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Everyday secrecy: Boundaries of confidential gossip

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Abstract

Gossip is an everyday part of organizational life and has been increasingly researched. However, some gossip has a particular character, whereby it is to some degree secret. Drawing on studies of both gossip and secrecy, in this paper we explore this 'confidential gossip' via a participant observation case study. This was based on an internship with Quinza, a British media company, and had a covert element which is discussed and justified. Specifically, we show how the boundaries around confidential gossip are marked in organizational interactions. The paper contributes to existing knowledge about organizational gossip by showing the particular significance of secrecy which makes confidential gossip a more potent source of group inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords

Gossip, confidential gossip, secrecy, groups, participant observation

Introduction

It is likely that anyone with experience of organizational life has had a corridor or ‘water cooler’ conversation which starts with words to the effect of ‘keep this between us, but...’ followed by the sharing of some piece of information about a colleague or workplace event. Such experiences are common enough to suggest that they are of interest to organizational analysis as one of the “nontrivial trivial[s]” (van Iterson et al. 2011, 382) which make up the daily fabric of organizations. They are an example of the many informal interactions at work (Fayard and Weeks, 2007) but they are of a particular sort, namely those flagged as confidential or for restricted repetition. We call these interactions ‘confidential gossip’ and the overarching aim of this paper is to explore the ways that the boundary between confidential gossip and other interactions is marked. In this way, we can also make visible the practice of confidential gossip and some of its effects.

The dynamics implicit within the phrase ‘keep this between us, but ...’ point to the complexities of social interaction at work as being embedded in the differentiations and entanglements between knowing and not knowing, between being and not being known, and between knowing and being known. As “many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it” (Goffman 1959, 13), our social relations might inevitably be shaped by degrees of conscious concealment. In this sense, secrecy, as intentionally keeping secrets from someone, is both a social process and a part of who we are (Simmel 1906/1950).

Recent scholarship in organization studies has identified secrecy as an important aspect of organizational life (Curtis and Weir 2016; Parker 2016; Scott 2013, 2015; Stohl and Stohl 2011). Within this, Costas and Grey’s (2014, 2016) work is of particular relevance as they identify informal secrecy as one general form of secrecy, meaning secrecy which is regulated by trust

and social norms rather than by law or organizational rules. Within informal secrecy, they recurrently identify “confidential gossip” as being a prime example (e.g. Costas and Grey 2016, 96-98). They do not, however, provide any empirical investigation of confidential gossip or any explanation of how it operates.

Studies of workplace gossip have indicated its ‘non-triviality’ for organizational processes such as being a way to maintain an effective communication system (March and Sevon 1988), to release and manage emotion (Waddington 2015), to build and reinforce identity and its recognition (Noon and Delbridge 1993; Waddington 2012), and to construct organizational reality (Gholipour et al. 2011). Overall, there is now an increasing body of research on organizational gossip (e.g. Hafen 2004, Michelson et al. 2010; van Iterson and Clegg 2008; Kurland and Pellad, 2010; Waddington 2011, 2016). However, these studies do not have a specific focus upon, although they do sometimes touch on, gossip as a form of secrecy (e.g. Kurland and Pellad 2010, 432; Michelson et al. 2010, 380).

The overall purpose of this paper is therefore to explore confidential gossip, meaning gossip within organizations which is to some degree secret. In doing so, we start from the position that – as indicated in the opening paragraph of this paper – it is a common, perhaps everyday experience within organizations. This ubiquity may make it easy to ignore or to treat as uninteresting, but Ybema et al. (2009) set out in detail the case for studying such everyday phenomena, pointing out amongst other things that in this way organizational research is more closely attuned to the actual experience of people at work, rather than offering sanitised and abstract accounts. Moreover, they argue that ethnography is the method of choice for such studies.

More specifically, within this tradition “everyday life in organizations is not peripheral; it is central to how affiliation, allegiance, and conflict develop, channel, and organize larger structures” (Fine and Hallett, 2014, 1774). This insight can be directly linked to theories of organizational secrecy where affiliation and allegiance are channelled via participation in or exclusion from secrets. Central to that is:

“the drawing of boundaries – boundaries around knowledge, yes, but also boundaries between knowers ... secrecy is about realm of the hidden and the arcane, but this realm can exist only if a boundary is drawn ...” (Costas and Grey 2016, 10).

Considered as a form of secrecy, confidential gossip must therefore include practices that mark the line or boundary around itself. Thus the main question addressed in this paper is: what are these practices? In answering this question, we follow Michelson et al.’s (2010, 374) call for the need to see gossip “as a process of negotiated interaction between individuals and groups”, applying a processual approach to the narrower concept of confidential gossip.

Empirically, studying confidential gossip poses significant practical and ethical challenges. On the one hand, “[gossip] is...an inherently difficult topic to research, fraught with complex conceptual challenges and contradictions, and resistant to paradigmatic summing up.” (Waddington 2005b, 222). On the other hand, the study of secrecy of any sort is fraught with difficulties (Greve et al. 2010; Parker 2016). This may explain why the topic of confidential gossip has not been directly tackled before, despite it being a common experience in organizations. In this paper, we report on a participant observation ethnography of a large UK media firm which we will call Quinza.

The overall contribution of the paper is therefore to show how confidential gossip operates as an everyday practice within organizations as a distinctive form of gossip and, more specifically, to show how the boundaries between confidential gossip and other interactions are drawn, re-drawn and negotiated, and with what effects.

In pursuit of this objective, the paper is structured in four main sections. The first section introduces and discusses the literature on gossip in organizations, moving to the delineation of confidential gossip understood as a form of informal secrecy. The methodology of the study is then outlined, with a focus on some of the specific issues posed by researching confidential gossip. The third and main section of the paper provides detailed empirical material and analysis of the various ways in which the line or boundary around confidential gossip is marked. Finally, a concluding discussion draws out the implications of the case study for understanding confidential gossip in organizations.

Bringing gossip and informal secrecy together: Confidential gossip

Gossip research is wide-ranging, encompassing social anthropology, social psychology, sociology, industrial sociology, management studies and organization studies (Noon and Delbridge 1993). The multiplicity of theoretical and disciplinary underpinnings of gossip research mean that “*any* definition of gossip is always likely to be complex and controversial” (Waddington 2005a, 36, emphasis added). The variety of definitions is compounded by the relationships between gossip and related communicative phenomena such as rumour, and by different types of gossip such as positive and negative gossip (Michelson et al. 2010). While no definition can encompass all perspectives and instances of gossip, we adopt a working definition used in many gossip studies, as Michelson et al. (2010) suggest that participating in

a general agreement of the otherwise unresolvable definitional issue encourages accumulation of understandings and findings of gossip across different studies.

Thus gossip is concerned with informal communication (Paine 1967, 293). It involves at least two people and is often concerned with the “positive or negative evaluation of someone who is not present” (Eder and Enke 1991, 496). It can also be concerned with sharing information about a wide range of things, not confined to talking about people. For example, gossip might be about forthcoming changes in the workplace, new initiatives and projects, possible job losses etc. In this sense, gossip and rumour are closely interrelated concepts (e.g. Noon and Delbridge 1993; van Iterson et al. 2011). Rosnow (1988, 14) indicates that “sometimes it is impossible to separate rumour from gossip”, whilst Michelson and Mouly (2004, 190) “choose to use them as synonyms”. By contrast, Waddington and Fletcher (2005, 379) suggest, “rumour is spread via the activity of gossiping, and can be seen as subset of the content of gossip”. For our purposes, it is adequate to recognize that they are closely related. What we want to explore is the specific issue of when the information passed – whether it be considered gossip or rumour – on a confidential basis.

What does gossip ‘do’ in organizations?

Because gossip involves at a minimum two people, it is a social process that can be understood at interpersonal, group, and organizational levels. Interpersonally, much of the literature on gossip emphasizes the issue of social comparison (e.g. Suls and Wheeler 2000; Wert and Salovey 2004), a common organizational example being comparing salary levels (Colella et al. 2007). Gossip is useful as open comparison can trigger public embarrassment and detrimental effects on self-esteem (e.g. Fine and Rosnow 1978; Wert and Salovey 2004). Therefore, gossip

may be “the only reasonable and non-painful way to obtain needed comparison information” (Suls 1977, 166).

Social comparison may be regarded as just one aspect of the wider issue of how gossip helps organizational members make sense of ‘how things are done around here’ (e.g. Baumeister et al. 2004; Grosser et al. 2010), and to understand appropriate ways of behaving within a particular social setting (e.g. Gluckman 1968; Wert and Salovey 2004). Thus several studies have shown how gossip can act as a vehicle to transmit group norms, values and moral principles (e.g. Gluckman 1963, 1968; Wilson et al. 2000). In this sense, gossip is intimately linked with the socialization and construction of groups and organizations.

Whilst these studies are concerned with what might broadly be thought of as the ‘integrative’ possibilities of gossip (i.e. its role in bringing people together), other studies have shown its potentials as “a manipulative tool” (Rosnow 1977, 159) to gain advantages. In these ways gossip can play a role within organizational politics and power-play (e.g. Feldman 1988), including as a way of exposing or resisting power and inequality (e.g. Spacks 1985).

From gossip to confidential gossip

Confidential gossip can be regarded as having all of the various characteristics of gossip identified in the literature discussed above, but with the additional feature of being shared as a form of informal secrecy. This entails the use of particular verbal and non-verbal cues which highlight the confidentiality of an exchange. The phrase “you must keep this to yourself” is an example of such a cue. Confidential gossip might be exchanged with a particular injunction about who it can and cannot be shared (e.g. ‘don’t tell X’) or participants may be expected to know with whom it is appropriate to share the gossip.

Like the distinction between rumour and gossip, that between gossip and confidential gossip is hazy, but it is meaningful as it is certainly possible to identify some cases of gossip which are not confidential at all (e.g. workmates gossiping about celebrities) and other cases where there is a strong expectation that the information will be rigorously guarded (e.g. gossip about deeply personal or even criminal matters). But between these extremes there may well be a lack of clarity about exactly who can and cannot be included in gossip: ‘don’t tell anyone’ might within context contain a tacit understanding that this means ‘you can tell X but don’t tell Y’. This means that gossip may often become “secret” depending on who is being spoken to (Michelson et al. 2010, 380), and so the line between confidential gossip and gossip is both context-dependent and mutable.

Although confidential gossip has all of the characteristics of gossip with the addition of informal secrecy, it does not follow that those characteristics are unchanged as a result of informal secrecy being added. In other words, confidential gossip is not just ‘gossip plus confidentiality’ if it is considered not just to be a form of gossip but also a form of secrecy. The reason for this is the particular and powerful nature of secrecy itself. Specifically, as Simmel (1950, 332) articulates, “for many individuals, property does not fully gain its significance with mere ownership, but only with the consciousness that others must do without it”. Most discussions of secrecy in organizations proceed from Simmel’s (1906/1950) classic analysis to suggest that secrecy shapes social relations by creating insiders and outsiders who share (or are excluded from) very strong bonds. Secrecy has a mystique about it, generating a sense of exclusiveness amongst those who share secrets but also a temptation to hint at knowledge of secrets in order to boost a sense of importance. Conversely, when secrets are revealed, the sense of anger, loss or betrayal can be significant.

This means that the various things that gossip ‘does’ in organizations are likely to be inflected differently and perhaps heightened when confidentiality is added to the mix. For example, gossip about ‘the way things are done around here’ might be taken especially seriously if it is shared with an imprecation to confidentiality because the mystique of secrecy means that things being intentionally concealed are more likely to be regarded as ‘the real, inside truth’: if the things being kept concealed were not important or special, why would they be intentionally hidden? Similarly, if gossip can shape group boundaries and norms then gossip which is confidential may do so in especially strong ways, as the inclusion is not only marked by the possession of certain knowledge, but is reinforced by the consciousness and ‘aristocratic’ sensation that others must do without it. Moreover, the pleasure of gossiping may be intensified if there is also the ‘thrill’ of secrecy.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the first condition for any form of secrecy to exist is that some boundary must be drawn between what is secret and what is not. In the case of confidential gossip, very little is currently known about how this occurs. It is for this reason that we undertook to study it, and it is to this study that we now turn.

Methodology

Viewing confidential gossip as a social process indicates that empirical consideration should be given not just to the communication content, but also to the social contexts and relations in which the content is produced. In order to understand confidential gossip, it is necessary to observe and to participate in it; to become to some degree an insider of it. As such a participant observation ethnographic approach¹ was adopted, with one of the authors undertaking (after a week pilot study) a three-month study in which she worked as an intern in a British media firm

we will call Quinza, during the winter of 2015-16. The intention was to capture actions and utterances that are generated by and give rise to particular social settings as part of the daily practices and experience at work. Hence, the approach was designed to focus “on the low rather than the high, on the ordinary rather than on the event” (Rabinow et al. 2008, 73) in order to experience and apprehend emerging behaviour and continuously negotiated interrelationships rather than acquiring snapshot-like views of actions. Engagement in the field involved the spatial and temporal contexts of office during working hours and after-work social gatherings.

To specify the role the researcher undertook in the field, we draw on Gold’s (1958, 219-221) spectrum defined by levels of involvement and covertness, which ranges from complete participant (fully covert; fully functioning member in an organization), participant-as-observer (researcher’s status is overt; participating in the organizational life), observer-as-participant (overt; limited participation in the field), to complete observer (overt; no social interaction with people in the field). The researcher undertook a role closer to participant-as-observer as when she worked in the organization and regularly interacted with the colleagues, her ‘researcher identity’ was known by them. The role combined and shifted between participant and observer to negotiate and manage the state of both body and mind between the inside and outside of the organization (e.g. Bate 1997; van Maanen 2011). It is itself a representation of an ongoing boundary drawing mechanism that was produced by the specific participant observer role and in turn reshaped how the role was undertaken.

Whilst by the standards of classical anthropological ethnography this was a relatively short period, such restricted time frames have become increasingly normal and legitimate in organizational ethnography (Bate 1997). The nature, advantages and dilemmas of participant observation and ethnographic studies of organization have been very widely explored and

discussed in the literature (e.g. Czarniawska 2014; Garsten and Nyquist 2013; van Maanen 2011) and we will not rehearse them here. Instead, we will indicate some of the particular issues that arose from using the method in this case.

Access to fieldwork: The complexity of collecting data on confidential matters

This study was positioned as being one informal communication. Confidential gossip does not exist in isolation with other forms of communicative interaction at work. So it would be impossible to devise a study which involved observation of and participation in *only* confidential gossip. If it was to be found, it would be embedded in wider interactions. Nevertheless, in negotiating access with a gatekeeper – a senior manager at Quinza who we call Victoria in this paper – we explained that this would be the focus and that within it we would be seeing if there were examples of confidential gossip. In that initial negotiation we also made it clear that any such examples would not be reported to the gatekeeper or to anyone else, and that anything published would rigorously suppress the identity of Quinza (see below for more detail).

Besides access negotiation, the general focus on informal communication also requires further consideration of the ongoing access to *people* and the ongoing construction of “a conceivable and reasonable form of engagement” (Garsten and Nyquist 2013, 16) between the researcher and the researched. In so doing, the researcher attempted to enhance her credibility by showing certain knowledge and understanding of the problems some colleagues encountered, such as the collaborative production and publication of media content. She also withheld judgements such as advisory comments (e.g. you should quit), as it might disturb the participants. Such processes involve ethical struggles and complexity which will be discussed in the next section.

Ethics of researching a sensitive topic

There was an ethical tension involved in both forms of access negotiation: ethics dictated that the gatekeeper be aware of what the project was hoping to achieve, but to have made it explicit to the employees that confidential gossip was the focus would almost inevitably have made it impossible for the researcher actually to be included in confidential gossip. Hence employees at Quinza were told, by the gatekeeper, that the researcher would be studying informal communication whilst working as an intern.

This points to the particular ethical complexities that attended a study of confidential gossip which, in its nature, might be sensitive and which was to some degree being covertly studied. Of course, if our underlying premise that confidential gossip in organization is pervasive were true, then any participant observer, whatever their research focus, would be likely to pick up on it just by accident. Given this, there was no *particular* ethical dilemma in terms of what we would do if we came across gossip about something illegal or immoral (we didn't, as it happened) any more than for any other ethnography which would be equally likely to encounter such gossip.

Rather, what was ethically distinctive was that when we did encounter confidential gossip we might be subsequently publishing it which would not necessarily be the case in other ethnographies. In this respect we approached the study as an example of 'researching a sensitive topic' mandating the use of disinformation when necessary (Lee 1993). Hence, it is crucial to understand that in this paper we have very extensively changed (not just concealed) details which might directly or indirectly allow the identification of the organization or of any individual (this is why our account is very vague indeed about the nature of the organization and its work).

The role of disinformation is central to the ethics of this research because, in some cases, participants might say something with an explicit injunction that it be kept confidential. By using disinformation we were able to comply with any such injunctions, whilst making analytical use of the material. So, to give a purely hypothetical example, if someone said to the researcher that another employee had called in sick but it wasn't true we might render that as someone saying that another employee had bulked out the hours they had worked. By substituting something similar, the approximate sense of the confidence is conveyed, without the actual confidence being broken. This could be done without compromising the integrity of the research because our interest is not in the actual 'content' of confidential gossip but in its processes and effects.

Marzano (2007) identifies gossip as something where covert research can be ethically justifiable and, indeed, in a formal sense, the project was conducted within the ethical protocols of, and with ethical approval from, our institution (and, it should be noted, covert research is legal within the jurisdiction where this study was undertaken). Less formally, our approach was based on Czarniawska's (2014, x) view that "doing research means making moral choices, continuously, and often under time pressure. If there could be but one common maxim, perhaps it can be borrowed from medicine: *Primum non nocere!* (First, do not harm)". More specifically, Roulet et al. (2017) indicate that ethical consideration of any (degree of) covert studies should be context dependent, as "it is in the particular cases of the here and now with participants that ethics are situationally accomplished" (Calvey 2008, 908). Throughout this particular fieldwork, the researcher interacted with the participants when they were willing to do so, in the ways that occurred 'naturally' by virtue of her intern role.

Data collection: Fieldnote taking

In this intern role, the researcher worked in the organization mostly five days a week and undertook a wide range of relatively mundane office tasks, interacting with a variety of people and departments within the organization. As she did so, she made notes during the day if her work permitted. As a tool of notes taking, the mobile version of Word was used, as it is common to carry mobile phones around in the organization, and typing was a quicker option for the researcher than pen-and-paper writing. When possible, brief notes were taken in the course of conversations and interactions, recording the contextual elements (e.g. where, when, who) and the specific transitions of interaction (e.g. topics, body gestures). An empty stairway or toilet was sometimes used to take more extensive notes shortly after the interactions. In some cases where the researcher was present without participating in some conversations (e.g. when queuing to use microwave or coffee machine in the kitchen), she was able to take notes contemporaneously. Within the setting of Quinza there was nothing unusual in tapping on a mobile phone or tablet whilst talking or eating.

Apart from this, notes from each day, including but not limited to confidential gossip, were written up in the evening. These notes attempted to render conversations as accurately as possible but, inevitably, absolutely perfect renditions were not possible. The diary also recorded the researcher's impressions and emotions about the day. At the end of the fieldwork, approximately 206 pages of field diary had been produced.

Reflecting upon the field role

During the fieldwork, the researcher's ties with a number of colleagues were established through frequent interactions and increasing familiarity with both colleagues and the character of their work throughout workdays, lunches outside the workplace, and occasional after-work

drinks. The ‘disconnected’ in the conversations gradually becoming connected, and the obscure became clearer (Roy, 1958). She was gradually ‘transforming’ from a passive listener where further explanation was needed in order to understand a conversation (see the first empirical example on expense reimbursement) to a competent participant in conversations. A methodological complexity here was that participation in confidential gossip might require the researcher herself actually passing on such gossip, which might violate the ethical limits of the project. Accordingly, she avoided doing so and was in this sense not a full participant (Gold 1958, 219-220).

In the early process of tie establishment she encountered examples of confidential gossip. This is both theoretically and empirically interesting as confidential gossip is supposedly guarded by familiarity and trust, yet some such gossip was shared even before these had been established. This was possibly aided by the relatively short period of fieldwork: as a relative newcomer she was not expected to know anything to gossip about (so not being a ‘full participant’ in gossip did not matter so much). Equally, as a person who was not just new but junior and temporary she was perhaps perceived as relatively insignificant, and in this sense unthreatening, and so possibly more likely to be confided in.

Throughout the process of tie establishment, “there [is] nothing as seductive for the fieldworker as being made to feel like an insider” (Kunda 2006, 244). This was very much the emotional texture of her experience. It was produced by the tension and connections between inclusion and exclusion of certain groups where she was involved in some but not all discussions, and where the alluring feelings of specialness interacted with the painful sense of exclusion. In this sense, the process of studying confidential gossip, including the emotions it engendered, is itself part of the practice of confidential gossip which the researcher experienced for herself.

Data analysis

The analysis of the field diary was undertaken in an inductive thematic manner: it was coded to emerging categories and themes by “interacting with the data...making comparisons between the data...deriving concepts to stand for that data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 66). A particular challenge of this research was that the shift from general conversation to more secretive gossip was not especially dramatic, nor was it announced with any great fanfare (and the vast majority of the time people were not engaging in gossip, confidential or otherwise). As a social process, it was subtly embedded within interactions, and sometimes only quite fleetingly glimpsed (e.g. in a half-overheard remark). Therefore, to generate examples and characteristics of confidential gossip in Quinza, the field diary was firstly coded through themes of locations (e.g. kitchen, open-plan offices, closed meeting rooms) and communicative markers, both verbal (e.g. ‘bitch’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘boring’) and nonverbal (e.g. lowering volume, door closing, eye exchange) that indicated the components of evaluation and confidentiality. Connections amongst certain first-order themes were summarized to generate second-order themes, such as the physicality of boundary, the negotiation of boundary, and the enactment of boundary. The themes were further aggregated into the third-order themes such as the social construction of boundary, of hierarchy, and of time. Such properties and dimensions were then organized into more general analytical frameworks such as sensemaking and culture.

The organizational context

Quinza employs several hundred people working in a wide range of capacities, which in general terms can be designated as professional, creative and administrative. Almost everyone works in large open-plan offices, with meetings being held in bookable space. This is significant for

the study, because it means that little in the way of communication of any sort, including gossip and confidential gossip, occurs in the main workspace. Instead, locations such as toilets, corridors and, in this case especially, the communal kitchen and dining area, as well as out of office locations like the Christmas party and more everyday social activities are the main sites of interaction, including gossip and, within that, confidential gossip.

From this study we can gain an ‘insider’ sense of how confidential gossip worked at Quinza. In reporting this, we denote extracts from the field diary in italics. Phrases in square brackets denote where we have summarised or suppressed text from the diary. Phrases in curly brackets denote explanations of things such as contextual events, word tone or bodily gesture which are not obvious from the written text. All names are pseudonyms and many details have been very substantially changed or suppressed to protect the identity of Quinza or of individuals, as explained above.

Confidential gossip at Quinza

An archetypical case

As a first example, we give an archetypical case of confidential gossip to illustrate the kinds of themes which are at stake, which we will later analyse in more detail. It took place at a table in the communal kitchen during an afternoon ‘tea and cake’ time where the researcher was invited:

Monica: You know, one of my [freelance contributors], last time he came to me bringing a pack of receipts. One of them is even from Cheap Burgers! And he had breakfast there! {Tone: surprised and mocking}

Karen: What? Really? Cheap Burgers?! {Implying ‘I can’t believe this’; People laugh}

Researcher: [asking Cathy] Do you usually reimburse freelancers?

Cathy: Yes, we reimburse them when we want them to come here for meetings or something else. We will pay for their trains and lunch, something like that. It is a nice thing to do, right. But [that guy] just collect the receipts of every single thing he paid for like a bottle of water or something. Maybe he thinks we should pay for everything since he came all the way here.

Monica: He is such a DICK! {emphasized}

Beth: Alana just walked by our table and left. Maybe she heard you said her favourite contributor is a dick.

Monica: {surprised and covering her mouth} Really?! No!

Beth: But I saw her smile at our table before she left. So maybe she didn't hear {big smile}.

This example shows a number of the features that, as indicated earlier, gossip researchers have identified as typical. Most obviously, it is evaluative and concerns someone who is not present. The freelancer is being evaluated negatively and is described quite pejoratively. As well as being evaluative, the gossip is pleasurable to the extent that those involved share laughter at the story. And it is also gossip that tells the newcomer (i.e. the researcher) something about how things are done at Quinza and more particularly it gives the ‘inside’ or informal reality that although formally a contributor may claim all expenditures, the norm is to just claim major costs rather than every little item. The story is worth telling (and is seen negatively) because this particular contributor has violated the norm. The gossip not only socializes the researcher, but in so doing enables the researcher to learn via violations that triggered sharper responses (e.g. “he is such a DICK”) and produces more intense embodied experience of the importance to maintain the norm as a form of boundary (Mahadevan, 2015).

Crucially for our analysis, this is not just an example of gossip but of, specifically, confidential gossip, because the possibility that Alana (who commissions this freelancer’s work) has

overheard is seen as problematic. The conversation was one that could be shared within the group, but not beyond it. This matters to the participants because Monica is worried that it might have been overheard, and Beth takes pains to reassure her.

Exclusion from confidential gossip

The idea that confidential gossip can be shared within, but not outside of, a particular group is central both to its practice (if it wasn't restricted, there would be no confidentiality) and to its social effects (by being restricted to a particular group, that group is constituted and insiders and outsiders are created). However, what is not obvious in the previous example is how that constitution occurs.

In the next example, we explore this. The background is that Tina was under family pressure and had confided to the researcher and others that she was looking for more permanent job opportunities outside Quinza. Some people knew about Tina's plans but it was understood that they should not be widely discussed because if she did not secure a job it might perhaps be thought that she was not committed to Quinza. A few days later, this conversation occurred:

Researcher: Do you have any interviews coming up?

Tina: Yes. Two. One next week, and one the week after next week. I said I would check my emails. I was actually going to check my personal emails.

Researcher: Oh that's great. Which companies?

Tina: One is {whispering} Company A, and the other one is Company C. The next interview is on next Tuesday. I won't come in on Monday next week so I can have a long weekend to prepare. They asked me to choose from Tuesday and Thursdays. I think I will be quite tired on Thursday after a week of working. So I chose Tuesday. And I can't really take three days off till Thursday.

Researcher: True. Good choice. What positions are you going after?

...

Tina: ...it's about [particular area of work].

Researcher: It's perfect for you! {Excited tone and smile}

Tina: Yeah {not excited}. But I heard the department is making people redundant. So I don't think they will hire new ones.

Researcher: You'd like to work in that company. Just give it a try {smile}

Tina: Yeah. I will.

Researcher: Good luck! And, keep me posted!

Tina: {smiles but looks at me in a weird way} OK.

However, the following week:

Researcher: So how was your interview?

Tina: Can we not talk about my interview PLEASE! {emphasized and in strongly annoyed tone}.

You ask me about my interviews every time! {Unpleasant tone and unpleasant look at me}

Researcher: {smile} Sure, sorry.

{Then Janine who is Tina's teammate walked in the kitchen, heading to the watercooler}

Tina: Hey Janine!

Janine: Hi! How was your interview?

Tina: {stood up and walked to hug her} I screwed up the first question! They asked me why I choose [this specialism]. I knew they will ask that and I prepared! But I just couldn't say it! I don't know why! I was thinking 'what the heck'?!

What happened over the course of this example is that the researcher was first *admitted* to the group within which Tina's job search could be discussed and then *excluded* from it. During the interaction (flagged as confidential by the use of whispers) in the first conversation, Tina confined to the researcher with quite a few details of her job search, but her responses became more abrupt, and her facial expressions became unfriendly. At the end, she looked at the researcher "in a weird way" and gave the impression that she was uneasy about the questions. In the second conversation, Tina forcibly closed down the conversation, and this was emphasised by the very effusive way that she greeted Janine (i.e. hugging her). It was not that she would not talk within the researcher's hearing about the job interview, it was that she emphatically showed that she was happy to talk directly to Janine but not the researcher. However, from that point on, Tina never spoke to the researcher about her job search again.

So moving from the first conversation to the second one, the line was redrawn very sharply. There is a significant contextual element here in that Tina, like all the Quinza employees, may well have been aware that the researcher was doing a study about communication in the workplace and might even have wondered if her job search would be reported back to Victoria or other senior managers. That does not 'invalidate' the analytical points we draw from the interaction because in any such interaction there would be perceptions about the position and agenda of the other person. It is precisely this which guides judgements about whether that person is an appropriate recipient of confidential gossip. In any case, suspicion about the researcher's role may not have been the issue: it may just be that she was perceived as being too 'pushy' for information for reasons of personality. Or it could be that Tina felt defensive about the fact that she had not done well in the interview.

Whilst these are all possible interpretations of motive, for our purposes the example illustrates, firstly, how inside relationships there is an ongoing negotiation of who can be included within confidential gossip. It is not a one-off event, but can include or exclude different people at different times. Secondly, considered reflexively, they show how the construction of that boundary has powerful effects. For the researcher this was an unpleasant experience. The exclusion was sudden and almost brutal, generating confusion and an unsettling sense of bond breaking. Moreover, it was done in public to the extent that it would have been apparent to Janine. This is an example of how, as mentioned earlier, the process of studying confidential gossip is also a type of involvement in confidential gossip.

At one level, this is not surprising, in that it is inherent to participant observation: the researcher is not simply observing but participating. What may be unusual – and revealing of the nature of confidential gossip – is that in the process the researcher herself experienced the emotional impact of exclusion. This also necessarily means that the reporting of this (and other examples) is to a degree subjective. For example, in saying that Tina’s expressions were “unfriendly” and here expressions “weird”, what is being recorded is the researcher’s interpretation of her experience of the interaction. Someone else might have interpreted it differently, but this is inherent in – and both a strength and weakness of – participant observation. The point is not so much what the feelings generated were, but that the process had the capacity to generate these or other feelings whether for the researcher or for anyone else. Thus it reveals the emotional potency of inclusion/ exclusion from confidential gossip.

Inclusion in confidential gossip

Whereas the previous example was about a re-negotiation that excluded the researcher, there were other occasions when the line got re-negotiated to include her, as in this example:

{Abbey and I agree to have lunch in the kitchen. I walk in the kitchen a bit later than her. Debra is in the kitchen with Abbey and Emily. She is saying something in a very low volume with some hand gestures, Abbey looks worried, and Emily sometimes says “yes I understand”. I walk straight to them and hear Debra saying “it was so embarrassing. I shouldn’t have done that”}

Researcher: What happened?

Debra: Oh {turns around and looks at me. Debra looks very serious and nervous}. Nothing, nothing really {shaking head. Then she turns back and looks at Abbey}.

Abbey: {frowning and shaking her head a bit then nodding, showing that ‘no talking, yes I understand’. I guess Debra’s look was telling Abbey that she doesn’t want Abbey to tell this thing to anyone else. Although I can’t see Debra’s eye expression directly, I do see Abbey’s as a reply to it}

Debra: {looking at me} I have a meeting very soon. So I gonna run.

Researcher: Sure. Enjoy.

{Debra walks out of the kitchen}

Researcher: What happened? {Then Debra suddenly opens the kitchen door and whispers something to Abbey. Abbey nods strongly}.

Abbey: She doesn’t want me to tell {short pause}. She just made a blunder. I’m sure it is not a big issue.

Researcher: Ok, hope everything is fine.

Here again, through verbal and non-verbal means a boundary is negotiated that excludes the researcher, and the serious and nervous looks show that what is being discussed is sensitive and important. But the following week the researcher sees Debra again and they have a conversation

in which the researcher says various things about some problems she is having with her work.

Debra responds sympathetically and then:

Debra: Remember the fuck-up thing I did last week?

Researcher: Oh yeah! What happened?

Debra: It was a conference call with one of the journalists last week. It was supposed to last for ten minutes. Then it was actually an hour long!

Researcher: An hour?!

Debra: Yeah! I know! Then at the end we thought both sides hung up. So I said, 'it was long huh. He was just keeping going'. But the actually the journalist's side didn't hang up {widening eyes looking shocked}! So he heard everything!

Researcher: Oh my god!

So, now, the boundary has been re-drawn and the researcher is included – probably because she has now shared her own problems with Debra, or possibly just because the incident with the conference call now seems less worrying to Debra. As with Tina's motives in the previous section, multiple interpretations of motive are possible. However, for our purposes what matters is that it illustrates the processual nature of the relationships within which confidential gossip is (or is not) passed. We will now explore that idea in more detail.

Opening up the space for confidential gossip

So far, we have depicted confidential gossip in terms of a boundary of inclusion/ exclusion being drawn and also showing that it can shift over time. However, this still presents too static an image, as if someone is either included or excluded even if that changes, as if there is a binary divide of 'in or out'. That ignores the way in which rather than being either/or,

confidential gossip often involves an unfolding process in which more and more is shared. This can be seen in the following example:

Researcher: I saw the emails that many people are leaving. Are they all for maternity leave?

Aisha: No. Many of them are from Department C. Because the company went through some difficult time, and now Department C needs to be restructured. And some people don't agree with that, so {stopped talking}.

Researcher: Oh ok. It's quite a pity.

Aisha: Yes, it's a shame. The company has been going through some changes, and some people don't want to follow or adopt the changes. They feel they're betrayed or abandoned by the company, and their work is not being treated as priority. But for the work that can be restructured in this way for a better economic sense should be changed accordingly. I think they can adjust to the change. But you know, if they don't want to follow, then {stopped talking}.

Researcher: Yes, that's true.

Aisha is communicating something important, and quite sensitive, about the recent history of Quinza as indicated by the strong terms used (“betrayed”, “abandoned”) and in each case she leaves the sentence unfinished. It is for the other person to infer the full meaning of what is being said and to respond in a way that encourages the conversation to continue. Aisha is implying a distance from those (“some people”) who do not agree with the changes and a certain lack of sympathy that they “don't want to follow” what is “economic sense”. So, if the response to Aisha's first statement had been something like ‘and quite right, too’, then it is unlikely that she would have continued to make the more revealing second statement. By reading between the lines of what was said, and responding in the ‘right’ way, the space for confidence-sharing was gradually extended.

We found many examples of such guarded conversations in which it was necessary to read between the lines and gradually open up the conversation. However, as in all this analysis, context is crucial. All of the material presented so far occurred on the Quinza premises, usually in the kitchen, during office hours. It seems plausible to think that the dynamics off-premises and out of hours might be different and this was explored at the Christmas party. Such parties are interesting organizational phenomena in their own right, as shown by Rosen (1988), because they stand on the boundary between work and not-work, being somewhat informal but carrying much organizational meaning. At Quinza (and no doubt many other organizations) that greater informality – aided by the consumption of alcohol – meant confidential gossip was exchanged in a less guarded way and with less need to gradually open up the conversation. In the sense that the party crossed the line of work and not-work, it also facilitated movements ‘across the line’ of what was confidential and what was not.

Indeed, even during the work day in the run up to the evening of the party there was much sharing of confidential gossip about previous parties, including possible use of drugs, flirtations, personal appearance and so on. Much of this took place in the ladies’ toilet as women changed clothes and applied make-up. This again underscores how particular places (like the canteen) are the settings for confidential gossip, and also the value of ethnographic methods for accessing them. As the field notes record:

So the ladies’ [toilet] changed from simply just a come-and-go place to a dressing room. People chatted and interacted much more [on day of the party] compared to normal working hours’ toilet chitchat. For example, after a long discussion of make up:

Grace: {lowering volume} Unfortunately I ran into Andrea. She was like putting on another layer! And her perfume! Ugh! {rolling her eyes}

Lydia: Typical Andrea.

Once at the party, the talk became more open and was at least implicitly evaluative, for example:

Ross {to researcher}: I need to watch out for you. There are some weird guys in the company.

Georgina: Yes. There are! {emphatic tone}

Researcher: Really? I never met any.

Ross: There are. That's why we need to watch out for you. Who was that guy?

Researcher: I don't want to tell you {laugh}

Ross: {not laughing} Tell me, who is it?

Researcher: {hesitating} Ok. He is the one standing there {indicates with eyes}

Ross: I see {pause}. Good, now he is gone.

The subtext here is that “that guy” is a sexual ‘predator’ – something well-known to Ross and Georgina and by implication more generally within Quinza – and that researcher is being reluctantly encouraged to participate in the conversation. The other two are being more uninhibited than they would be in a normal work environment (i.e. in work time, on work premises), so they are across the line of what would normally be confidential, and they are trying to move the researcher across that line as well. This is the exact reverse of the example discussed above about the restructuring, where Aisha is guarded and gradually opens up to share a confidence with the researcher.

Finally in this section, it should be noted that ‘opening up’ is not always about someone gradually choosing, or being encouraged, to share confidential gossip. Sometimes sharing what one has been told in confidence is tempting, unprompted and may even lead to indiscretion. For example:

Ross: So you know how Richard never tells anyone about what he does on holiday? Well, I had one of those catch-up meetings with him. And he told me he always goes to this naturist colony. Imagine, Richard, NUDE {emphasis and laughing} – flopping around this village or whatever it is {imitates by moving body up and down}! He said, don't tell other people. But I've told everyone! It's just mind bitch!

Daisy: It's really a funny image! I can't believe it!

Rosie: It's so funny!

Ross reveals a story of Richard that generates a possibly contradictory image of him that triggers Daisy’s reaction as ‘I can’t believe it’. This last example is important because it serves as a reminder, firstly, that confidential gossip in organizations can be fun, as indicated by both Daisy and Rosie; and secondly that, like other forms of secrecy, there is a “seductive temptation [of breaking] through barriers by gossip or confession” (Simmel 1950, 466), as Ross indicates that he has told “everyone” because it is “mind bitch”. In that way, confidential gossip has an inherent fragility. Even if something is marked – as in this example by Richard’s request to Ross not to tell other people – as confidential, there is always the possibility that the confidence will be broken.

Concluding discussion

This paper began with the observation that confidential gossip is part of the everyday life of organizations, and as such was worthy of research. But researching the everyday entails more than simply recounting it. Rather, the aim is to explore it more deeply than we would on an ‘everyday’ basis. So whilst it may readily be agreed that confidential gossip occurs in organizations, what we have tried to show is how it occurs and, more specifically, how it gets separated from other kinds of interactions.

Just as ethnography is in general a suitable method for exploring the everyday in organizations, it is especially suitable for something like confidential gossip. For how is something that is concealed to be researched other than by getting inside the process to see what is going on? For all that this presents some practical and ethical challenges, which we have discussed, this paper has sought to show ‘what is going on’ when confidential gossip occurs.

Some of that is the same as has been revealed by previous research on gossip (for example how it may evaluate absent third parties), but in this paper we show how by combining those insights with those of secrecy research we can find gossip which is distinctive for being confidential. What makes it distinctive? Centrally, the answer is the drawing of boundaries that separate it off as confidential. This might be as simple as a direct verbal instructions are given (‘don’t tell X’) whilst other times it is a matter of gesture, tone of voice, or just assumption. Beyond that, we have also shown how inclusion in confidential gossip is negotiated on an ongoing basis, with inclusion and exclusion shifting over time, and how according to context the boundary is fluid and can be more or less relaxed.

Such ongoing negotiation indicates the temporality of boundary of confidential gossip. Yet this is not to imply a circle of negotiation-enactment-renegotiation-re-enactment as either the uni-

directional or the sole dimension of understanding the boundaries of confidential gossip. Rather, it points to the multilayered interactive dynamics within enactment and between enactment and negotiation: what lies underneath the enactment is an ongoing negotiation that reaffirms, refines and revises an agreement, and this enactment is itself the ground of what should be negotiated and agreed upon. In this sense, boundaries of confidential gossip are processual and recursive as they emerge and re-emerge in the constant interplay between knowing and not knowing, and through the tension of reaching a type of informal agreement regarding what is known, what can be discussed, and with whom.

We argued earlier that confidential gossip does not just mean ‘gossip plus confidentiality’ but rather that, by being confidential, it acquires a new kind of dynamic, with specific effects. This is that identified by secrecy theory, which draws particular attention to the power of secrets to shape social relations. That power is in part about the emotions associated with secrecy. In the material above we can see, for example, how worried Debra was that her mistake with the conference call might be talked about; how angry Tina becomes when she feels that her job seeking plans are being inappropriately discussed, and how upset the researcher feels when she is excluded from this discussion.

The power of secrecy also, and crucially, lies in the way it creates insider and outsider groups. For example, at the Christmas party, Ross and Georgina are trying to enrol the researcher into the insider group that knows about the sexual predator. Our argument is that, more than other forms of gossip, confidential gossip is far more potent because of the special status of secrecy. There is a degree of ‘thrill’ in being included in, say, Richard’s slightly embarrassing holiday habits. Equally, there is a hint of danger, as when Monica worries that Alana has overheard the confidential gossip about the ‘cheapskate’. These effects are specific to confidential gossip as

opposed to gossip in general in that they only arise to the extent that some people are or should be excluded from what is being discussed.

We referred earlier to Fine and Hallet's (2014) claim about the non-peripheral nature of everyday life in organizations. More specifically, they argue that what they call the 'meso-level' of the 'interaction order' is where researchers need to focus to understand the dynamics of group and organizational cultures (Fine and Hallett, 2014, 1787-8). One part of those dynamics can be seen to lie in how group (and perhaps organizational) cultures are shaped by the sharing of confidential gossip or, even, that this can be part of the very constitution of those groups qua groups.

It is important not to over-state this. We are not suggesting that confidential gossip is the main, or even a necessary, factor in the constitution of groups and we certainly do not have data to support such a claim. Rather, we can suggest that confidential gossip can sometimes be a factor within the constitution and ongoing dynamics of groups. It is also important to recognize that, at least within our research, confidential gossip does not necessarily involve deep, dark or dramatic secrets. Instead, they are quite mundane. But it is not the content of the secret that matters here, it is the mere fact of secrecy which gives rise to the potential power that comes from being included or not, and that inclusion is effected by the boundary processes we have described. Understanding such boundaries is just the first, but necessary, step in understanding the impact of confidential gossip on group and organizational cultures as complex and fluid milieux and this could be a fruitful area for future research.

As Clifford Geertz notes, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (1973, p.5). Through this paper, we can consider the webs as being constructed by social

vocabularies to withhold and communicate concepts of particular organizational life that give sense to and make sense of the social recognition of individuals living within. As one of the vocabularies, confidential gossip is not only a participant but also an expression of certain kinds of social relations. Whilst having acknowledged the mundanity of confidential gossip, it is this we suggest that makes it important and interesting, for it shows a seemingly unremarkable and easily overlooked process that contributes to the everyday experience of organizational life.

Notes

1. The distinction and relationship between participant observation and ethnography, especially in organization studies, is a fine and sometimes contested one (see Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). We run the terms together here to connote that our study used only participant observation from the various methods of ethnography, but that this observation was informed by an ethnographic sensibility.

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