded, as in-group members sanction the exclusion of these individuals behind their backs, arguing that these individuals do not uphold group norms. Once the targets of office gossip learn of the negative gossip being spread, they might not be able to retaliate as they lack social support (Ellwardt et al., 2012). However, although targets (members of the out-group) might perceive gossip in a negative light,

members of the in-group might view this gossip in a positive light, holding that the information protects the rest of the in-group members from associating with someone violating group norms (Grosser et al., 2010; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2012).

In literature dealing with management issues, senior managers are often identified as the culprits victimising and bullying targets and behaving in a mean manner toward employees (Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2010). However, victimising and bullying of targets of gossip, which is known as workplace mobbing, can occur at any organisational level (Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2011). Workplace mobbing takes place where power relationships exist among gossipers, listeners and targets, with gossipers influencing others to behave in ways they would not normally have done (Kniffen, & Wilson, 2005; Michelson et al., 2010).

Goals of the study

The aim of this study was to explore black employees' perceptions of gossip directed at them or at other black employees by white peers. The following questions guided the study:

- *How do black employees in a historically white-dominated work setting experience office gossip directed at them or at same race colleagues by white colleagues?*
- *What are the typical reactions of black employees to being targets of office gossip?*

Method

Research design

A qualitative interpretivist paradigm using an exploratory and inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to gather and analyse the data on black staff members' experiences of office gossip. This methodological approach was appropriate for the study as it allowed the

researcher to capture and construct knowledge based on the everyday experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2006). By means of this method an in-depth understanding of lived gossip experiences of participating black employees targeted by white colleagues could be gained.

Participants and setting

The sample comprised a purposive sample of 24 black employees at a historically white South African university (Indian employees = 8; African employees = 8; coloured employees = 8). Of these, 50% were females, 50% were males, 50% were support staff, and 50% were academic staff. (See Table 1 for demographic information.) Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 55 years. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Table 1. Biographical data of participants

Gender	N	%
Male	12	50
Female	12	50
Race		
African	8	33.3
Coloured	8	33.3
Indian	8	33.3
Employee category		
Academic staff	12	50
Support staff	12	50

Data collection and procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information from the participants about the settings in which gossip was directed at them or at other black employees, about the perceived intent of the gossip, and about the responses of these black employees to the gossip. Each semi-structured interview lasted 60 minutes. To ensure data credibility, follow-up interviews

were conducted with all the participants. These interviews also served to clarify and probe deeper into aspects not addressed in the first round of interviews.

Procedure and ethical consideration

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the relevant university's ethics committee. Each participant consented individually to take part in the study. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their identities would be kept confidential. The objective of the study was explained to participants. The questions posed during the interviews focused on how black employees experienced and perceived office gossip at an academic institution. Data was collected at participants' respective workplaces and homes.

Data analysis

The data obtained was thematically analysed using the procedures developed by Nieuwenhuis (2007). The data was systematically organised, categorised, summarised and described according to meaningful themes (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Three major themes emerged from the analysis: gossip undermined work performance; gossip expressed a lack of trust; and gossip was coped with by succumbing. These themes are discussed next.

Gossip undermined work performance

All the respondents indicated that gossip was used by white peers to undermine the work performance appraisal of black employees absent from business meetings. For instance, participants observed as follows:

Every time we attend a meeting where a black colleague is absent, whites would mention the individual's name and highlight all their work-related mistakes. They never target white colleagues who attend the meetings. Our white secretary never includes these discussions in her minutes though. She tries and covers up such discussions because she knows these comments are racist (Participant #13, Coloured, Academic).

I have never heard whites ever being criticised for their work by their own in meetings, although I am aware that they are also not perfect in their jobs. Their faults are always hidden and covered up by other white colleagues (Participant #22, African, Academic).

Two white colleagues were gossiping about a black colleague who had just started working in our department and were complaining that he is a poor performer. I had worked with the black employee and knew that he was an excellent academic, but they didn't perceive it that way (Participant #21, African, Academic).

Participants perceived some white managers to silently collude with fellow white workers when black employees were being gossiped about. A participant put it as follows:

What I find strange is that my manager would not stop whites from gossiping about a black colleague's work. This could be because he also belongs to the white race group and condones such behaviour (Participant #2, Coloured, Support worker).

A participant reported overhearing a white support staff member trying to influence decisions about appointments by the department:

I heard the manager's secretary, a white lady, mentioning a black professor's name. I heard her telling our white manager that the department should employ individuals who

'fit' into the workplace culture and that he should refrain from employing additional blacks as they are upsetting the white homogeneity in the department and are unable to conform to the white ways of work (Participant #5, Indian, Support worker).

Another participant had the following to say:

One of my black colleagues approached me and told me that white colleagues are gossiping about me and saying that I'm loafing and not doing my work. This was a complete lie as I had arranged with my manager to attend class and he also had my timetable (Participant #1, Coloured, Support worker).

White colleagues gossiped in their native language when it suited them, causing black people to feel uncertain and uncomfortable because they did not understand what was being said. One participant remarked about the use of native language by white colleagues during meetings:

I feel very upset when white colleagues continuously talk in their own language during meetings. I have to keep on reminding them that I don't understand what they are saying but they don't pay much attention to me as they continue with the behaviour. I think they do this because they are gossiping about us blacks (Participant #9, African, Support worker).

Gossip expressed lack of trust

The participants perceived white employees to gossip that black employees could not be trusted. Participants had the following to say:

I heard white colleagues gossiping about me one early morning as I passed their office. One of the ladies who came in early told another woman that the previous afternoon I

had taken used paper from my office to sell and they started laughing. Now this woman did not realise that the four boxes of used paper I had taken away were the articles that I would be using to complete my literature review for my PhD thesis (Participant #18, Indian, Academic).

White colleagues [alleged I had] an affair with my supervisor as I often went to consult with him. This accusation was ludicrous as our relationship was based on a professional relationship (Participant #6, Indian, Support worker).

[A white colleague] used to instigate the students and tell them that I don't know my job and will not be able to teach them anything about the subject. Black students used to report to me about her remarks. I had lots of complaints about my teaching from white students though. I took up the matter with the Head of Department and he did nothing about it (Participant #24, African, Academic).

Gossip was coped with by succumbing

Participants reported that they resorted to forming their own race gossip networks, and that it was a form of coping by succumbing:

We usually inform blacks about what was gossiped about them in order to warn them to watch their backs. We tend to gossip about whites especially when we feel unfairly treated, but don't do it in the open. Usually nobody is privy to this information. But when whites gossip about us across the organisation, everyone gets to hear of it and this makes us feel small (Participant #10, African, Support worker).

As a child my parents always taught me not to rise against white people. This has had such a dramatic impact on me that I'm still unable to defend my absent black colleagues in meetings as I'm afraid to voice my dissatisfaction and to stand up against my white colleagues (Participant #20, Indian, Academic).

A remark by one participant indicated that resilience was shown in coping with gossip:

I wanted to leave work after a month of commencing my job here. I spoke to black colleagues who told me of their experiences of being targets of gossip. I realised that I was not the only one being targeted. Their stories and support have allowed me to continue working in this organisation. I must admit I don't trust white colleagues (Participant #12, African, Support worker).

Discussion

The findings of the study suggested that black employees were targets of office gossip in public spheres (for instance, at meetings), and in private spheres (for instance, in corridors and offices). This was contrary to the claim of Michelson et al. (2010) that gossip takes place in intimate and private spaces. It was likely that gossipers used business meetings to reinforce or maintain power relations within white-dominated organisations (Kieffer, 2013). It was found in this study that black but not white colleagues who were absent from meetings were criticised.

It seemed that gossip was used by white employees as a way of undermining workplace confidence in black employees or the esteem in which they were held. By criticising the work performance of black colleagues, accusing them of loafing on the job, and inciting students to be critical of their performance, gossipers attempted to destroy targets' reputations (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Cole & Scrivener, 2013). As has been pointed out by Hess and Hagen

(2006), individuals gossip about others as they derive pleasure from discovering and discussing the shortcomings and mistakes of others.

Participants perceived workplace gossip by white peers as attempts to exercise social control over black colleagues (Das, 2007). They also perceived the gossip as an attempt to strengthen in-racial group identity (Herriman, 2010). In-groups and out-groups evaluate each other negatively in societies characterised by strong in-group identification and loyalty, as is the case in South Africa, and in societies where social comparison processes and sensitivity to threat and power politics incite and endorse out-group hostility (Cairns et al., 2006).

The findings of the study suggested that white employees used gossip to express their mistrust of black colleagues, and even to attempt to influence decisions about appointments. In most cases this was done behind a target's back or by talking in their native language (Jandt, 2010; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). Participants expressed the belief that white peers used negative gossip to spread false rumours about black groups (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007).

Participants noted that black employees responded to gossip mostly by succumbing. This could be ascribed to black people having been taught by parents when they were children to respect white people (Carrim, 2012). The fear that black employees experienced of defending their absent group members and themselves in meetings and public spaces could be due to their having little social support as white managers colluded with white employees (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

Unlike the findings of other studies that employees who belonged to minority groups and were the targets of gossip left the organisation (Keiffer, 2013; Kniffen, & Wilson, 2010; Turcotte, 2012), it was found in the current study that the black employees supported each other to counteract the detrimental effects of negative gossip and to cushion them to an extent because they did not receive support from management. This finding contradicted the finding

of Shallcross et al. (2011) that a lack of support from management resulted in the targets of gossip leaving the organisation. The steadfastness of the participants in the current study in staying in the organisation indicated their resilience to try to overcome the obstacles of being gossiped about, and their handling of the situation strengthened their in-group identity (Allport, 1954).

Limitations of the study

A limitation of the study was that it focused on a single historically white academic institution. Future research should be conducted to ascertain whether the results would be replicated at other similar institutions. Another limitation was that data was collected from black informants only. Future studies should collect data from white informants as well to allow for cross-validation of findings.

Conclusion

Gossip is used as a medium by white people to make black people feel like pariahs in the workplace, and also to manifest the 'superior' status white people had during the previous dispensation (the apartheid era). This appears to be achieved through gossiping at meetings about black colleagues who are absent, and through spreading untruths about the academic credentials of black peers. While black people find comfort in the knowledge that they are not the sole targets of gossip, it does not alleviate their feelings of discomfort about the situation.

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