

# Minorities' experiences of office gossip



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**Orientation:** Office gossip can result in someone from a minority group feeling powerless, being resigned to the out-group and be deprived of social networks.

**Research purpose:** This article sought to explore the extent to which research has been conducted on minorities' experiences of office gossip within organisations.

**Motivation for the study:** Previous organisational research on employees' experiences of office gossip focused on employees in general and not on specific groups of employees such as minority workers. The literature review of this study therefore points to key areas identified in past studies where experiences of minorities related to gossip are lacking.

**Research approach/design and method:** Based on a systematic review of the literature published over the last 60 years, the author focused on key areas where office gossip related to minorities is lacking.

**Main findings:** The author found that existing research relating to minorities' experiences of office gossip had focused only on two categories: women minorities and racial minorities. Limited research had been conducted on other minority groups' experiences of office gossip.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Organisations could benefit from having knowledge about the experiences of minority employees, such as foreign nationals, gays, lesbians and obese individuals, to mention but a few. Managers could exert influence to change a work environment and culture to be more inclusive so as to minimise office gossip that would possibly make minorities feel excluded.

**Contribution/value-add:** This article aimed to fill the gap identified in the literature regarding research on workplace gossip as related to minority employees.

## Introduction

Think gossip, think negative outcome! However, not all gossip is negative. Most religious scriptures and society do not sanction negative gossip. Nevertheless, because of its pervasive nature, individuals constantly engage in some form of gossip, be it positive or negative. Hence, whether at a wedding or at work, gossip forms a major part of social interactions (Carrim, 2016). The reputation of an individual can be tarnished or uplifted within a split second as a result of gossip.

Gossip can be categorised into malicious or non-malicious gossip (Smith, 2014). In their study, Kiss, Meester, Kristensen and Braeckman (2014) state that individuals who support unacceptable behaviour, such as gossip, are likely to experience social wealth in their organisations. Those who are the targets of such unacceptable behaviour generally receive insufficient support and are usually isolated (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell and Labianca (2010) suggest that one can choose to steer clear of gossip on public forums but it is difficult to avoid gossip in everyday face-to-face social interactions. According to these authors, gossip is perceived as a socially destructive activity as it can damage a person's reputation.

Smith (2014) cautions organisations against malicious observers: these are individuals who come across as charming most of the time in an attempt to disguise their negative behaviour. Therefore, it is essential that organisations make their employees aware that gossip can cause damage, even to third parties (Vickers, 2014). However, Michelson, Van Iterson and Waddington (2010) point out that gossip is not always negative – talking about others behind their back does not translate into stabbing them in the back. They give the example of a supervisor who advises an employee on how to improve his or her chances of being promoted by his or her manager (absent third party). This behaviour on the part of the supervisor cannot be regarded as gossip if the manager is not opposed to such knowledge being shared with the employee.

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Much research has been conducted on the causes (positive and negative), processes and outcomes of workplace gossip in recent years (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010; Grosser et al., 2010; Kanteti, 2015; Kiss et al., 2014; McAndrew, 2014; Smith, 2014). In the majority of studies, the focus has been mainly on malicious gossip, its processes and outcomes as experienced by employees (McAndrew, 2014). Some research has been conducted on positive gossip, which has been found to assist in facilitating group membership and information transmission (Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery, 2014; Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015).

Previous research indicates that women, as a marginalised group and racial minorities in the workplace, have been targets of malicious gossip (Carrim, 2016; Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009; McAndrew, 2014). Recent studies on office gossip have contributed to knowledge in the field of management. These studies, which focus on managers as a minority group, have found that employees' gossip about their managers is positive (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012a; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010).

The first objective of the current review is to ascertain the extent to which gossip literature focuses on the experiences of minority employees. The second objective is to determine the theoretical perspectives used to investigate workplace gossip.

This article firstly summarises the most recent topics, specifically why gossip is a complex phenomenon to explore. Some of the causes of gossip, positive and/or negative, are also investigated. The process and outcomes of both positive and negative gossip are also examined from the literature. Also, the extent to which previous research on gossip focused on theories is examined. This information is used to inform suggestions regarding how gossip relating to minority employees can be explored to advance future research in this area. Overall, the author hopes that a better understanding of office gossip will assist in providing a more complete picture which will inform organisational researchers on how they can conduct research on an unexplored area.

## Scope of the literature review

The author's review includes articles that focus on gossip in the workplace that have been published in psychology and sociology journals and general journals (*Annual Review of Psychology*, *Review of General Psychology*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *Psychologist-Manager Journal*, *Social Networks*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* and *Journal of Sociology*), business and management journals (*Group & Organization Management*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Organizational Dynamics*, *Organization Studies*, *European Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Human Resources Management Research* and *International Journal of Human Resource Management*), communication journals (*Southern Journal of Communication* and *Australian Journal of Communication*) and other miscellaneous journals (*Burnout*

*Research, Living, Working and Learning Beyond, Family Journal*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Research, International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health, Negotiation and Conflict Management Research, Contemporary Nurse*, and *Hudson Review*).

The first step in the article selection process was to search for journals in the period 1950–2018 for the following terms: office gossip, minority, employee, workplace, positive, negative, mobbing, bullying, malicious, causes, process and outcomes. A total of 233 articles met the initial search criteria.

The second step concerned closely reviewing each article to determine if it focused on empirical research that was related to office gossip and the above-mentioned search terms. This process resulted in identifying 41 articles that formed the foundation of the review (see Table 1 for a summary of the studies).

## Results

### Main themes covered

The review of the identified articles is organised into the following themes: challenges studying the phenomenon of office gossip, causes of gossip: positive and negative, gossip as a process and outcomes of gossip as depicted in Figure 1.

A review and integration of the findings within each of the themes in Figure 1 follows highlighting some of the salient areas of research in these sections. In so doing, the review commences with the first research area, namely, challenges studying the phenomenon of office gossip followed by the remaining themes.

### Challenges studying the phenomenon of office gossip

Office gossip, although ubiquitous in the workplace, is not a simple construct to investigate. There are various challenges related to the study of office gossip. Firstly, office gossip does not consist of simple fixed definitions or standardised explanations (Foster, 2004) and is therefore a contested issue (Shallcross et al., 2011). Organisational researchers have defined the concept from various perspectives. For example, Noon and Delbridge (1993, p. 25) define gossip as 'the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting'. This definition explains which type of conversation relates to gossip (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Thus, harmless information is discarded as it is believed that information that is communicated should have some impact on targets (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Gilmore (1978, p. 92), on the other hand, defines gossip as 'critical talk about third parties'. Spacks (1982, p. 20) regards the term as almost synonymous to 'women's talk'. Michelson and Mouly (2004) argue that the inclusion of value-laden information only in the definition of gossip is limiting as it ignores the different functions and purposes that gossip may serve. Kniffin and Wilson (2010, p. 4) point out that the reason for inconsistent definitions of gossip lies in the fact that the concept arises coincidentally in the investigation of other

**TABLE 1:** Office gossip target articles.

Authors	Title	Purpose	Method	Sample	Theoretical perspective	Key findings
Akgeyik (2012)	The multidimensionality of workplace gossip (a study on the perceptions of employees about gossip)	To ascertain employees' perceptions of gossip in 10 Turkish organisations	Quantitative method using Sharpsteen's (1988) gossip questionnaire	424 participants	None	Women engage more than men in gossip; high level of morality reduces gossip
Altuntaş, Altun and Akyil (2014)	The nurses' form of organizational communication: What is the role of gossip?	How nurses use gossip as an informal communication tool in Turkish hospitals	Quantitative method using questionnaire developed from gossip literature	420 nurses from four hospitals	None	Nurses use gossip to share information about work conditions when they are angry
Aquino and Thau (2009)	Workplace victimisation: Aggression from the target's perspective	To compare several types of aggressive behaviour towards employees	Systematic literature review	-	None	There is a lack of research conducted on victimisation from employees' perspectives
Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs (2004)	Gossip as cultural learning	To ascertain how gossip allows people to learn how to live in their cultural environment	Quantitative method using questionnaire developed from gossip literature	58 undergraduate Psychology students	Theory of evolution	Gossip is not always derogatory and sometimes strangers are targets of office gossip
Beersma and Van Kleef (2011)	How the grapevine keeps you in line: Gossip increases contributions to the group	To ascertain when group members have a high tendency to gossip, do individual contributions to group gossip increase	Quantitative method using an experimental design	147 students from a large university in the Netherlands	None	Gossip controls self-serving behaviours in groups Gossip is essential for group survival
Carrim (2016)	'Shh... quiet! Here they come' Black employees as targets of office gossip	Black employees' experiences of office gossip	Qualitative method using semi-structured interviews	24 black employees from a historically white South African university	None	Gossip undermined the morale and work performance of targets of gossip
Crothers et al (2009)	Clique, rumours and gossip by the water cooler: Female bullying in the workplace	To explore gossip which leads to workplace bullying in women	Systematic review on relational bullying was examined	None	None	The authors provided recommendations to managers in addressing relational bullying in the workplace
Dodig-Crnkovic and Anokhina (2008)	Workplace gossip and rumour: The information ethics perspective	To explore the role of gossip in social networks	Literature review on gossip in social networks	None	None	An interdisciplinary deeper understanding of gossip is needed in information communication technology
Duffy and Sperry (2007)	Workplace mobbing: Individual and family health consequences	To explore the health consequences of mobbing	Qualitative method using case studies	Two employees working in a university	None	Mobbing is related to workplace gossip
Dunbar (2004)	Gossip in evolutionary perspective	To explore gossip as a means of controlling free riders	Systematic literature review	None	None	Gossip can be used to control free riders by group members
Ellwardt et al (2012a)	Who are the objects of positive and negative gossip at work? A social network perspective on workplace gossip	To explore the targets of positive and negative gossip	Quantitative study using surveys asking network questions	36 employees working in a Dutch child protection institution	Social network approach	Both positive and negative gossip focus on colleagues' own social groups Targets of negative gossip are from low informal status groups. Targets of positive gossip are more evenly spread out
Ellwardt, Wittek and Wielers (2012b)	Talking about the boss: Effects of generalised and interpersonal trust on workplace gossip	To explore positive and negative gossip about managers	Quantitative study using employee survey and network surveys	190 employees working in a Dutch child protection institution	Relational approach	Negative gossip about managers increases when employees have infrequent contact with managers, when low trust exists and when managers are not friendly
Farley et al (2010)	On coffee talk and break-room chatter: Perceptions of women who gossip in the workplace	To know the perception of others about gossips	Quantitative study using tendency to gossip questionnaire	128 students from Baltimore University and Albright College	None	High-frequency gossips and those who gossiped negatively were least liked and had less power
Ferrari (2015)	In praise of gossip: The organizational functions and practical applications of rumours in the workplace	To provide positive applications of gossip and to make managers aware of the various functions of gossip	Systematic literature review	-	None	Gossip can assist in reducing costs, improving coordination and control
Georganta et al (2014)	Talking behind their backs: Negative gossip and burnout in hospitals	To find the relationship of gossip with burnout, job engagement, suboptimal care and patient safety in public hospitals	Quantitative survey	532 doctors and nurses working in hospitals in Greece, Croatia, Romania, Republic of Macedonia and Turkey	None	Negative gossip is positively correlated with depersonalisation, suboptimal care and job engagement. Negative gossip was negatively correlated with job engagement and personal patient safety
Gilmore (1978)	Varieties of gossip in a Spanish rural community	To look at different types of gossip in a specific community	Qualitative study (observations by an anthropologist)	A small towns' inhabitants	None	Individuals gossip in groups as well as in communities
Grosser et al (2010)	A social network analysis of positive and negative gossip in organizational life	To understand, using social network analysis, how employees' tendency to engage in gossip is driven by their relationship ties	Mixed-method qualitative interviews; quantitative-sociometric and psychometric data collection	40 employees in a medium-sized enterprise in the USA	None	Expressive relationship ties between employees are positively correlated with engaging in both positive and negative gossip. Instrumental workflow ties are related to negative gossip
Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca and Ellwardt (2012)	Hearing it through the grapevine: Positive and negative workplace gossip	To explore the functions of gossip and how managers can deal with it effectively in the organisation	Conceptual paper	None	None	The authors provide advice to managers in handling workplace gossip
Hafen (2004)	Organizational gossip: A revolving door of regulation and resistance	To focus on gossip as a communicative practice	Qualitative study focused on narrative	31 employees from four different workplaces	None	Gossip is regarded as a social capital that encourages workplace deviance behaviour

Table 1 continues on the next page →

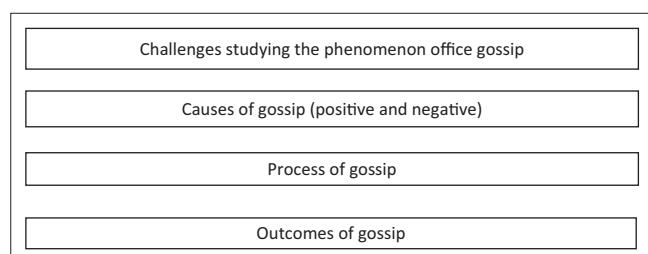
**TABLE 1 (Continues...):** Office gossip target articles.

Authors	Title	Purpose	Method	Sample	Theoretical perspective	Key findings
Kanteti (2015)	Demographic differences in workplace gossip behaviour in organisations – An empirical study on employees in small and medium enterprises	To examine the link between demographic variables and gossip	Quantitative study using self-designed questionnaires	130 employees from small and medium-sized enterprises	None	Gossip varied in terms of different demographics in the workplace
Kieffer (2013)	Rumours and gossip as forms of bullying: Sticks and stones?	To examine the construction, maintenance, proliferation and management of gossip from a psychoanalytic perspective	Critical analysis intervention	Three case studies	Psychoanalysis	Gossip in a group creates a hostile environment and leads to bullying of targets
Kiss et al (2014)	Relationships of organizational social capital with the presence of 'gossip and slander', 'quarrels and conflicts', sick leave, and poor work ability in nursing homes	To explore organisational social capital (networks) in the presence of gossip	Quantitative study based on survey	239 employees working in 11 different nursing homes	None	Significant association was found between organisational social capital (networks) and gossip
Kniffin and Wilson (2010)	Evolutionary perspectives on workplace gossip: Why and how gossip can serve groups	To show, using an evolutionary approach, that gossip is a natural part of organisations	Qualitative case studies	Case studies on cattle ranchers, team and airline company employees	Evolutionary framework of multi-level selection theory	Workplace gossip can serve a positive function within groups
Kuo et al (2015)	Gossip in the workplace and the implications for Human Resource Management: A study of gossip and its relationship to employee cynicism	To develop knowledge regarding the association between gossip and employee behaviour	Quantitative study using questionnaires	362 employees across a range of industries in Taiwan	Social information theory and social cognitive theory	Job-related gossip predicted cynicism and non-job-related gossip showed a weaker effect to employee cynicism
Kurland and Pelled (2000)	Passing the word: Towards a model of gossip and power in the workplace	To build a conceptual model of gossip and its effect on employees who initiate it	A conceptual paper	None	None	Exploring the role power plays in employees becoming targets of office gossip
Leymann (1990)	Mobbing and psychological terror at workplaces	To explore the negative impact of mobbing	A conceptual paper	None	None	The different elements of mobbing and its consequences are described
McAndrew (2014)	The 'sword of a woman': Gossip and female aggression	To explore competitive gossip amongst women	A conceptual paper	None	None	Women tend to be more aggressive in their gossip against women
McAndrew, Bell and Garcia (2007)	Who do we tell and whom do we tell on? Gossip as a strategy for status enhancement	To explore who would individuals pass gossip to and their likelihood of spreading gossip	A conceptual paper	None	Multi-level selection theory	Men are more likely to spread gossip to their lovers and women tend to spread gossip amongst self-sex friends and boyfriends
Michelson and Mouly (2000)	Rumour and gossip in organisations: A conceptual study	To examine the role of women's gossip in organisations	A conceptual paper	None	None	Women are not always the main instigators of office gossip
Michelson and Mouly (2004)	Do loose lips sink ships? The meaning, antecedents and consequences of rumour and gossip in organisations	To examine the meaning, management and reasons of gossip	Systematic literature review	None	None	Different gossip serves different purposes and results in different outcomes
Michelson et al (2010)	Gossip in organizations: Contexts, consequences, and controversies	To examine the context, outcomes, challenges and controversies of gossip	Systematic literature review	None	None	The beginning and end points of gossip are not always clear. The ethical arguments and effects of gossip depend on who the listener, gossiper and target is
Noon and Delbridge (1993)	News from behind my hand: Gossip in organisations	To examine the importance of workplace gossip	Systematic literature review	None	None	Gossip is an intrinsic part of organisational life. It offers the individual social mobility and escapism
Shallcross, Ramsay and Barker (2011)	The power of malicious gossip	To explore malicious gossip from the targets	Qualitative study – interviews	212 participants	None	Targets are expelled from the organisation through a process of mobbing. Colleagues as well as managers are involved in terrorising the target
Shallcross, Ramsay and Barker (2013)	Severe workplace conflict The experience of mobbing	To understand how malicious gossip is conceptualised and the formal and informal relations within organisations	Qualitative study – interviews	15 participants	None	The study identified five phases of workplace mobbing related to gossip
Shallcross, Sheehan and Ramsay (2008)	Workplace mobbing Expectations in the public sector	To explore the counter-productive behaviour of mobbing as a result of gossip	Qualitative study – interviews	Eight women participants part of a support group who experienced workplace mobbing	None	Environment within the public sector is toxic and high in mobbing
Smith (2014)	Evil acts and malicious gossip: A multi-agent model of the effects of gossip in socially distributed person perceptions	To investigate individuals' perception on gossip	Quantitative study using experiments	20 targets and 20 observers	None	Perceivers can use gossip to protect themselves against the influence of malicious gossip
Spacks (1982)	In praise of gossip	To provide an overview of gossip	Conceptual paper	None	None	Gossip is a natural phenomenon
Vickers (2014)	Towards reducing the harm: Workplace bullying as workplace corruption – A critical review	To explore the acts of bullying and corruption overlap and how gossip is related to both elements	Systematic literature review	None	None	Recognising these concepts overlap can result in making workplaces safer

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**TABLE 1 (Continues...):** Office gossip target articles.

Authors	Title	Purpose	Method	Sample	Theoretical perspective	Key findings
Wert and Salovey (2004a)	Introduction to the special issue on gossip	To introduce a special issue on workplace gossip	A conceptual paper	None	None	None
Wert and Salovey (2004b)	A social comparison account of gossip	To understand, using social comparison, motivation related to gossip and the reasons of negative gossip	Systematic literature review	None	Social comparison theory	Gossip is necessary for healthy social functioning
Yerkovich (1977)	Gossiping as a way of speaking	To explore how people in a community communicate through gossip	Qualitative observation	A town	None	Gossip is a form of social interaction

**FIGURE 1:** Display of results.

phenomena in the workplace and not as an explicit attempt by organisational researchers to study the concept.

Yerkovich (1977, p. 196) four decades ago mentioned that no matter how scandalous or salient information is, it is not gossip unless participants personally know the individuals being gossiped about as this element adds to the thrill of revelation. Dodig-Crnkovic and Anokhina (2008) pointed out that the term 'gossip' is mainly used with negative connotations hinting at the spreading of malicious, unreliable and unchecked information. However, several scholars have suggested generalising and neutralising the term to include any talk about others (De Backer, 2005; Dodig-Crnkovic & Anokhina, 2008; Dunbar, 2004; Kurland & Pellet, 2000). Therefore, given these suggestions, organisational scholars need a universally accepted definition of office gossip in understanding this phenomenon (Wert & Salovey, 2004a).

Secondly, considering that office gossip is a private conversation, it poses another challenge that results in a dearth of research related to this phenomenon (Wert & Salovey, 2004a). Besides being private conversation, gossip occurs within diverse complex situations, which are subtle and in most cases too subtle for outside observers, such as organisational researchers, to decode. This subtlety makes it challenging to determine the purpose of gossip and whether the conversation in question is actually gossip (Wert & Salovey, 2004b).

Thirdly, another challenge related to office gossip is its purpose. The majority of researchers regard the purpose of gossip to be a social function. For example, Dunbar (2004) regards the purpose of gossip as the central element in the evolutionary story of social life and human intelligence. Some researchers argue that the purpose of office gossip is to teach social norms and to transmit social information (Baumeister et al., 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004b). On the other hand, Foster (2004) argues that the purpose of office gossip is

to obtain valuable information that one works with. Office gossip is also used to hurt a high-fliers' reputation or to ensure that certain people remain powerless in the organisation (Carrim, 2016).

Fourthly, when we deliberate on valence, that is, positive and negative evaluations made by the gossiper, many alternatives and intricacies are included in the construct. Social conversation without valence is basically the propagation of news, for example, who has been admitted to university and who has a baby. As long as these conversations do not carry any evaluative connotations, they may be regarded as gossip of a benign nature and for informational purposes only (Foster, 2004).

Lastly, another challenge that Carrim (2016) points out in researching office gossip is that different ethnic groups may perceive gossip differently. Thus, when investigating office gossip in relation to ethnic minority employees, one needs to be aware of the fact that what the majority ethnic group may perceive to be gossip, ethnic minorities may regard this as conversational remarks and discussions, and not related to gossip in any way.

### Causes of gossip: Positive and negative

A vast body of research has examined the negative causes of gossip, but to a lesser extent on the positive sources of gossip (Carrim, 2016; Grosser et al., 2012; Shallcross et al., 2011). More recently, scholars are increasingly calling to focus on both the positive and negative elements of gossip in a single study (Altuntas et al., 2014; Grosser et al., 2010). Despite the importance and ubiquitous nature of positive and negative gossip for organisations and employees, limited research has been conducted on who the objects of gossip are, especially for those who are part of formal work groups and those in informal social status groups who may interact in an informal manner (Ellwardt et al., 2012a). Ellwardt et al. (2012a) elaborate on the latter point, as they indicate that employees who are part of the formal group experience both positive and negative gossip. They further add that employees who are low on social status and have few friends or acquaint unpopular staff are more likely to experience negative gossip. A worthwhile study would be to investigate the friendship links of minority employees and the extent to which they experience positive and negative gossip. Ellwardt et al.'s (2012b) study does not explicitly state the characteristics of the object that may lead to positive or negative gossip about the employee.

The question to be asked here is whether there are other factors, except the characteristics of an individual that may lead to the person receiving either positive or negative gossip. One therefore needs to consider being the recipient of gossip in a holistic manner. In addition, Ellwardt et al.'s (2012b) study is deterministic and does not account for a high-status manager who may be gay (in terms of the organisational culture, the latter identity may be considered a low-status position), which in some organisational cultures may result in a high-low status position for the individual minority.

Previous research has also been based on majority groups within organisations and how they handle gossip without explicating the role and experiences of minorities (Hafen, 2004). Research on gossip has also been associated with gender without clearly stating that women comprise a minority group within the organisations under study. Previous research reveals mixed results related to gossip engaged in by both male and female employees. Some studies, for instance, indicate that women tend to gossip more than men (Akgeyik, 2012; Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995). Yet, Anthony's (1992) research reveals that men spread gossip to more people and tend to engage in gossip to a greater extent than women. Nevo, Nevo and Derech-Zehavi (1994) also attest that men gossip more than women. These studies have once again been conducted on majority group employees. Most research on office gossip has, however, not accounted for how minority men and women engage in gossip.

Research on office gossip has also been conducted on managers as a minority group (Altuntas et al., 2014). The results are, however, mixed, as Ellwardt et al.'s (2012b) study indicates that when employees have high trust in managers, managers are gossiped about in a positive manner. However, when trust in managers is low and there is infrequent contact, then gossip is negative (Altuntas et al., 2014). Research on office gossip related to the experience of managers from minority groups who may be part of the out-group is scant. There is a lack in the above-mentioned studies on how gossip may empower some minority individuals to reach senior managerial positions compared to some others.

Carrim (2016) elaborates on racial minorities as being targets of negative office gossip within one organisational setting. The study states that minorities gossip to inform each other about how majority group members gossip about them. However, the study does not elaborate on the extent to which minority employees within their groups engage in office gossip. Secondly, the study does not account for what type of gossip minorities engage with majority employees, if at all such episodes take place. Unlike Carrim's (2016) study which was based on minority employees' experiences in one organisational setting, Hafen (2004) studied workplace gossip across four different types of organisational settings (electricity utility, college, manufacturing and restaurant). The results of Hafen's study revealed that where informal conversations are discouraged, gossip does not thrive. Office

gossip scholarship on minorities, such as Hafen's (2004) study, can benefit from research in diverse settings, as well as based on multi-level analysis (both individual and organisational levels) (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010).

Wert and Salovey (2004b) point out that positive gossip assists individuals in understanding their work environments and alerts them to information regarding promotions and rewards. While this may be true for majority group employees such as white men, for example, this type of positive gossip may not resonate with the experience of minority employees who may face structural workplace impediments.

### Gossip as a process

Noon and Delridge (1993) point out that individuals, including minority employees, will have several choices to make before they engage in gossip. Some of the guiding factors in individuals engaging in gossip are their perceptions of the group's values, individual relationships, as well as both formal and informal power relations. Being from the out-group, minorities have the risk of being subjugated and marginalised in the workplace and therefore their voices may not be heard (O' Farrell, 2005). Gossip is also the process of passing value-laden information (Noon & Delridge, 1993). Thus, minorities will ensure that they pass accurate information across, especially when dealing with majority group members. The reason is that passing on inaccurate information will make them seem untrustworthy in addition to their already marginalised status. However, if a message provided by an individual is well received by a group, then the employee's status within the organisation will tend to be enhanced. The converse is also true. Thus, as a process, gossip includes both individual choices and group dynamics (O' Farrell, 2005).

A study by Kurland and Pellet (2000) indicates that gossip can affect the amount of informal power one has in an organisation. Power in this context is used regarding the ability of a person to influence others to do what they would not normally do. For example, Grosser et al.'s (2012) study indicates that groups occupying lower level positions can exert informal power. In the vast majority of organisations, women are relegated to lower level posts as gender inequality still exists within the corporate environment (Carrim, 2012). Grosser et al. (2012) found in their study that Japanese women in lower level positions in a traditional organisation exerted tremendous informal power through gossip. The men in this organisation were afraid of the women's gossip and tried to stay on their good side by buying them expensive presents and taking them to lunch. This case provides a good example of how low-status employees can use gossip to equalise formal power differentials (Ferrari, 2015). In some instances, those lower in the social hierarchy may find it difficult to transmit gossip as they may violate group norms and may face punishment from those higher up in the organisational hierarchy (Kieffer, 2013). Nevertheless, limited research exists on how minorities transmit gossip in the workplace.

Alternatively, Logli, Keltner, Campos and Oveis (2008) found that individuals who harm the interest of the group are likely to become the targets of gossip. In a study of sorority sisters, they found that targets of gossip were those who were in high pursuit of power and status. There is therefore a need to develop an in-depth analysis and understanding of office gossip pertaining to minorities, especially related to the amount of power or lack of power within groups and how they become targets of gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Moreover, Beersma and Van Kleef (2011) argue that group gossip can also enhance the social reputation of individuals by painting them as likeable or, in contrast, portraying them as immoral and selfish. Not much is known about how majority group members may destroy or enhance the image of minorities through gossip.

Gossip can also serve as a process where management decisions are questioned. Gossip allows for the creation of workers' sub-cultures which break down managerial control and provide employees greater opportunity in their work environment. The collapse in management respect through the process of gossip also undermines management power as they try and execute their plans, especially those involving change (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Carrim (2016), for example, indicates in her study that the majority of employees use gossip as a means to discredit racial minority managers. Besides this study, there is limited research that addresses this issue from a gossip perspective related to diverse minority managers. Nevertheless, the gossip process can have a positive role for all employees as it can clarify information, thus relieving anxiety and tension (Moore, 1962). Also, gossip can be a means of influence to those in less powerful positions, as noted to Kanter (1977), where secretaries gained power through their access to important information. However, gossip may render minorities powerless if they do not have access to important information in the workplace.

Mobbing is another gossip process that usually results in humiliation, doubt, damaged reputation and, in severe cases, loss of employment for an employee (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). Mobbing is a group activity, where group members aggressively target a fellow employee through malicious gossip to marginalise and make the individual's further employment in the organisation intolerable (Leymann, 1990). Leymann refers to mobbing as a psychological terror being enforced on the target through gossip. Those targeted through mobbing are seen as being outsiders as they are seen as outside the gossips' boundaries of fairness. This is evident in Carrim's (2016) study where racial minorities were gossiped about by the majority groups regarding their perceived 'poor' work performance. Additional research is required regarding mobbing related to minority employees.

Gossip can lead to bullying, especially when it is associated with lies. Kieffer (2013) points out that individuals in the workplace are bullied and become scapegoats through the process of gossip if they represent a threat to the group power structure or they possess traits that threaten the power and

prestige of an in-group. Those who are bullied only need to have one key quality different from the group, for example, female managers in a group of male managers or older employees in a group of younger personnel (Ettin, 1999). Some individuals are bullied because they possess traits that are secretly envied but openly rejected (Kieffer, 2013). Gossip then becomes a basis for discrimination and racism as illustrated in Carrim's (2016) study.

### **Outcomes of gossip**

The outcomes of office gossip can be both positive and negative. On the positive side, gossip functions to reinforce social bonds amongst colleagues (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). It is also a way to relieve stress and tension (Michelson et al., 2010). In some instances, gossip also provides power to some marginalised groups, as was the case of Japanese women at lower levels (Ogasawara, 1998).

On the negative side, being the target of negative gossip can result in victimisation, such as preventing work-related success and obstructing the psychological need to belong (Ellwardt et al., 2012a). For instance, a study by Burt (2005) related to bankers uncovered that those who were targets of negative gossip had difficulties in forming supportive working relationships with peers, and exited the organisation sooner than those who were not victims of such negative behaviour. Employees who are victimised find it difficult to trust others and to cognitively control their social environments (Beersman & Van Kleef, 2011). Thus, targets become the victims of social undermining where they are unable to establish and maintain favourable reputations and positive interpersonal relationships (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Alternatively, negative gossip may have favourable outcomes for the group. For instance, previous research reveals that negative gossip is used to sanction and socially control employees who do not conform to group rules (De Pinninc, Siera, & Schorlemmer, 2008). Employees usually conform to group norms as they are afraid of negative gossip and being ostracised (Foster, 2004).

Negative gossip has also been linked to decreased productivity, hurt reputations and feelings, poor morale and increased turnover rates in valued employees (Michelson et al., 2010). However, these consequences can be avoided if managers tap into employee gossip networks regularly to avoid negative results (Grosser et al., 2010). Baumeister et al. (2004) contend that managers who are not part of the gossip network or who are kept out of such networks tend to leave the organisation sooner than those who are privy to such information. Other consequences of negative gossip are damaging the targets' reputation, resulting in targets being disciplined, spreading false information about the individual and also using such behaviour to enhance one's own upward mobility (Shallcross et al., 2011). Research related to the outcomes for minorities related to the outcomes of gossip is, however, lacking. Carrim (2016) found in her study that for racial minorities who were targets of gossip, their willingness to leave the organisation was decreased as they were

cushioned by fellow minority employees who protected them against the dire outcomes of malicious gossip.

## Discussion

Taking into account the studies covered in the review, the author suggests potential theoretical perspectives and research on minorities to this body of literature. Firstly, two potential theoretical perspectives related to minorities are suggested. Then potential research questions associated with gaps identified in the current review related to minority experiences caused by office gossip are presented (see Table 2). The literature on workplace gossip has historically consisted of studies driven by describing literature and/or data-driven. Only eight (19.5%) researchers used one to two theoretical perspectives in the current review. This is not surprising as gossip has only been recently examined by organisational scholars. The author suggests researching office gossip from two potential theoretical perspectives. However, it should be noted that there are many other theoretical perspectives from which office gossip can be researched and that they should not be limited to the following possible theories: the social identity theory and the contact theory.

### Social identity theory

Social identity theory states that individuals classify themselves and others in terms of diverse social categories, such as age, sex and religion, and attach an emotional component to these groups. Thus, social classification allows an individual to define himself or herself and others in the social environment (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In-group bias, that is, preference for one's in-group over the out-group, is expressed in evaluating, liking or allocating resources and rewards (Tajfel, 1978). Usually, in-group favouritism is associated with out-group negativity and has its roots in ethnocentrism. Social identity theory postulates that a positive social identity is a result of favourable intergroup comparisons. Therefore, there is a strong link between the strength of group identification and the extent to which individuals positively differentiate themselves from out-groups (Allport, 1954).

**TABLE 2:** Recommendations for future research on gossip related to minorities.

Topic	Findings and Research question
Challenges studying the phenomenon of office gossip	Research on the challenges of researching gossip has not taken into account gossip in traditional societies. Thus, while scholars are debating the definition of gossip and how it may impact individuals, research in the Eastern world, Africa and other traditional societies is lacking. Also, how do gays, lesbians, different generations define gossip? How do minorities from diverse backgrounds define gossip?
Causes of gossip: positive and negative	Limited research has been conducted on who the objects of gossip are. Also, there is limited research on whether some minorities are more likely to become targets of positive, while others are of negative gossip. What are the experiences of different minorities related to office gossip?
Gossip as a process	Gossip is said to increase power or decrease power. To what extent do different minorities have power related to office gossip?
Outcomes of gossip	Office gossip is said to alienate minorities and in some instances push them out of the work environment. To what extent are minority employees targets of workplace mobbing, bullying and malicious gossip and what is their survival rate in their respective organisations?

This view has been questioned by others who maintain that the strength of identifying with the in-group and the extent of bias towards the in-group, as compared to the out-group in some cases did not exist (Reynolds & Turner, 2001). Allport (1954), however, points out that out-group, hostility could strengthen in-group belongingness, but this does not imply positive feelings towards the in-group. In the author's opinion, using social identity theory as related to in-group and out-group relations may enhance an in-depth understanding of office gossip and social relations within the workplace. For example, are there certain minorities who can become part of the in-group and not be ostracised through malicious gossip?

### Contact theory

Contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) advocates that deep-rooted hostilities towards another group can be diminished through regular dealings with members of that group. The groups should preferably have equal status and common goals, cooperate with each other and external parties should support intergroup contact through legislation, policies and customs (Ata, Bastian, & Lusher, 2009). When such a situation exists, contact between groups can decrease feelings of discrimination and prejudice. However, research indicates mixed and conflicting results that racial discrimination and prejudice indeed decrease (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010). For example, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 713 independent samples from over 500 studies and concluded that intergroup contact reduces discrimination; they opined that while Allport's (1954) conditions are pivotal facilitating factors, they are not necessary for discrimination reduction. As contact amongst groups does not take place in isolation, social norms in the broader context are imperative in explicating how and why intergroup contact reduces discrimination (Hughes, 2007). In addition, although stereotypes and attitudes may be reduced through intergroup contact, the systems that sustain discrimination may still persist and minority groups may still be targets of negative gossip. What is especially important for workplace gossip in terms of intergroup relations using social identity theory and the contact hypothesis, is that these frameworks shape the interactions at the micro and group levels (Dixon et al., 2010). The focus now is on recommendations for future research generated from the current review.

### Recommendations for future research

Table 2 depicts the main themes reviewed. The author highlights some main aspects of each theme that may be investigated in the future. This does not, however, mean that several other research questions cannot be generated. However, for the brevity of the article, one aspect from each theme is extracted only and one to two questions are asked for each section.

## Conclusion

Although the topic of gossip has been studied from various perspectives such as anthropology, sociology, psychology

and organisational behaviour, the area is still in its infancy in the workplace. While some research has been conducted in the field through observations, case studies and interviews and quantitative analysis, the author suggests that more research should be conducted through in-depth interviews and narratives from potential participants. The author believes that by focusing on the lack of theoretical perspectives and identifying the area where there is a lack of research, an impetus can be created to move the field forward in terms of future research to decrease the detrimental effects of negative gossip and enhance the use of positive gossip.

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