

The power of malicious gossip

Linda Shallcross, Sheryl Ramsay, and Michelle Barker

ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on malicious workplace gossip from the perspective of those targeted by this dark form of organisational communication. Findings from a large exemplarian action research project are reported that suggest malicious gossip can be an influential form of power that strongly contributes to counterproductive organisational behaviour. The discussion draws upon the emergent themes from the research to highlight the negative consequences of malicious gossip for those targeted and their organisations, and in so doing, elaborates on the phenomenon of workplace mobbing. This research highlights the importance of recognising gossip as an effective, though dark, form of power and the value of rational discourse for improving organisational communication.*

Introduction

Malicious gossip is a negative phenomenon associated with the dark side of organisations. This paper firstly contextualises malicious gossip within the all-important group processes that are naturally associated with organisations. The use of power followed by links between malicious gossip and processes of mobbing are then discussed. The specific research question addressed is: 'How can mobbing processes, and particularly the role of gossip, as identified by targets, be conceptualised and advanced?' The paper then presents the findings of a qualitative research study and their implications for organisational processes, interventions, and future research.

Linda Shallcross, Sheryl Ramsay, and Michelle Barker, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Within organisations, communication is interwoven across formal and informal groups. These groups vary on a range of dimensions, including members' shared beliefs about behaviours (i.e., social rules) that should or should not occur in particular situations (Argyle, Henderson, & Furnham, 1985; Wilson, Lizzio, Zauner, & Gallois, 2001) and the significance and strength of group identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Group members' behavioural choices in particular situations are guided by cognitions, as are judgments and interpretations of behaviours (Gallois & Callan, 1991). In terms of group processes, the communication of social rules is dynamic and integrally related to group functioning. According to Argyle et al. (1985), there are several 'universal social rules' (p. 125) that guide behaviour in all situations (e.g., be friendly, be polite, be pleasant, avoid embarrassment, respect privacy, keep confidences, avoid negative consequences, and maintain eye contact). Additionally, there are contextual variations encapsulated by social rules, including the type of situation (e.g., its formality) and participants' characteristics such as status, gender, power, and national culture (Argyle & Henderson, 1990; Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Canterello, 1986; Wilson et al., 2001). Also, some social rules will be more strongly held than others, along with the associated judgements and sanctions that are linked with rule-following and rule-breaking behaviours (Bryan, 2002).

When considered in terms of the universal social rules presented above, the dark side of organisational life can be seen as behaviours that seemingly break the expected rules (Ramsay, Troth, & Branch, 2011). While some rule-breaking can be linked to lack of understanding of the social rules, or lack of skills in following them, it seems that rules can also be broken intentionally for some particular benefit (e.g., to gain advantage over another person (Salin, 2003)). Moreover, if social rules encompass negative behaviours that are communicated and accepted, especially by those with formal or informal power, the 'dark side' of organisations can be fostered, with such behaviours becoming part of a group's repertoire (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2006; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998), which also works to delineate in-group and out-group status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For instance, within a hospital setting, Hutchinson et al. (2006) have found evidence of 'predatory alliances' (p. 6) where perpetrators furthered their own goals by cooperating to harm targets, for example, by forcing them to resign or denying them promotion opportunities.

Group processes are thus integrally related to the development and maintenance of dark behaviours, of which malicious gossip is an

important component. While there is acknowledgement that the definition of gossip is a contested issue (Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010), there is nevertheless some agreement among authors as to the type of communication that constitutes gossip. One definition that seems to have general acceptance is that of Kurland and Pelled (2000), who describe gossip as 'the informal and evaluative talk in an organisation, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organisation who is not present' (p. 430). Gossip is closely affiliated with rumour, which is described as occurring when 'a specific (or topical) proposition or belief, is passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth without secure standards of evidence being present' (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. ix). While gossip can be discussed from a number of theoretical perspectives (Michelson et al., 2010), the present research domain appears to align best with concepts of 'outsider' theories (Elias & Scotson, 1994), where 'blame gossip' is considered to be a means of discrediting outsiders and 'praise gossip' (p. 93) is seen as potentially useful in reinforcing existing power structures. However, because of their particular relevance and value in understanding malicious gossip and its relationship with the dark side of organisations, discourse and power theories will be highlighted here.

This discussion of gossip and rumour is also partly informed by discourse theory, whereby gossip can be described as a set of discursive practices or tacit rules of conversation that validate the social constructions of some groups of speakers over others. The dilemma as to why some voices are heard, and gain the status and currency of truth, while others are marginalised and subjugated, can be explained from the critical perspective of post-structuralist thought (O'Farrell, 2005). Post-structuralism focuses on language as the way in which truth and reality are constructed rather than an objective description of the real world (O'Farrell, 2005). Theoretical concepts about the construction of knowledge and the power of voice contribute to our understanding of the credibility afforded to malicious gossip over reasoned discourse.

The construct of 'co-rumination' (Haggard, Robert, & Rose, 2010) also appears relevant, particularly in regard to excessive and repeated negative discussions of the same problem that takes place between workers in a dyadic relationship. Co-rumination may be helpful in reducing anxiety and work-related stress for both the gossipier and the hearer, particularly in circumstances where they are subjected to 'abusive supervision' (Haggard et al., 2010, p. 27). However, the actual value of co-rumination or discussing workplace problems over an

extended period of time has been questioned, with indications that it can prolong the stress and anxiety (Haggard et al., 2010). Additionally, extended co-rumination has been linked with emotional problems including depression (Haggard et al., 2010). While co-rumination focuses on the dyadic relationship of the gossiper and the hearer or listener, it is the gossip triad (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), which includes the absent third party, that appears to be most useful to understanding workplace gossip. The gossip triad recognises the impact of gossip on the absent third party, and workplace mobbing is concerned with the consequences of malicious gossip that causes harm to the third party (Davenport et al., 1999). Mobbing (Lorenz, 1963) is a dark form of group activity, where group members actively target an individual using negative processes such as malicious gossip to marginalise and, in many instances, make the target's continued participation in an organisation difficult or untenable (Leymann, 1996).

Those targeted by workplace mobbing are often perceived to be 'deserving targets' for unfair, unjust, and harmful treatment (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p. 10). They can sometimes be described as outsiders in the sense that they are outside the gossiper's 'boundary of fairness' (Opatow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005) and are perceived to be deserving of any unfair, unjust, or harmful treatment that is directed towards them. This is described as 'moral exclusion' (Gerson et al., 2005), where those on the outside of an individual's boundary of fairness cannot be forgiven for breaking the social rules, whereas the same behaviour undertaken by an insider is more likely to be forgiven.

The behaviour directed towards those targeted is described in the workplace mobbing literature as a form of 'psychological terror' (Leymann, 1990, p. 119) to emphasise the damaging psychological attacks on those targeted until they are 'eliminated' or forced to exit their employment. While this may sound overly dramatic to those who have not experienced the problem, these descriptions typify the experience of those who have been adversely affected by mobbing. Consequences often involve loss of employment, long-term health problems, and loss of long-term financial earning capacity (Lewis, Coursol, & Wahl, 2002).

While gossip has negative connotations (Gluckman, 1963, as cited in Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010), this discussion is not intended to mean that it is always malicious and counterproductive. Indeed, the literature recognises that gossip exchanged in social,

personal, and professional networks is a useful resource for gaining information that might otherwise not be available (Michelson, van Ilterson, & Waddington, 2010). However, it is the capacity of gossipers to assert their power and influence in organisations, more than previously realised (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), that has the potential to cause harm to the absent third party. The ability to use gossip as a form of power is highlighted in one Japanese study (Ogasawara, 1998, cited in Michelson et al., 2010) where female clerical workers were found to have influenced the promotional opportunities of their male managers. The women in the study were able to enhance or destroy a manager's reputation through the power of gossip exercised in social networks. Gossip, as with any form of power, can be used in this way to further the objectives of one individual or group over those of another. This paper is concerned with those incidents when gossip is used with malicious intent and causes long-term harm for those targeted.

Gossip and power

The potential for gossip to cause harm is recognised in the literature (Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010) as an agent of workplace harassment and bullying. However, this does not appear to be widely understood in the management literature, where harassment or bullying is stereotypically understood as a more senior person who behaves aggressively towards subordinates. Yet workers at any level of an organisation may deliberately target a co-worker with malicious gossip to further their own aspirations—a process described by some authors as workplace mobbing (Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2010, p. 34). The malicious gossip associated with workplace mobbing takes place within a gossip triad, that is, with power relationships established between the gossiper and the hearer, or listener, and the target (Michelson, et al., 2010). The gossiper exerts power in the form of influencing others to behave in a way that they may not have otherwise done. While this can be a positive and effective use of power in some situations, this paper is concerned with malicious intent and the harmful consequences for those targeted.

The literature discusses negative and positive forms of gossip and suggests that there are different types of personal power associated with each (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Whether positive or negative, either type increases the power of the gossiper as an expert source of useful information about the organisation and the people who work there (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 431). Furthermore, negative gossip has an implied threat to the recipient that they too may become the

target of malicious gossip if they do not comply with the expected behaviour of gossiping within the social network (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Positive gossip is also powerful because of the implication that recipients, if they comply, will also be rewarded with positive gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

However, before discussing the research findings, it is useful first to briefly discuss gossip as it occurs in the context of the mobbing literature and to describe the five phases of the mobbing experience. It is also important to distinguish workplace mobbing as a broader sociological problem compared to bullying, which is more commonly discussed from a psychological perspective that explores individual perpetrator and personality types that may be at fault. The term 'mobbing' was first used by Lorenz (1963) in his description of behaviour directed towards outsiders in schools and in the military. However, the problem was more widely drawn to public attention by Leymann (1996), who described mobbing as a form of social isolation that often results in the target's expulsion from the workplace. Another researcher, Schuster (1996), also discusses mobbing as a method for socially excluding outsiders, and identified gender and social class as potential risk factors (Schuster, 1996).

Zapf and Leymann (1996) have found that those targeted tend to be demonised and discredited as being unworthy of basic human rights. Based on their analysis of survey responses from 2,500 Swedish workers, they concluded that management, in their desire to be rid of the target as the source of the problem, violated fundamental rights to fair treatment such as denying the right of reply to accusations of wrongdoing (Zapf & Leymann, 1996). They identified mobbing as a five-phase process of workplace expulsion where those targeted are discredited and demonised to the extent that they are eventually forced to leave their employment.

Since then, other researchers have refined the five-phase process that first commences with an unresolved conflict that escalates to the second phase with psychological assaults perpetrated with the deliberate intention of harming those targeted (Davenport, Distler-Schwartz, & Pursell-Elliott, 1999, p. 38). The third phase commences when management becomes formally involved and the situation becomes a problem case. During this phase, management tends to escalate the conflict to the detriment of those targeted by siding with the perpetrators (Davenport et al., 1999). During this stage, the target tends to become a scapegoat who is deemed to be 'guilty of all failures

and wrongdoings in the team' (Zapf & Leymann, 1996, p. 210). During the fourth phase, those targeted are blamed as being at fault and their reputations are discredited to the extent that they are forced to exit their workplace. During this phase, colleagues and management tend to focus on the personal characteristics of the target rather than the broader social, economic, organisational, and cultural factors. For example, Zapf and Leymann (1996) point out that targets are often ridiculed on the basis of personal characteristics including their speech, posture, walk, clothes, appearance, private life, nationality, gender, and race. They identified that 'unverified rumours, slanders, and insults are spread in an attempt to disgrace victims by negative references to their entire life, work and privacy' (Zapf & Leymann, 1996, p. 33).

The fifth phase is described as expulsion, where the target is removed from their workplace and either relocated to a less responsible role or otherwise forced to leave. The impact of the expulsion most often includes long-term psychological damage, long-term ill health, and sometimes suicide and even homicide (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 23). To highlight the role of gossip and rumour throughout the five phases of the mobbing experience, the findings of this research are now explained in the context of some examples of workplace mobbing identified in this research.

In essence, the problem of workplace mobbing is described as co-workers collectively 'ganging up' to isolate, discredit, and demonise the target through the power of gossip, rumour, hearsay, and innuendo (Shallcross, et al., p. 56). While the practice of gossip may be recognised as an effective means of workplace communication (Grosser et al., 2010), the processes of negative gossip and their impact on those negatively targeted would benefit from further exploration. Problems arise for organisations when gossip, rumour, hearsay, and innuendo are accepted as truth, without first exploring the validity of claims (Shallcross et al., 2010, p. 30). The damaging experiences of those targeted and the ongoing consequences for organisations, including resistance behaviours by those targeted, are now outlined in the methodology and findings of the research. Furthermore, the phases discussed above are linked with the present findings.

Methodology

The research population for the three stages of the study comprised 212 participants. The pool of potential participants responded to newspaper articles that described the malicious and vexatious nature of gossip, rumour, innuendo, and hearsay in eliminating employees

from their employment. The majority of the potential research participants made contact from an e-mail address link on the www.workplacemobbing.com website. There were 230 website visitors initiating e-mail contact from the website and, of those, 212 consented to participate in the research. These people, who initiated contact as self-identified targets of workplace mobbing, generated textual data for the thematic and crystallisation stages of the study.

Consistent with the exemplarian action research methodology (Coenen & Khonraad, 2003), issues and problems were first identified during the thematic stage from the pool of 212 self-selected participants. From this pool, 62 contributed to the crystallisation stage where common threads were further explored and clarified. From this pool, 21 continued to contribute during the exemplar phase, resulting in the identification of 10 exemplars. Multiple sources of data were used for the collection of data, including 10,000 e-mails and approximately 600 documents. These include confidential medical reports, legal documents, departmental records, court transcripts, witness statements, and correspondence from a range of agencies involved in dealing with the consequences arising from workplace gossip and rumour.

Research documents have been archived. When these documents are quoted in this paper, they are referenced to the archived list. The reference includes the participant ID number, the folder number, the document number, and the document page number, for example: ID28, F2, K2, p.20. The confidential examples and sources have been sighted and signed by the supervisors of the research as well as a Justice of the Peace to add validity to the claims made. Some of the documents identifying participants are publicly available; for example, discussions of compulsory retirement on the basis of alleged psychiatric illness are documented in parliamentary reports and are accessible on the Internet (see, for example, Flegg, 2004). These matters have been reported in the print and electronic media and those involving some of the participants in this study are listed in Appendix 1.

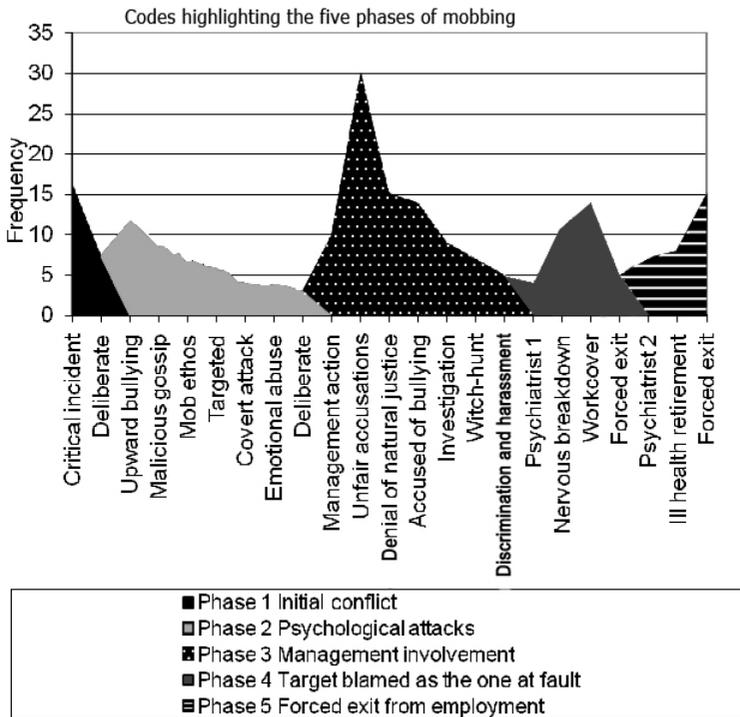
Some of the supporting documents include witness statements gathered during investigations into complaints, and these frequently include comments that indicate the extent of gossip, rumour, hearsay, and innuendo that is used to discredit and demonise those targeted. The vast quantity of data collected was analysed using grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach is grounded in empirical reality that complements action research with systematic procedures, facilitated by MAXqda analysis software, for labelling and

categorising similar concepts, and the identification of themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data collection for the thematic and crystallisation stages of the study, described in the literature as Computer Mediated Communication or CMC, consists of textual data generated through online methods including e-mails (Mann & Stewart, 2003).

Findings

In summary, the findings indicate that the processes that lead to targets' expulsion from the organisation are consistent with the five phases of mobbing, where the problem commences with an unresolved conflict that escalates over a period of time, during which those targeted are subjected to psychological group assaults. The situation becomes increasingly detrimental when the conflict is escalated by management, who seemingly join in with the perpetrators, blaming the target as the problem. The psychological assaults continue until the target is eventually expelled from the workplace.

Figure 1. Number of grounded codes identified during each of the five phases of mobbing



The volume of grounded codes identified at each of the five phases is depicted in Figure 1, which indicates that the highest intensity of codes occurs during the third phase with management's escalation of the conflict. The findings are then discussed in depth.

Phase one: Initial conflict

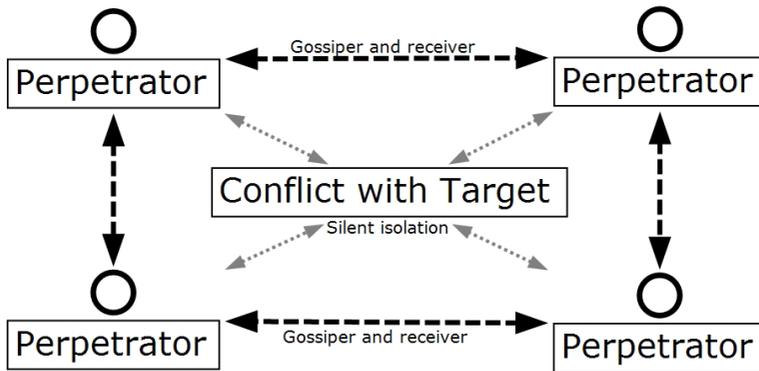
The process commences with an initial conflict, which, in hindsight, is identified by those targeted as an unresolved conflict that remains a source of resentment fuelling gossip and rumour for an extended period of time. Although the initial conflict is seemingly insignificant, the matter was not resolved to the satisfaction of the aggrieved parties. For example, 16 of the 62 participants (26%) identified that an unresolved conflict escalated over time to the extent that they were eventually forced to exit, or were expelled from, their employment. One participant, identified for the purpose of this discussion as Dana, introduced herself in an e-mail as having been 'away from work for two months' and was being 'closely monitored' by her doctor because she was 'suffering very deeply' as a result of unsubstantiated allegations of bullying that had been made against her by a 'group of staff' (ID199, F1, DS1, LB, p. 5). Her husband, who was employed in the same workplace, had also been suspended without adequate explanation, pending further investigation.

Correspondence from the union to the employer highlights that Dana had not been informed as to the substance of the allegations or who had made them (ID199, F1, DS1, LB, p. 10). The situation was further escalated when her attention was drawn to a report in the local newspaper, where it was reported that both she and her husband, although not identified, had been suspended as a result of bullying accusations against them both. Later, at a hearing in the Industrial Relations Commission, records provided evidence that neither she nor her husband had been dealt with fairly, nor was there a case for her to answer (ID199, F1, DS1, LB, p. 30). While her husband was reinstated, Dana received a small financial settlement. In hindsight, Dana attributed her situation to circumstances five years earlier when some staff had been 'dissatisfied with procedures' that she had implemented under the direction of her then supervisor. She claimed that, when she finally received the investigator's report, she 'could not believe what [she] was reading' because the report was 'about 50 pages long' with an 'unbelievable . . . twisting of lies . . . going back five years or more' and included complaints from staff who had since left the organisation (ID199, F1, DS1, LB, p. 5).

Phase two: Group psychological assaults

The second phase is characterised by group psychological assaults. Twenty-three of the 62 participants (37%) identified that they had been targeted with malicious gossip, covert or silent behaviours, and emotional abuse that could be described as psychological assaults. This phase can be conceptualised as a process of social isolation, where the target is discredited with malicious gossip as indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Gossip and social isolation



The perpetrators, the gossipers, and the hearers of gossip appear to band together with covert communications to discredit and isolate the target, creating a communication barrier or a wall, as indicated by the black arrows, surrounding the target at the centre of Figure 2. The experience of isolation is exacerbated when the powerful influence of the network expands to include additional hearers of gossip that further isolate and discredit the target. While the solid black arrows in Figure 2 represent the wall isolating the target, the grey arrows, by contrast, indicate the communication flow between the perpetrators. The following reflection of one participant typifies the perceptions of targets during this phase of covert psychological assaults, in which they tend to be dismissive of the behaviours to which they are being subjected.

I was so busy trying to keep things going I did not really notice this hostility at first. I then told myself I was being overly sensitive and reading too much into there [sic] behaviour. They enlisted a few of the longer standing members of the group and things went from bad to worse. Eventually I was locked out of the office and told not to return. (ID17, F1, DS1, p. 98)

Phase three: Management's escalation of conflict

Thirty of the 62 participants (48%) identified that they had been targeted with unjust or unfair accusations once management became involved during the third phase. The accusations are typically based on the feelings of the perpetrators and are characteristically unsubstantiated. The nature of the assaults fuelled by gossip and rumour include multiple investigations, rejection of compensation claims, disciplinary action, compulsory psychiatric assessment, and expulsion from the workplace. For example, according to the written accusations provided to her, a senior manager, identified for the purpose of this discussion as Nikki (ID9), was required to leave her position on the basis that she had 'demonstrated a pattern of behaviour' that resulted in other staff having 'feelings of intimidation and abuse' and 'feelings of being part of a divisive workplace' (ID9, F2, N5, p.1).

When forced to produce examples, the trivial nature of the complaints is typified by the allegation that 'you would appear really calm, really spacey [sic] and vague on some days and dismissive, short and abrupt on others' (ID9, F2, N5, p, 3). Two years after Nikki's expulsion, retracting statements from the complainants were made that demonstrate the effectiveness of gossip to cause harm when used with malicious intent. One witness statement included comments such as '[the perpetrator] built up the impression that Nikki hated me and so I was scared of [her]' (ID9, F2, N11, p. 12). Another retracting complainant commented that 'I don't know that I would have had the idea to make a grievance . . . but I opted to go along with the process once the procedure started' (ID9, F2, N4, p.9).

This case also highlights the serial nature of malicious gossip that may sometimes be directed at the position rather than the holder of the position as suggested in the following comments:

the intense bitching behind one's back kept on going [after Nikki's expulsion] . . . the focus of [the perpetrator's] hatred just turned to someone else . . . I noticed a pattern between [what happened to] Nikki and [the new acting manager] . . . (ID9, F2, N2, p. 2)

When the key perpetrator was appointed to act in Nikki's position, this retracting complainant reported that she had also become the target of malicious gossip, commenting that: '[she] started doing to me what she had done to [another acting manager] and to Nikki, causing

conflict and talking behind my back and telling lies . . . this is a pattern for [her]' (ID9, F2, N2, p. 3).

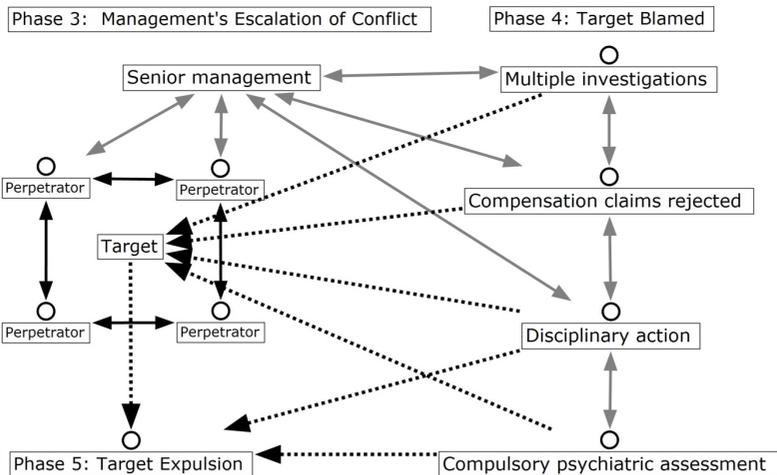
The malicious nature of gossip is highlighted by the following comment made by one retracting complainant who noted that: 'if people challenged her . . . or contradicted her, she would say things such as "I hate that bitch, I'll take her down"' (ID9, F2, N2, p. 8).

The deliberate intention to cause harm is further demonstrated in the following comment made in another retracting complainant statement.

I have seen [the perpetrator] sacrifice other's credibility and lie and say others have not done something so that she would not be exposed . . . sometimes I think she . . . is the most malicious woman in the world . . . I do not think Nikki was the evil archetype that [she] would have liked us to think. (ID9, F2, N4, p. 12)

During the crystallisation phase, 30 of the 62 participants (48%) identified that they had been targeted with unjust or unfair accusations once management became involved during the third phase. The nature of the assaults that typify phases three and four are indicated in Figure 3 and include multiple investigations, rejection of compensation claims, disciplinary action, compulsory psychiatric assessment, and expulsion from the workplace.

Figure 3. Map depicting management's escalation of conflict where the target is blamed



The combined forces of the organisation appear to assault the target over a period of time until their expulsion is achieved. The systems deployed by management include multiple investigations, disciplinary action, compulsory psychiatric assessment, and rejection of claims for compensation, causing harm to those targeted as depicted by the dotted black arrows in Figure 3.

Thirteen of the 62 participants in the crystallisation phase (21%) identified themselves as managers who had been accused of bullying as part of their mobbing experience. Furthermore, these 13 participants suggested that managers further up in the organisation engaged consultants to conduct investigations. Those targeted often described their experience as merciless witch-hunts where every effort was made to crush their psychological wellbeing and future earning capacity (see, for example, ID19, F1, DS1, p. 45, ID56, F1, DS1, p. 87, and ID78, DS1, F1, p. 213).

This finding in relation to management's escalation of conflict is consistent with reports in the literature that management tend to side with the perpetrators and try to 'get rid of the problem' (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 39). During the process, those targeted tend to be dealt with unfairly and denied entitlements or basic rights. Furthermore, colleagues and management tend to create explanations based on the personal characteristics of those targeted rather than on environmental factors (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 39).

Phase four: Target blamed

During the fourth phase, senior management are again identified as perpetuating further harm by blaming those targeted as the source of the problem. While the participants reported nervous breakdowns (18%), visits to psychiatrists (7%), and ill health compulsory retirement (13%), their treating psychiatrists, in various reports, described their ill health as a normal reaction to the emotionally abusive behaviours they had endured in their workplace over a lengthy period of time. In Nikki's case, the highly supportive statement of a psychologist who had been employed by the organisation to build morale in the group over an 18-month time frame was dismissed in favour of allegations based on gossip, rumour, and innuendo rather than substance. His statement included remarks that 'Nikki's management style was not the issue here' and 'to portray Nikki as a bully is to be out of touch with reality' (ID9, F2, N7, pp. 7-8). While he furthermore added that 'there was a history of unrest and dissatisfaction that had gone on for a long time' and that Nikki had been 'done in big time', this credible evidence was

dismissed by the investigator on the basis that this was not relevant to the investigation (ID9, F2, N7, pp. 7-8).

Prior to the retracting complainant statements, management pursued Nikki with multiple investigations and blamed her as the one at fault and at the same time appeared to protect the perpetrators. For example, the retracting statements were not brought to Nikki's attention until six months after they had been made. In any case, management were dismissive of the retractions, commenting that they did not influence the outcome of their investigation (ID9, F2, N25). Rather, the complaints of the remaining perpetrator were upheld, and she remained at work without being held accountable for the harm arising from malicious gossip over a period of three years (ID9, F2, N25).

The influence of power and gossip in Nikki's situation is indicated in the following comments from the Public Service Commission's investigation.

The interviews conducted by [the investigator] with [two of the complainants] some eighteen months after first being interviewed are significant, in that they show a workplace in which people's behaviour to each other was influenced by rumour, innuendo and gossip. (ID9, F2, N11, p.12)

However, these comments were dismissed by the employer, who continued to portray Nikki as the cause of the problem (ID9, F2, N22, pp. 3-6). Nikki was denied rehabilitation assistance during the expulsion phase and was subsequently compulsorily retired from the public sector on the basis of psychological ill health (ID9, F2, N22, pp. 3-6.). However, this was without compensation because of the reasonable management action rule. This is where management can argue that, while they recognise that damage has been caused, they are not at fault, and for compensation purposes their actions constitute 'reasonable management action' (ID9, F2, N22, pp. 3-6).

Phase five: Expulsion

The fifth phase of workplace mobbing, the expulsion, was reported by 32 of the 62 participants (52%) during the crystallisation phase. The remaining 28 participants, although continuing in their positions, indicated that their ongoing employment was tenuous. The experience of the participants in this research is consistent with the psychological

terror identified by other researchers. For example, one participant described the experience as 'soul destroying' and being pushed to the 'brink of suicide' (ID184, DS1, p. 28). Additionally, three participants reported that they were admitted to hospital in a distressed state, while others, including 12 of the 13 managers were diagnosed by psychiatrists with 'severe major depression', 'panic disorder', and 'adjustment disorder' (evidenced in confidential documents N8, p.1 and M8, F1, DS1, p. 5). In one psychiatrist's report that investigated an application for workers' compensation, the applicant, identified for the purpose of this discussion as Hayley (H33), commented on the behaviour of her line managers. She suggested that they 'behaved like predators who had wounded their quarry, and who intended to continue inflicting more and more wounds in the hope that their prey would haemorrhage and die' (ID86, F1, H33, p. 4).

Some of the participants' descriptions that highlight the form of the expulsion during the fifth phase are presented in Appendix 2 and include character assassination, extended investigations, psychological breakdown, unfair dismissal, and workers compensation.

Implications

The findings from the present study suggest that there are five identifiable phases of mobbing that move from initial conflict through to expulsion from the organisation. Moreover, these processes are integrally related to group processes that involve perceptions of social rules that operate in relation to group boundaries that can be set according to in-group and out-group status (Argyle et al., 1985; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Malicious gossip can operate as an enabler and reinforcer of the processes of mobbing, as shown above. Also of interest is the role of the gossip triad (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) in isolating the absent third party, which is consistent with outsider theories and blame gossip (Elias & Scotson, 1994).

As well as these phases and the role of gossip therein, there are several emergent themes from the grounded theory analysis that are integral to the findings and research process, which are now outlined in order to demonstrate the implications for individuals, organisations, and further research.

Power, influence, and the role of gossip

While organisational hierarchical structures define lines of authority and formal means of communication, it is the frequently used informal

communication channels that are herein identified as a major source of power and influence. Informal sources of power, accessed through participation in social networks, are recognised not only as useful sources of information, but also as influential in either enhancing or destroying future employment prospects (Einarsen, et al., 2003; Ogasawara, 1998). In this context, although a more senior person has formal hierarchical power, it is argued that they often cannot protect themselves against harmful gossip and rumour (Davenport et al., 1999). Untruths, based on gossip, rumour, hearsay, and innuendo were found in this study to be more likely to influence organisational decision making than tested truth claims. Gossip was found to be more influential than formal systems of rational discourse. The informal communication channels through which knowledge is constructed should therefore not be underestimated as influential forms of organisational power worthy of further research. From the perspective of third parties harmed by malicious gossip, the findings suggest that it is important that organisations follow fair procedures in dealing with accusations received on the basis of gossip.

The participants identified gossip, rumour, hearsay, and innuendo as influential forms of power in organisations. Their experiences indicate that malicious gossip and rumour underpin the silent behaviours that condone and perpetuate workplace mobbing. The apparent acceptance of gossip by management as truth, without fair standards of investigation, was found in this research to have serious and devastating consequences for those targeted, for their work colleagues, for their families, and for the organisations in which they had been employed (Shallcross, Sheehan, & Ramsay, 2008). While some of the communication literature refers to gossip and rumour and discusses the powerful influence of networks (e.g., Grosser, et al., 2010; Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010; Michelson, et al., 2010; Mills, 2010), the connection with malicious gossip as a form of social isolation that facilitates the process of workplace mobbing may benefit from further exploration.

Gender and gossip

Another theme identified by the participants is an apparent gendered pattern to the behaviour, where women are more likely to perpetrate acts of mobbing towards other women. The relationship between female gender and gossip is discussed in the context of this study, where women were identified as the major perpetrators of gossip, particularly targeting other women. This is consistent with the conclusions drawn by some other researchers who suggest that women can be expected

to co-ruminate in the workplace with friends, particularly if they have abusive supervisors (Haggard et al., 2011). Others suggest that women tend to be more 'spiteful' than men and typically 'talked behind people's back' and 'spread rumours' (Leymann, 1993, as cited in Schuster, 1996, p. 298). However, these themes are not new. Gossip and the sharing of secrets were identified as having the ability to affect hierarchies of power as far back as mediaeval times (Matlock, 2004). More recently, the US Hostile Workplace Survey (Namie, 2000) found that women reported being targeted by other women 84% of the time. Additionally, Hockley (2002) concluded, after investigating emotional abuse among women in the nursing profession, that malicious gossip and spreading of rumours are just as damaging as stereotypical male forms of aggression (p.18). However, others disagree, arguing that links between women and gossip is a stereotypical myth rather than an empirically substantiated fact (Michelson & Mouly, 2000, p. 339). They warn managers to be wary of making assumptions about gossiping or rumour mongering based on gender.

Conclusion and limitations

The present study set out to examine how mobbing processes, and particularly the role of gossip, as identified by targets, can be conceptualised and advanced. Overall, this study suggests that malicious gossip can contribute to the dark side of organisations, with potentially severe outcomes for those targeted and their organisations. Group processes including the emergence and maintenance of social rules and group boundaries that highlight in-group and out-group status, and the 'outsider' theories of gossip, including conceptualisations of the gossip triad, are highlighted within the present findings. Theories of discourse and discursive practices also help to explain the dynamics of this type of behaviour, including its perpetuation. The research findings can be mapped against the five phases of mobbing identified by earlier researchers and emphasise the third phase, where management becomes involved, as the most crucial stage of intervention that contributes to the target's expulsion.

While the present study has the strength of being large with data accessed through a range of media, the participants were self-selected and so may be particularly representative of certain groups or views. For example, women are quite possibly more comfortable in communicating in a small group and so more likely to join in with this type of research. The qualitative nature of the study gave the research depth and richness, which are also strengths. However,

broader quantitative research could supplement the findings here, particularly surveys into organisational climate and the presence or otherwise of malicious gossip. That is, a survey would invite the views of organisational members more generally, in addition to those who particularly identified themselves as targets of mobbing. Furthermore, we recommended that future research focus on building upon the theories presented here to further explain this difficult workplace behaviour, with a view to develop both better understanding of the phenomenon and practical interventions that may impact positively on this dark side of organisations.

In conclusion, this paper highlights malicious gossip and rumour as powerful forms of communication in organisations. The paper draws on the findings of an action research project, undertaken from the perspective of those who were forced to exit their employment on the basis of unfair accusations. Findings from this large study indicate that malicious gossip is a powerful and (negatively) effective form of communication that can be used to discredit and demonise workers, often with serious consequences for those targeted and for the organisations in which they work. Furthermore, the findings suggest that management are sometimes overly reliant on conclusions based upon gossip and rumour, sanctioning the information these types of communication provide as truth rather than pursuing fair means for investigating the facts. For this reason, the authors advocate a focus on rational discourse as a way to address, and hopefully reduce, the incidence and effects of mobbing—one of the most insidious contributors to the dark side of organisations.

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APPENDIX 1: Media reports of the harm caused by malicious gossip and rumour

Headline	Media	Date
2003		
Gossip can be lethal weapon	<i>Northern Territory News</i>	Oct-19
Interview with Kim—Work with Rebecca Gorman	Life Matters ABC Radio	Nov-01
Mob rule at work	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	Nov-17
Office gossip (mob) can kill a career	<i>Sunday Tasmanian</i>	Oct-30
Psss! Heard the latest about vicious gossip	<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	Oct-19
2004		
Severe bullying may cause serious illness	<i>The Gold Coast Bulletin</i>	Apr-24
Call for ban on psych testing	<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	Nov-21
Help for those done over by the mob	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	Sep-28
Mobbing conference	Life Matters ABC Radio	Oct-14
Mobbing interview with Alan Jones	Radio 2GB Sydney	Oct-15
Mobbing: bullying's ugly cousin	<i>The Globe and Mail Canada</i>	Dec-12
Psych tests dished out as punishment	<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	Oct-24
Public service bosses hear darkest secret	<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	Dec-08
Storm grows over psychiatric tests—'hitmen'	<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	Nov-14
Wired for sound and fury	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	Feb-07
2005		
Government accused of playing unfair mind games	<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	Aug-11
Harassment organisational culture starts at the top	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	Sep-28
I'm a victim of mob justice	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	Jun-28
Minister's staff member wins settlement over sacking	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	Jan-14
Problems at the top	<i>The Townsville Bulletin</i>	Aug-11
When the office rumour mill gets ugly	<i>The Financial Review</i>	Jul-19

APPENDIX 2: Some participant descriptions of the fifth expulsion phase

Method	Participant description
Character assassination	<i>I was a manager for some ten years . . . I took a package . . . this year . . . I was the subject of innuendo, gossip, character assassination and disciplinary action. My complaints to senior staff were ignored . . . my staff were allowed to continue their assault on my character, both working and personal. (ID67, DS1, F1, pp. 105-106)</i>
Extended investigation	<i>I was removed from my positions [sic] and after an extended investigation lasting more than a year I was cleared of all allegations but I am still unable to return. (ID122, DS1, F1, p. 236)</i>
Psychological breakdown	<i>I'm a late middle-aged man, working in the public sector and I have been subjected to . . . mobbing in the workplace . . . This happened over a number of years . . . and culminated in my having a psychological and physical health breakdown. I was off work for over 4 months. (ID73, DS1, F1, pp. 116-117)</i>
Sick leave	<i>I am currently on sick leave and have applied for workers compensation. (ID110, DS1, F1, p.16)</i>
Unfair dismissal	<i>The upshot of all of this has been that I have been summarily dismissed and am now involved in unfair dismissal proceedings. (ID201, DS1, F1, p.40)</i>
Made redundant	<i>. . . the Uni has now classified me as a "OH&S risk" to staff . . . (that is why I was banned from entering buildings) and that I will be made redundant [sic]. (ID130, DS1, F1, p.1)</i>
Workers compensation	<i>I have effectively lost my job as a direct result of the workplace mobbing and have been horrified at how quickly the management . . . continue to push me out despite singing my praises . . . I am endeavouring to get some closure on the many issues. (ID189, DS1, F1, p.183)</i>

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