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reflexive account  
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Title: Organisational gossip, *sense*-making and the spookfish: a reflexive account

**Abstract:**

This paper offers a reflective and reflexive account of doing research into gossip in healthcare organisations. It advances the concept of *sense*-making, drawing upon Weick's perspective theoretically and reflexively to incorporate a 'sixth sense' of intuition. The spookfish, which has developed highly specialised eyes to cope with very low light levels, is used as an organising metaphor to illustrate how attention to everyday talk can illuminate our understanding of gossip and intuition in organisational and managerial contexts. The paper exemplifies some practical aspects of working reflexively, illustrating how critical conversations and metaphor were used in the research process, and beyond, as a means of encouraging creative thought in the emergent scholarship of organisational gossip.

**Key words:** Organisational gossip, reflexivity, intuition, metaphor, sensemaking.

*Thus, the task is not so much to see what no one has yet seen; but to think what nobody has yet thought, about that which everybody sees.*

Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961)

## **1. Introduction**

The above quote is a clue to the paper, which is to think about gossip in a different way, and to do this by using the concept of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) in a different way. *Sense*-making is used here to represent a reflexive and literal use, engaging with gossip in terms of

the five senses of what we hear, see, touch, smell and taste, and a 'sixth sense' of intuition. The paper is also written in a different way to provoke new insights and perspectives about the often managerially maligned topic of gossip. Writing found in management and organisation studies journals, particularly in areas described as 'critical', is often obscure, dull and pretentious (Grey and Sinclair, 2006); as if 'describing and explaining organizational lives must invest itself with a language quite different to those lives' (p.445). I want to capture and convey some of the essence and language of gossip and how it is manifest in day-to-day organisational life, recognising the informal, 'chatty' characteristics of what is constituted and experienced as gossip. This paper is a reflexive account of research into gossip in nursing and healthcare organisations, and data excerpts are interwoven throughout as 'snippets of gossip'. Some names, such as those of research participants, who were all senior managers or clinicians, have been changed to maintain confidentiality, others haven't. The aim of the paper is to say what I have come to know about gossip through reflecting upon the processes of researching, writing and talking about it.

### *1.1 Reflexivity*

Reflexivity is an ambiguous and not unproblematic concept, which has only quite recently entered management discourse (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). The term is used in the research literature to acknowledge the role, influence, subjectivity and visibility of the researcher. It involves thinking about oneself, thinking about one's research, thinking back and thinking around, with the danger that the experience of the research is simply that of the researcher. From this perspective it is little more than self-indulgent narcissism, and Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) argue that without critical interrogation, reflexivity runs the risk of becoming a pointless exercise. My intention is to show *how* reflexivity was used to

produce thoughtful and interesting research, and point to new areas of inquiry into what for some people, is viewed as an intrinsically interesting topic, for example:

*Anne:* And when I told my boss this morning that you were coming to interview me, and Ken was with her at the time, and I said it was on gossip, and there was instant interest, it was ‘oh how interesting’. Whereas if you said it was about any other topic it would be ‘yeah right’. About any other topic to do with work, it’s just not interesting, but gossip opens everyone’s eyes.

Reflexive research practice involves *attending* to actions, thoughts, values, feelings and identity, and their effect upon others. The above data extract, with its attention to everyday talk, represents my attempt at ‘being reflexive’, as I asked participants if and how they had talked to others about the research. This was a way of stepping ‘outside’ and viewing self and subject from different angles (Alvesson, 2002). Being reflexive, and then describing and explaining this is not necessarily easy, so following Cunliffe (2003) the paper includes *italicised commentary*, based upon reflexive principles of:

- acknowledging the constitutive nature of our research conversations
- adopting multi-perspective practices
- questioning and challenging our own intellectual assumptions
- making sense of actions in practical and responsive ways
- constructing emerging practical theories rather than objective truths.

Such commentary, inserted at various points, draws upon insights, conversations with ‘critical friends’ and reflections occurring before, during and after doctoral research.

*Commentary: Acknowledging the constitutive nature of our research conversations. What I mean here is gossiping about gossip in an academic sense. Conversations I have had with others who share my interest have helped me see the role that gossip plays in the fabric of organising and organisations. David Sims got me thinking about gossip and organisational*

*management, and other organising processes, such as change, exist through and in gossiping and gossip. 'Tuning in' to gossip can give an indication of reactions to change, an 'early warning system, you'll know what to expect' as Bruce, a manager, said to me when interviewed. But gossip is also the 'Devil's Radio':*

*Gossip, gossip*

*Gossip, gossip*

*I heard it in the night*

*Words that thoughtless speak*

*Like vultures swooping down below*

*On the devil's radio...*

*George Harrison, 'Devil's Radio' (<http://georgeharrison.lyrics.info/devilsradio.html>, accessed 11/12/09). But perhaps 'reflexive gossip', as a form of mindful attention to everyday talk can help us to see beneath the surface of organising and organisations?*

Having introduced the concept of reflexive gossip, next up is the spookfish, used as an organising concept and metaphor to advance our understanding and re-thinking of organisational gossip.

## *1.2 Introducing the spookfish*

The deep-sea spookfish has developed highly specialised eyes, each with two parts to cope with very low light levels. The upward looking part of the eye uses a conventional lens to focus light onto the retina; the downward looking part is sub-divided into many reflecting light crystals, which collectively make up a composite mirror. The spookfish in effect has four eyes. The two looking up are sensitive to the small amount of sunlight that filters down, the two looking down act as mirrors detecting bioluminescent and reflective objects from

below. The research team who recently caught the first spookfish in the South Pacific Ocean believe that this unique anatomy improves the spookfish's ability to detect prey and spot predators in all directions (Wagner et al., 2009).

The deep-sea is a hostile environment; there are big fish with big teeth lurking in its gloomy depths and organisations are not so very different. During interviews using repertory grids (Cassell and Walsh, 2004) to elicit the characteristics of gossip and people who gossip, constructs relating to political awareness arose, for example:

*Richard:* They are older, very politically astute in the organisation, have been through a lot of organisational change and come out well - a survivor.

The spookfish provides an intriguing metaphor to better understand gossip for several reasons which have both theoretical and practical importance. Firstly the spookfish has evolved a particular way of seeing, and is able to 'make sense' of very low light forms as a means of surviving in a hostile environment. The spookfish's eyes have a 'conventional' lens *and* the ability to reflect light particles using its second set of eyes as mirrors. Similarly, our theoretical understanding of organisational gossip can be enhanced by using 'conventional' disciplinary lenses, as well as developing reflective and reflexive research practices that allow us to develop a multi-perspective 'composite mirror' on gossip. Secondly, the spookfish metaphor helps us to understand experiences of organisational gossip and its potential to help make sense of our environment through attending to multiple small sources of informal information. Finally, I propose that reflective attention to gossip is an, as yet unexplored, way of developing reflexive and intuitive management practices. These ideas are explored more fully in relation to *sense-making* later in the paper.

## 2. Background

Here I outline a brief history of gossip, and make explicit my position and interest in the field of gossip in organisations. My authorial position lies between the academic and professional disciplines of psychology and nursing. In my work as a nurse, gossip happened everyday, but so what? Nursing is a profession with a strong oral tradition, and communication is a fundamental aspect of nursing work. My real interest in gossip began with research I did in the early 1990s into perceptions of organisational culture in a 'post 1992' university in the U.K. (i.e. a former polytechnic). There I found gossip, which appeared as a glimmer in the data. One example (there were more) was:

*Kathryn:* Why are things done the way they are around here?

*Alex:* O.K, turn the tape recorder off, I'll tell you why things are REALLY done the way they are around here.

His reply was accompanied by head nodding and leaning forward to get closer to me (but not the tape recorder, which had been switched off). This was 'off the record'. It was gossip, and it illuminated deeper levels of the organisational culture in terms of *unobserved* values and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). This was also 'insider' research, as I was working as a lecturer in the same university, having recently moved from the world of nursing and hospital cultures. Alex's comment led to a significant 'aha' moment, helping me to begin to make sense of the new organisational culture in which I found myself.

Arguably Alex, who occupied a senior position, was simply behaving in the manner of an 'elite', sharing their knowledge of the world view and trade secrets with me, the new girl on the block.

If that were the case, the disclosure of gossip could be interpreted in relation to his role and

status in the organisation. However gossip also glimmered elsewhere in the data. For example, when using metaphor to describe the organisation ‘as if it were something else’:

*Richard:* There are people rather like in Henry VIII's court who happen to be favourites at the time and then drop out of favour...or probably the equivalent of the spy network, although not as formal as that, but analogous I think. Someone who is capable of listening to gossip ... it's fascinating, it really is, and as I say it's actually quite a good explanation, a good analogy of what really does go on.

*Ellen:* I've described this place as a leaky colander to people.... if you know people around the place you get told little bits of stories. ‘Did you know that so and so has been paid off, they got £X’ ‘they got £X?’ -and you know, there are lots of rumours and a lot of stories, any organisation has that.

The (then) literature around the storytelling organisation (e.g. Boje, 1991) was helpful in understanding the significance of the fragments of gossip I had found. Gossip and stories were artefacts of the organisational culture, and also a reflection of deeper organisational values and assumptions around power and influence. I was left with an increasing awareness of how pervasive gossip is at and about work, but puzzled by the absence of organisational analysis and research. Gossip appeared in research papers, but not as a topic of inquiry in its own right. For instance, in literature relating to conflict in organisations, where public, formal and rational aspects of conflict and conflict resolution submerged the private, informal and non-rational aspects of corridor conversations and gossip (e.g. Kolb and Putnam, 1992). The absence of empirical research into gossip can be attributed to rational and positivist ways of thinking that, in the past, have dominated the organisational and management literature. In addition, perceptions of gossip as a maligned managerial concept, and its uncritical evaluation as a ‘problem’ to be eliminated (e.g. Chapman, 2009) haven't helped. These perceptions cast gossip as a ‘tainted topic’, and something that incurs social and organisational disapproval (MacLean et al., 2006, p.59).

## 2.1 *A brief history of gossip*

The term gossip is associated with idle, trivial talk, groundless rumour, pejorative assumptions, traditionally seen as ‘women’s talk’ (Stewart and Strathern, 2004). The censure of gossip is linked with Biblical writings and the association of gossip with transgressions such as malice, envy, deceit and sloth (Schein, 1994). Historically, gossip was both disapproved of and punished, by public shaming, wearing of masks of torture with tongue spikes and burning. The structure of medieval society, with its dependence upon oral communication for news and strict codes of conduct was an important determining factor in both the prevalence and censure of gossip at that time. Ironically, the structures and strictures found in nursing and other professions, in the form of codes of conduct and management-driven targets, may have reproduced similar contemporary organisational conditions for gossip.

There are numerous philosophical considerations relating to the nature and outcomes of gossip, such as issues of human rights, freedom of speech, privacy, harm, and morality. Because of its potential to harm, moral condemnation of gossip is justifiable in some circumstances, for example spreading unsubstantiated malicious gossip. However a blanket prohibition of gossip on moral grounds is *not* justified because as Ben-Ze’ev (1994) comments, this focuses on extreme, non-typical cases, which has distorted the reputation and perceptions of gossip. He uses the analogy of eating - while excessive eating (or gossip) is harmful, this does not imply an intrinsic evil in eating (or gossip).

Knowledge about gossip is strewn across fields of social history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, loosely connected by threads about reputation, comparison and identity. Studies of gossip focus in varying degrees upon content, context and function. Gossip is a dynamic process of informal interpersonal communication, occurring between small groups of people, and it comes in many flavours: private and public; critical and uncritical; information sharing and judgemental; positive and negative; good and bad (e.g. Bergmann, 1993; Goodman and Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). While there are undoubtedly different types of gossip, arguably, apart from the notion of 'good gossip', terms like 'information sharing and judgemental' don't necessarily capture or describe the day-to-day experience of gossip:

*Kathryn:* What were your first thoughts when I approached you about participating in the research?

*Gill:* One thing that did strike me is why use the term gossip, because it does have quite negative connotations doesn't it?

*Kathryn:* Yes, when I started doing this I found myself talking about things like networks and informal communication, but quickly realised at the end of the day gossip is something that happens; people say things like 'close the door' and 'what's the gossip?' and.. [I'm quickly interrupted by Gill].

*Gill:* Yeah – they don't say 'close the door, let's informally network'.

Asking participants for their thoughts and 'first impressions' was a simple but effective way of getting reflexive feedback about how other people saw me and my subject. It was also a way of enabling further reflection upon gossip as an interesting topic:

*Ken:* I suppose my first thought was [pause] fairly, um, if I'm completely honest, I thought that's a fairly nebulous topic... and then there was an element of 'that is actually quite interesting', and since then I've been occasionally thinking about talking about gossip and my impression changed, because I think that gossip is not seen as high up on the agenda.

*Kathryn:* Is that because it has traditionally been seen as women's talk perhaps?

*Ken:* I think there's a gender difference, or I think there's a gender difference which is *claimed*, because people say 'oh no men are much worse gossips than women', so I think it's gendered issue, it's seen as a female attribute, and yet the newspapers are full of gossip...interesting.

### **3. Approaching gossip as a research topic**

The void in the literature around organisational gossip that I had stumbled into was the impetus for doctoral research, but it took a while before I plucked up courage to make a start. My hesitation was influenced by gossip's poor reputation. Heidegger (1962) for example dismissed gossip as inauthentic discourse, too trivial to aid genuine understanding of the more profound aspects of human existence. Best not go there I thought. But, as I talked about my research ideas informally, there was much curiosity and interest. I heard a variation of 'you must come to where I work, there's loads of it!' many times, similar to Sims' (2005) observation in *You Bastard: A Narrative Exploration of the Experience of Indignation within Organizations*: 'Many people seem keen to talk about the topic of this paper, but not to write about it' (p. 1629). So it was with gossip.

Maybe the reluctance to research and write about topics like indignation and gossip is because they fall outside of 'conventional' areas of inquiry; but that is not to say they should be ignored and neglected. I found a supervisor, Clive Fletcher, who was interested and encouraging, and I embarked upon a part-time PhD in psychology in the mid 1990s. A psychological lens was clearly just one of many perspectives needed, and an interdisciplinary approach was adopted. The concept of sensemaking, which is about developing ideas, putting things into frameworks, constructing meaning and mutual understanding, redressing surprise and

patterning (Weick, 1995), was a core theoretical strand. It also became a metaphorical 'ball of thread' with which to navigate the maze of sprawling literatures and paradigms. This particular metaphor - there will be more - comes from the Greek myth about Theseus using a ball of fleece to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. I was navigating and assimilating many perspectives and paradigms, something that Alvesson (2002, p.172) refers to as 'reflexive pragmatism'. Jumping between paradigms, he suggests, is a very difficult sport, but needed to widen one's horizons and look self-critically at favoured assumptions.

*Commentary: Adopting multi-perspective practices .The first time I presented a paper about my research at an organisation studies conference was scary. I had just begun my PhD, and was presenting the emerging research agenda and methods. I wasn't sure that I had really understood the call for papers with its talk of 'power/knowledge discourses' and 'inter-subjectivity'. I felt a long way out of my comfort zone of nursing and organisational psychology. I remember, with a tinge of embarrassment now, practicing my presentation in front of a video camera and watching it – a first exercise in practical reflexivity as I tried to imagine how others from different disciplines might see me and my research agenda. The paper went quite well, no really hard questions, but lacked a little spontaneity on my part. At the end a woman came up and said quietly 'I just wanted to say I enjoyed your paper, it was the first one I could really understand'. This comment resonated with me; I had found some of the new perspectives I was encountering difficult to comprehend, as if written in a new language, some of which was impenetrable, confusing and irritating. We had a little gossip, reflecting on the irony that there was another reading of power/knowledge that was elitist and oppressive. Paper given, I relaxed and noted that Mike Noon was also presenting at the conference, great! His 1993 paper (with Rick Delbridge) 'News from behind my hand: gossip in organizations' had influenced my research agenda and I wondered what other suggestions*

*he might have. I asked what he was doing with regard to research into organisational gossip; he smiled and said 'not too much yet, it's been really difficult to come up with an operational definition'.*

### *3.1 The problem of definition*

The definition of gossip is problematic because of the numerous disciplinary underpinnings, which 'tend to perceive gossip differently with different authors within each discipline rarely agreeing on what gossip is' (Noon and Delbridge, 1993, p.23). This is further compounded by gossip's relationship to a number of other communicative and conversational phenomena, such as chatting and storytelling. Evolutionary psychology proposes that language evolved to allow us to gossip, defining it in terms of the exchange of information about other people/social matters (Dunbar, 1996; 2004). On the other hand a recent sociological analysis, defines gossip in more precise terms as 'unsanctioned evaluative talk about people not present' (Hallett, Harger and Eder, 2009. p.587).

It is not necessarily easy or necessary to try and squeeze gossip into narrow disciplinary boxes, which can be a bit like trying to nail jelly to a tree; but nor is it helpful to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach which ignores the complexity and nuances of gossip. Flexibility of thought is needed, and gossip is best thought of as a multi-faceted prototypical category, lacking clear-cut boundaries as to what constitutes membership of such a category (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). Some items within a prototypical category may be so similar or so different to the prototype that there is absolutely no doubt about their inclusion/exclusion. But there are borderline cases, as illustrated by the story of the 'most-most' (cited in Varzi, 2001). This

story is in Saul Bellow's 1964 novel *Herzog*, which follows five days in the life of Moses Herzog, a failed academic whose wife has recently left him for his best friend (a not uncommon topic of gossip in itself). The story of the most-most is about a club in New York where people are the most of every type: the hairiest bald man, the baldest hairy man and so on. Every Saturday night there is a competition to tell them apart, and the person who can differentiate between the hairiest bald man and the baldest hairy man gets a prize, but as Varzi (2001) points out:

There is no sharp boundary demarcating the category of bald men, no precise number of hairs separating the bald from the hairy. Hence it makes no sense to suppose that one can identify the hairiest bald man...Some people are clearly bald, and some people are clearly hairy, but between these two sorts of people there exist a variety of borderline cases (p.135) .

When researching gossip, there will always be a tension between the need for some conceptual clarity on the one hand, and the vagueness of the phenomenon being investigated on the other. In Michelson, van Iterson and Waddington (forthcoming) we propose minimum criteria such as evaluative talk (written or spoken) between at least persons about an absent third person/s. This identifies core elements of gossip so that some accumulation of research findings can occur across studies, but it is also necessary to think about offering more criteria or attributes when studying gossip in particular contexts and/or perspectives. When conducting interviews and talking about what I meant by gossip in my own research I used the following attributes: (i) gossip is informal talk; (ii) occurring between small groups of 2 or more people; (iii) concerning the verbal exchange of information; (iv) about work related

issues. At various points and in various ways I asked participants for their own constructs and definitions of gossip, arising from their day-to-day experiences. Here is one of my favourites:

*Ian:* OK – gossip is a way of presenting a collection of thoughts and opinions that don't necessarily have a basis in proven fact or evidence. We gossip about people, their opinions, their attitudes, their physical size and shape, their cultural and social tastes, their appearance, their non-appearance in certain situations. About people's actions, about other people's reactions to those actions. We gossip about other people's gossip, [laughs] it just goes on and on doesn't it?

The notion of 'truth' in gossip which is reflected here is clearly selective and partial. Does this matter?

*Commentary:* *Constructing emerging practical theories rather than objective truths. I am reminded of something that Pamela, my sister and also a nurse, said to me in a telephone conversation when we were catching up about what was going on in our work and in nursing. Pamela was unsure where our talk was going and when I explained where I thought it was going, she said in a rather exasperated manner: 'Oh, that's you all over Kathryn - there you go again, off on a tangent with a grain of truth'. This was an astute observation; I have a tendency to make conceptual leaps of thought when talking with people I know well about areas of shared interest and experience. 'Home truths' like this are a way of reflexively and critically evaluate my thinking, and such comments from Pamela - and others - provide a 'reality check', which are useful when trying to construct practical theories. The phrase 'going off on a tangent with a grain of truth' struck me, and it said something to me about the relationship between gossip and knowledge, and the small truth claims that glimmer in gossip. Can a grain of truth become a pearl of wisdom? What conditions, angles and processes might help a grain of truth expressed as gossip become usable organisational knowledge? And usable to whom, why and how? Thinking back to the 'aha' moment when I*

*heard 'off the record' gossip, at the time it didn't matter if it was truth or trivia, what did matter was how it helped me make sense of and understand what I saw, heard and experienced.*

### 3.2 *Summary of research methods and findings*

I used mixed-methods and a top and bottom approach, looking at organisational and individual levels of analysis (for detail see Waddington, 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; Waddington and Fletcher 2005). Essentially I wanted to know who gossips to whom, about what, and what (if any) difference gender, position in the organisation and organisational size might make. I collected data from 96 qualified nurses using repertory grids, in depth interviews, critical incident technique and structured diary records. The intention was to capture, far as possible, some of the ephemeral and diverse nature of gossip in work settings. An analytical framework was developed using template and immersion/crystallization styles of analysis to combine data and build up a thematic picture (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). The broad findings are summarised below:

- Gossip is a subjectively and socially constructed multidimensional phenomenon
- There are rules that differentiate gossip from other forms of communication
- It is the individual who gossips, while the organisation provides the content, context, opportunities and triggers
- Gossip is both a problem solving *and* emotion focused coping strategy for dealing with work related stress
- Gossip is both a cause of, *and* a defence against, anxiety in nursing and healthcare organisations.

I then re-examined the findings using postmodernism as a reflexive device to sharpen my thinking and sensemaking and to think differently with, and about, the data and findings (Alvesson, 2002). Gossip is deeply embedded into the (un)professional culture of nursing, which I re-interpreted as gossip as ‘unofficial’ nursing discourse, used as a means of expressing resistance to the dominant discourses such as health service reform and managerialism. Power is also manifest in the informal and unofficial discourse of gossip, and the interpersonal relationships and networks it sustains. There are aspects of gossip which are private/hidden which can also be understood in relation to the ‘micropolitics’ of conversations. Micropolitics is about networks, coalitions, political and personal strategies to effect or resist change (Morley 1999). In other words do people challenge or collude with the status quo? Gossip is a potentially powerful but paradoxical influence here; while the topics and subjects of gossip, which might include bullying, racism or poor practice for example, remain in unmanaged spaces, behind hands and closed doors, the status quo is maintained.

In practice, re-interpretation of the findings consisted of cycles of immersion and re-experiencing of the data, and the ingredients were myself, time, intellectual honesty, and a lot of gossiping about gossip.

*Commentary: Questioning and challenging our own intellectual assumptions. This sometimes felt uncomfortable, unpleasant and voyeuristic – was it OK to root around in the minutiae of other peoples’ lives in order to advance my academic career? I worked with a process of peer supervision, sharing my thinking and engagement with the literature and data with other academic and practitioner colleagues who acted as ‘critical friends’. They questioned my interpretations, offered other explanations and helped me to ‘see’ things that had previously been hidden. We joked that the immersion/crystallisation style of data analysis was like*

*‘working inside a jam pan’ – a contained, intense experience of boiling things down, of turning one set of ingredients into something else. I was also working with Clive, my PhD supervisor, who freely admitted that he came from a fairly traditional organisational psychology position, but was open to new ideas and perspectives .Sometimes though I strayed a bit too far, particularly when leaping across paradigms and disciplines and stopping to have a look around different landscapes. Clive would rein me in with a gentle reminder that I was doing a PhD in psychology, not sociology, for example. This was sensible advice, universities have academic standards, organisational and disciplinary reputations to uphold; there are rules, conventions and gatekeepers. As a doctoral student I it was easier to question and challenge my own intellectual assumptions, than to challenge disciplinary and institutional assumptions.*

#### **4. Sense-making and metaphor**

I mentioned earlier that Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking was used as a metaphorical ball of thread to navigate the maze of theories, paradigms, and literatures. Unexpectedly, it also afforded a literal understanding of gossip which arose from reflections upon the use of metaphor in the research process.

##### *4.1 Smells like gossip - some reflections*

I am sitting on a train, this time going to a qualitative research conference to present a paper about peer supervision and reflexivity. Jennie my co-presenter and critical friend is taking the jam pan (see commentary above) in her car, and we plan to use the jam pan as a visual metaphor in our discussion about doing interpretive data analysis. I am anticipating questions

and thinking about what I might say if asked for a metaphor for gossip. An image immediately comes to mind: a stagnant pond with putrid vapours drifting upwards. Not nice, but I think again. Not all gossip is nice, and I wonder what the image of a stagnant pond might say about organisational gossip? I begin to think, on the train, quite literally and playfully about *sense*-making. We *hear* gossip (or not) often in slightly lowered tones, or behind closed doors; we *see* gossip in non-verbal communication, behind hands, in a quick nod or raising of eyebrows; we are *touched* by gossip which can be very hurtful, but gossip can also express care and concern; being left with a bad *taste* in your mouth after excessive/binge gossiping; but can we really *smell* gossip? Does gossip have a metaphorical smell? Is the bad smell coming off a stagnant organisational pond a reflection of stasis and a reluctance to challenge the status quo? I reflect on the smell of gossip a bit more, not all smells are bad and nice smells are a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Smells are also a warning, alerting us to a fire, or a car's imminent mechanical or electrical failure. I wonder, can the metaphorical smell of organisational gossip signal something worse to come?

Looking back on this now I can offer at least two interpretations. Either I had driven too many unreliable old cars in the past, and was simply recalling the smells of burning oil or electrics that often forewarned of a wait for roadside breakdown services. Or, I was experiencing what Cornellison, Kafouros and Lock (2005) refer to as a semantic leap. For reflexive purposes and to support the arguments I am developing in this paper I will focus on the latter interpretation, but want to acknowledge that many, many experiences can creatively shape and influence our thoughts and ideas. I carried on with this *sense*-making train of thought on the train, which led me to consider further a 'sixth sense' of intuition.

#### 4.2 *Gossip and intuition*

The notion of semantic leaps points to ‘‘non-compositional’ processes that are at work in metaphor, that evoke the imaginative capacities of meaning construction, and that eventually lead to the production of a new, emergent meaning’ ( Cornellison , Kafouros and Lock, 2005, p.1548). In nursing and other areas of professional practice, intuition is an unconscious information processing activity used by experienced practitioners, which is unavailable to an inexperienced practitioner (Benner, 1984). The outcomes of intuition are difficult to explain, often described in terms of a ‘hunch’ or ‘gut feeling’ (Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox and Sadler-Smith, 2008). Intuition is a highly creative process, fundamental to hypothesis generation in science and medicine (Greenhalgh, 2002). Through gossip we also generate informal working hypotheses that can be supported or refuted:

*Kathryn:* Can you tell me something about your day-to-day experience of gossip?

*Steve:* I work within an area which has become a ‘repository for gossip’ and information often comes into the directorate as gossip and we have to differentiate carefully between the verification of tittle-tattle and the embellishment of story – a sort of triangulation of gossip if you like.

What I think Steve (previously an expert clinical practitioner in nursing) is talking about here is how he is using intuitive judgements in his practice as a senior manager. Recent reflective conversations about organisational gossip and intuition with experienced clinicians who also have senior management responsibilities points to an interesting contradiction, summarised as a composite comment: *In a clinical context, you ignore your gut feelings at your peril, patients’ lives may be at risk; in an organisational and managerial context you often just ignore your gut feelings, and next thing there is an inquiry: Who knew what, when did they know it, and what did they do about it?*

What is known from public inquiries into professional and organisational failures and subsequent human tragedy, both in the UK and elsewhere, is that the underlying reasons and concerns are often known of, but are not heard; heard but ignored; or silenced (Alaszewski , 2002; Ceci, 2004; Hendrickson and Dayton, 2006; van Iterson and Clegg, 2008). Concerns may be expressed as gossip, but because of gossip's reputation as a maligned management concept, trivial discourse and tainted talk, such concerns are likely to be discredited or neglected. Thus that which is 'known' through gossip is not always that which is 'heard'. There are some difficulties, of course, in assuming that all forms of gossip need to be heard, because some gossip is frankly malicious and inaccurate. Nevertheless I suggest there are some similarities between gossip and intuition in an organisational and management context that are worthy of further exploration. For example a social intuitionist model proposes that moral intuitions appear at the fringe of consciousness, as *evaluative feelings* about the character or actions of a person, while evaluative evidence may be absent (Haidt and Bjorklund, 2008). Maybe this moral dimension is what links the concepts of intuition and gossip? Intuition is about the capacity to attain direct knowledge or understanding without rational thought through non-conscious mental processes and holistic associations (Hodgkinson et al., 2009). This is illustrated in the following repertory grid construct:

*Reg:* They wouldn't go for the more salacious side of gossip and are more likely to gossip about events, but are good at looking at subtleties, are good at making connections, and have 'aha' moments.

Maybe, going back to an earlier snippet of gossip, it's about a non-conscious process of seeing patterns and connecting 'little bits of stories'? Intuition research is moving in from the fringes, and so is gossip research. There is in my view a compelling need and opportunity for further research to examine the relationship between organisational gossip and intuitive managerial practice.

## 5. Bringing it all together

Alvesson et al. (2008) argue that reflexivity should yield tangible results such as ideas, concepts, challenges to conventional thinking, or suggestions for new research, and I hope this account has gone some way to achieving this.

*Commentary: Making sense of actions in practical and responsive ways. I have endeavoured to show how I made sense of my actions as a reflexive researcher and writer. This has been the 'what', and the 'so what' has been an attempt at talking about complex thought processes, meanings and understandings. I have tried to think and write differently about organisational gossip to help readers to 'see' its potential as a neglected management concept. The 'now what' is a call for further research into the relationship between gossip and intuition, and consideration of the individual, group and organisational processes necessary to turn the 'bad smell' of gossip into forewarning of potential organisational failure. The spookfish metaphor helps us to see and understand how reflexive gossip, in this case mindful attention to glimmers of gossip found in everyday talk, can illuminate and reflect what really goes on in the murky depths of organisations.*

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