

EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Crushing each other with gossip in nursing academia: Sophisticated communication or a symptom of dysfunction?

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the faculty role within the Canadian higher education workplace related to the phenomenon of gossip and reflect on ways to stop this unhealthy social communication tradition. Failure to address gossip, a form of bullying, in academia contributes to irreversible damage to a person's career and character. Sadly, faculty in nursing and the nursing profession are champions of this unprofessional behaviour. Navigating through a workplace environment tainted with gossip is a skill faculty must work on to prevent unfortunate consequences. The impacts of gossip must be recognized and handled responsibly. It is never too late to reflect on our communication practices and the potential impact on our workplace environment, including role modelling the nursing culture on learners.

Key Words: Gossip, Communication, Bullying, Nursing education, Faculty role

1. INTRODUCTION

When information about a person's behaviour or character is exchanged while a person is absent, gossip occurs.^[1,2] The phenomenon of gossip in this article relates to when information exchange is used to discredit or devalue an individual in a public forum professionally. In this context, gossip is a form of bullying and relational aggression that can include attacking an individual's reputation and self-esteem to cause irreversible damage to a person's career and character. Nurses are champions of this unprofessional behaviour.^[3] Faculty in nurse education demonstrate the dark side of gossip. They must pay particular attention to how such gossip can influence a legacy of ongoing accepted behaviour amongst academic and frontline healthcare workers. In higher education settings, gossip is more damaging than physical violence. Gossip is a serious workplace issue; gossiping individuals

demonstrate unprofessional behaviour^[4] and participate in psychological bullying.^[5] Gossip can be considered a part of schadenfreude, where envy plays an interactive enjoyment of mistreating others.^[6] Other researchers describe gossip as horizontal violence.^[7,8] The outcomes of gossip are humiliation, depression, and alienation.^[9] Gossip is a "largely spontaneous form of verbal communication that two or more people use to praise or denigrate people".^[10] Nursing faculty victims of gossip describe feeling trapped and isolated, are less productive and question their decision to enter academia.^[11] Bystanders of gossip often do not challenge this behaviour out of fear for their personal or professional well-being;^[12] however, they may experience guilt if they do not dare to stand up for the victim.^[9] Gossip negatively impacts a post-secondary organization's social climate, work potential, reputation^[13] and overall performance.^[14] Neg-

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ative impacts of faculty gossip spillover to their students include role modelling the acceptance of gossip behaviour later in nursing post-graduation.^[15]

In this paper, we reflect on the phenomenon of gossip within the post-secondary education context and how this affects the nursing education environment explicitly. The context is within the Canadian perspective and uncovers the many elements to consider regarding gossip, how gossip shapes the learning environment and addresses a negative relational dynamic that diminishes the core caring moral of nurse education and leads to further bullying. Our stance is that gossip in the workplace must stop and never be entertained, as gossip is the main characteristic of bullying in academia. However, we recognize that gossip is a way academics share information. It has varying effects on relieving anxiety. Most academics prefer not to gossip; however, they indulge when there are insufficient organizational communication structures.

2. EXPLORING THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF GOSSIP

The concept of gossip is described in various perspectives ranging from a primary communication method to the enactment of intentionally abusing power. In his seminal research about gossip and scandal, Max Gluckman observed various populations to understand the functions(s) served by gossip.^[16] While gossip can certainly be evaluative talk about another person (usually absent), it is also understood to meet other group or society needs, such as group cohesion and interpersonal bonding.^[17] However, gossip usually comes at the expense of a group or individual to reinforce ingroup power and hierarchy.^[18] Victims of gossip threaten ingroup norms and power, not necessarily by having undesirable qualities but by being confident, competent, and well-liked.^[14]

A closely related concept to gossip is a rumour, with both behaviours considered relational aggression.^[18] With rumours, groups attempt to gather information to interpret ambiguity and risk. The group then produces a form of acceptance if the ideas in the rumour align with the group's core feelings and beliefs. Rumours enforce group norms, cause closer bonds between members, and foster the development of goals while increasing acceptance between group members.^[12, 19] Although rumours and gossip are very similar, in the literature, gossip appears to be more complex and harmful; gossip is viewed as a controlling mechanism within academic power structures, a way to manipulate status differences between individuals, and a way to tighten a bond of acceptance between members of a group by using a scapegoat. The consequences of gossip in higher education include profound distortion of

an individual's image without them having any control. For example, a false story about a teacher being labelled a lazy teacher can evolve to a point where other teachers refuse to approach them or work with them on academic projects. The impact on a bystander may include either vicarious trauma or unconscious enjoyment and lead to continued aggression by the bystander towards the victim.

On the other hand, gossip may have a place in higher education, especially when there is a sense of anxiety or stress that needs to be vented or discussed to maintain a sense of well-being. Historically, gossip carries social traditions, "[f]ar from dangerous, gossip is seen here as a fundamental competent of a healthy society".^[20] Seminal research on gossip is viewed as a form of community regulation which maintains unity and group understanding of social rules.^[16] Peggy Chinn, a transformative nurse educator and leader, suggested that gossip has the potential to be managed to share personal truths.^[21] To skillfully use gossip, one must take responsibility for the information conveyed to others, focusing on transparently explaining why they are telling a story, naming the source of information, and using the information to share compassion. Chinn further suggests that the goal of gossip should be more about how to use the information to move forward for positive change, including speculation for growth and change and taking responsibility for how the gossiper is part of the situation. "Use gossip to assist, build community, not compete".^[21] Gossip can enhance one's career status by sending messages regarding career goals and inviting collaborative initiatives of similar interest through the grapevine.^[18] In academia, an example could be sending out a message of a professional desire to go for a promotion or interest in forming a research network, making clear the story's intention is to enhance the department's academic vision or making the transitional change a positive notion. Although there appears to be a place for gossip when assisting with moving matters forward for a better understanding, the way gossip is conveyed through abuse of power needs to be addressed as an unacceptable form of bullying.

3. ADDRESSING GOSSIP IN NURSE ACADEMIA

In nurse academia, gossip is viewed as an aggressive form of communication that may be influenced by uncertain times and interpersonal conflicts. Gossip is a standard human communication method during organizational stress, a way to push forward through stressful times, weed out weaker, less competent workers and keep the stronger individuals running the organization.^[22] Internal academic systems of appraisal, biased peer evaluations, and comments made by

academics in higher positions at exclusive meetings can potentially support gossip and normalize the manufacturing of performance or stature ideas. Factors within academia that fuel gossip is increased demand for research or grant productivity, inequitable funding opportunities, historical relationship disputes between groups on campus (union versus administration), unclear professional advancement options or process, inconsistent messaging, and actions from the administration toward employees. Miscommunication and faculty who are unsure or unclear of the support they have in their professional roles can develop professional jealousy, fewer collaborative initiatives, and the breeding of resentment.^[23] Hostile behaviours in higher education environments are due to sociocultural power differences and various forms of discrimination.^[3,4,13] Young women and those viewed with the most significant potential for career advancement are often the victims of bullying.^[24] Early career victims of negative gossip have the stress of working hard to reshape and protect their workplace reputation. Throughout their career, they may blame the gossip for unfairly criticizing their character.^[25] Gossiping in nursing may stem from ineffective role modelling by faculty with absent or inadequate conflict resolution training in nursing schools. Faculty might be uncomfortable managing gossip themselves or may choose to ignore the situation.^[9,24,25]

4. WHY GOSSIP?

Exploring the world of a gossip often helps the victim understand what is behind the behaviour and can give insight into strategies to address it. The literature exploring why people gossip includes themes such as wanting revenge, attention or acceptance, and jealousy.^[4,6,12,14,22,23] Sending malicious rumours appears to derive from poor self-esteem.^[18] In the academic setting, Bullies usually lack self-confidence and try to divert attention by focusing on someone else, traditionally viewed as a threat but not necessarily a subordinate.^[2,4,7,13,18] Gossipers are described as psychologically weak, explicitly displaying poor coping, lack of confidence or feelings of jealousy toward another. Gossip also has social functions and is used to disseminate information,^[17] create strong bonds between members within an organizational group,^[4] share the history and informal cultural norms and administrative rules,^[16] and release workplace stress.^[22] Through gossip, leaders can be warned of faculty complaints, assess reactions to organizational changes, and even use gossip to disseminate an idea by sending out accurate information via formal communication systems.^[19,22]

Often bullying occurs between individuals with power differences, such as an administrator targeting a faculty member or a supervisor with a graduate student.^[26] This type of

ivory tower bullying is often not monitored. However, the one with lesser power may view the treatment as tolerable due to the dependence on future career opportunities such as a recommendation letter or access to research funding. Faculty-to-faculty bullying is ongoing and prevalent between and within all faculty ranks and is typically described as horizontal violence.^[24] While there is little current work on gossip-related academic activities off campus, older research found that faculty-to-faculty bullying and aggression occur during conferences.^[27] Perhaps, gossip is a sophisticated means to solve a problem by manipulating social networking.^[17] Arbitrary rules of conduct enhance the culture of bullying in an organization, validating gossip as a cultural norm.

5. CYBERBULLYING, THE VIRTUAL GOSSIP

Dangerous elements of gossip include informal communication through social media and how these impact multiple aspects of a victim's life.^[28] Technology can multiply gossip's effects and create multiple bystanders safely distanced from physical, relational aggression.^[28] With just one tap of a button or screen, many can view a rumour, storyline, or ambiguous statement. Virtual messages, photos, or even videos can be a complex form of gossip. Messages can be manipulated and left intentionally vague, which invites endless interpretations, and no actual means to sort through the message.

Furthermore, the cyber world not only opens the virtual back door to informal communication between faculty members but also stays open forever, and no message can be taken back.^[28] A victim is often powerless to delete the message or correct any misperceptions. A gossip engaged in cyberbullying may send a misleading or embarrassing comment in a group email, leaving little opportunity for a recipient to defend themselves instead of having a private, face-to-face conversation.^[29] Unfortunately, the effects of this often more public type of gossip can spill over into the victim's personal and professional identities, involving bystanders such as other employees, family members, and potential future employers. A mob mentality can form quickly in this realm of abusive communication, and bystanders might observe the unfolding of the relational bullying dynamics between the bully and victim and develop a sense of vicarious enjoyment.^[29,30] While gossip may affect the victims' psychological well-being for life, the bully and bystanders seem affected only temporarily.^[30]

6. GOSSIP INTERVENTIONS

These authors suggest keeping written details of events, dates and times and any communications for victims of gossip, es-

pecially if they are intolerant of the story. Those who find gossip intolerable and have the potential to affect their health are strongly encouraged to seek management or human resources assistance or any other means the academic system has in place to deal with dynamics. The harm to health and academic reputation may even result in legal action if sufficient evidence is collected. Some may find that the damaging results of gossip can harm health or standing, and moving forward with a new career in a more supportive organization is a rational option. When pursuing this change in perspective, the victim should take part in an exit interview and write a letter to leaders of the organization with accurate details of the reasons behind the departure, so the academic institution has a record of the occurrence and can assist the victim in leaving with a sense of first steps toward healing.

Bullies use rumormongering when a bystander shows acceptance or empathy for the gossipers' position.^[9,19] Feelings of inferiority fuel the gossip to seek out an audience that can contribute to or support the strength of the gossipers' story. Often such people are new to the environment and are non-threatening or perceived as not having the ability to dissuade the gossipers from their position. The bystander may be in a position of power that could ultimately improve the gossipers' function. The gossipers might choose a person to hear their story to be heard, to vent their frustration, or to make themselves feel better. When a gossip (the bully) baits a person into a conversation that includes talking badly about someone, there are several things the receiver or bystander can do to de-escalate the situation dramatically. The first and most respectful action is never participating in gossip and refraining from adding to the gossipers' storyline. If caught up in a story session, the bystander quickly needs to put the gossipers on notice that they are not comfortable with how and why the storyline was shared and is therefore not agreeing with the principles of the process of gossip. Bullies have a poor memory when displaying inappropriate behaviour and past acceptance of it by others.^[31] Acceptance of individuals does not mean supporting the put-downs of others; therefore, the bystander is not implicated in the bullying that has occurred. Gossipers seeking support for their story might also involve or drop the names of others who agree with their storyline. Bystanders should take a clear position and not agree to participate in the conversation (now considered a group gossip session, as others are virtually or physically involved in the unfriendly discussion).^[24]

Nursing faculty leaders play an essential role in stopping gossip trends and enhancing a climate of civility, which prevents the creation of new victims and past victims from leaving the organization.^[31] Workplace behavioural policies only work if reinforced and reviewed for relevance by all the stake-

holders of an academic organization,^[32] and extra screening before hiring employees regarding social relationships is highly recommended.^[26] Suggestions for educational organizations include gathering data using surveys to measure the perceptions of academic incivility.^[33] Sending consistent messages fostering non-punitive reporting systems is also imperative so that the victim of gossip can report their situation safely and professionally.^[31,34] Providing cognitive rehearsal simulations as an anti-bullying strategy and workshops on collaboration and mindfulness are encouraged to manage conflict, enhance a culture of positive communication, and proactively work through incivility within the workplace.^[33,35] Nurse leaders in academia are uniquely positioned to manage talk, as their units on campuses represent professionals who advocate for population wellbeing; thus, as qualified health care providers and administrators of health care, leaders in nursing seem to fit well with role modelling and implementing campus-wide vision statements on acceptable organizational behaviours and professional values.

7. CONCLUSION

Gossip can highlight very unpleasant human qualities that bring attention to a situation indirectly, allowing the gossipers to get away with confronting an individual they have a concern about, but also creating a toxic workplace that impacts work productivity and potentially emotionally scars the target;^[31] in other words, gossip can be viewed as an indirect attack on someone powerless to defend themselves, as they do not have a chance to respond to the details when they are shared with someone else. Gossip can negatively or positively affect the absent party.^[17] Gossip increases in workplaces when formal communication systems are dysfunctional or when workers are challenged with ambiguous situations.^[19]

Mutual respect between faculty members encourages reciprocated work relations, collaboration, and retention. Nurse academics specializing in relational practice encourage nurses to rise to the challenge to support values that promote social justice and equity, looking at bullying in the workplace as an organizational symptom of inadequate support systems instead of an isolated event between individuals.^[36] The interplay between workplace pressure, inconsistent or unfair relational actions on broken unprofessional behavioural policies and unhealthy leadership reflect organizational functions supporting, ignoring, or downplaying the damage created by gossip. Academic and corporate leaders that avoid acting on the conflict that damages the psychological and emotional well-being of a faculty member should instead provide problem-solving approaches and transparent com-

munication links that empower faculty to want to contribute to the workplace culture and accomplish both their academic and caring goals in nursing education.^[22] Ultimately, the long-term consequences of gossip in academia should be critically reviewed, especially when the organizational conditions support gossip to spread. These authors encourage academic gossipers to move to a desire to help others and better understand a social environment rather than sending messages that hurt others and create a sense of unearned power.

“I am not joking when I say this: If you are ever working with me and I hear you treat another colleague with disrespect or talk down to someone, I promise you, I will fire you on the spot — on the spot. No ifs and or buts,” Biden told the staffers, talking to a large video screen. “Everybody is entitled to be treated with decency and dignity.” Cited in New York Post, by Nelson, S. (January 2021)^[37]

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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