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## Researching the Mechanisms of Gossip in Organizations: From Fly on the Wall to Fly in the Soup

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## Researching the Mechanisms of Gossip in Organizations: From Fly on the Wall to Fly in the Soup

### Abstract

In this paper, I explored how to research a sensitive topic such as gossip in organizations and used a narrative approach to illustrate the methodological and ethical issues that come up when considering a variety of research methods. I first attempted to conduct an ethnographic research on a project group from a Dutch university undergoing a major change. At the very beginning of the project, as a participant observer, I struggled to remain an outsider, or a “fly on the wall.” But as issues of power came into play and access became increasingly problematic, I moved towards the role of an “observing participant.” Therefore, in order to research gossip and some of the hidden dimensions of organizational life, I turned to auto- and self-ethnography as a way to regain access and greater authenticity. While following this route presented its share of ethical and methodological issues, it also provided valuable insights that could be of value to researchers attempting to study sensitive topics such as gossip in organizations.

### Keywords

Gossip, Ethnography, Autoethnography, Research Methods

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*In this paper, I explored how to research a sensitive topic such as gossip in organizations and used a narrative approach to illustrate the methodological and ethical issues that come up when considering a variety of research methods. I first attempted to conduct an ethnographic research on a project group from a Dutch university undergoing a major change. At the very beginning of the project, as a participant observer, I struggled to remain an outsider, or a “fly on the wall.” But as issues of power came into play and access became increasingly problematic, I moved towards the role of an “observing participant.” Therefore, in order to research gossip and some of the hidden dimensions of organizational life, I turned to auto- and self-ethnography as a way to regain access and greater authenticity. While following this route presented its share of ethical and methodological issues, it also provided valuable insights that could be of value to researchers attempting to study sensitive topics such as gossip in organizations. Keywords: Gossip, Ethnography, Autoethnography, Research Methods*

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Over the last 50 years, the number of studies pertaining to organizational culture and behavior have greatly expanded, as managers could apply such studies in order to “secure employee loyalty and facilitate strategic change” (Van Iterson, Waddington, & Michelson, 2011, p. 375). In time, many managers realized that, to communicate a change, for example, simply relying on formal communication channels was not enough. Ivancevich, Konopaske, and Matteson (2008) observed that gossip and the grapevine are often the fastest and most efficient communication channels within an organization. However, gossip generally has a bad reputation. According to Peters and Kashima (2015), “societal attitudes towards gossipers are overwhelmingly negative” (p. 5). By looking at how gossip is portrayed in popular culture, the authors noted that “60% of quotes and aphorisms about gossip condemned gossipers as immoral individuals who do harm to those that they talk about” (p. 784). When googling “office gossip,” for example, a large number of articles appear, such as “How to address Office Gossip as a Manager,” “Managing: How to Stop employees from Gossiping,” “Negative Effects of Office Gossip on the Work Environment,” and “How to Stop Office Gossip Once and for All.” In these articles, gossip clearly harbours negative connotations such as workplace bullying or character assassination.

Although gossip has been “marginalized, demonized or trivialized” (Waddington, 2012, p. 11), quite a few organizational researchers recognized the important role of gossip in understanding organizational culture (e.g., Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004; Mills, 2010; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Many researchers now consider the role of gossip to be positive: for example, Ivancevich et al. (2008) stated that gossip plays a vital role in developing a company’s corporate culture: “Via gossip, the company war stories and those stories that communicate the firm’s values can be told” (p. 369). Gossip is also used to protect the group and warn group members against others that violate group norms (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Similarly, Baumeister, Vohs, and Zhang (2004) claim that gossip is “observational learning of a cultural kind” (p. 112). Several researchers (Foster, 2004; Giardini,

2012) also observed that gossip is an essential (and often the only way) to gather information within an organization.

However, while there are numerous studies outlining the benefits of understanding the mechanisms of gossip within an organization, few actually provide guidance on how to research a sensitive topic such as gossip, which is, according to Dickson-Swift, James, and Liamputtong (2008), often “taboo,” “laden with emotion,” or “intimate, discreditable or incriminating” (p. 2). Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) note that relatively few writers have tried to document the issues that sensitive research raises. This applies even more so to the study of gossip in organizations. How can a researcher ensure that participants reveal their true behavior if there is some form of shame attached to it?

In order to address some of these issues, I explore what would be the most adequate research method(s) to use when trying to understand the role of gossip within an organization, using a case study taking place at a large Dutch university as narrative thread. The goal of the project at this university, where I worked at the time, was to facilitate the merging of several faculties and offer a completely new curriculum by the start of the following school year. Since several of my colleagues in my research group were on the steering committee of this project, (and some were in charge of designing the new curriculum), they agreed that it would be interesting for me to conduct my research there. Since change often provides a fertile breeding ground for gossip (Mills, 2010), I thought this project would be of great interest to my own research on gossip. The project manager also seemed keen on documenting the project and to know more about informal communication in order to advance the change process.

By describing the steps, I undertook for my preliminary research, where I give “an account of an experience that is told in a sequenced way” (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012, p. 188), I discuss the methodological and ethical issues that arise when undertaking such research. My aim in writing this paper is to have other researchers (gossip researchers as well as others researching similarly sensitive topics) engage with me in a discussion. In a first step, I examine the literature on gossip to see how other researchers have handled such a sensitive topic.

### **Researching Gossip: Quantitative Studies**

Over the past 50 years, anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, and philosophers have analyzed gossip (see Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014) using a variety of research methods. However, most of the studies on gossip tend to be quantitative studies, where researchers define gossip as “positive or negative information exchanged about an absent third party” (Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014; Cole & Scrivener, 2013; Farley, 2011; Foster, 2004; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010; Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014; McAndrew, 2014; Yao, Scott, McAleer, O’Donnell, & Sereno, 2014). Researchers often break down the notion of gossip into finite variables or categories. For example, Kurland and Pelled (2000) distinguished between three types of gossip: sign, credibility, and work-relatedness. Sign is the valence of the gossip, or “positivity or negativity of the information being related” (p. 430). Credibility is the extent to which the gossip is accurate and true. Work-related gossip focuses on an individual’s performance and relationship with colleagues.

Similarly, Martinescu et al. (2014) also broke down topics of gossip into several categories: appearance, personality, peculiarities, or competence. Who we gossip with (Wittek & Wielers, 1998), and why we gossip (Martinescu et al., 2014; McAndrew, 2014) were all objects of study. The function of gossip was also broken down into several categories: to protect the group from a norm violation (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), to gather information (Foster, 2004; Giardini, 2012), to influence (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012) or to entertain (Foster, 2004; Yao et al., 2014).

While these variables give some insight as to people's general attitudes towards gossip, I find that they do not offer much depth as to what really goes on in an organization. By taking such a distanced view, these studies often do not provide enough insight into the dynamics, the details, and the context of the gossiping process. As Alvesson (2003) noted, in many quantitative studies, "acts, practices, relations, feelings and cognitions are totally lost to the correlation of variables" (p. 167). While a study can, for example, conclude that negative gossipers are perceived less favourably than positive gossipers, it does not give much nuance as to the type of negative gossip they are engaging in. Saying that someone is bad at her job, for example, is quite different than saying that she is ugly and smells, yet they are both lumped under the category of negative gossip. Context, nuances, and emotions are lost. After examining some of the quantitative studies done on gossip in organizations, Van Iterson et al. (2011) also noted that when taken out of context and scrutinized, "the uniqueness and authenticity" of gossip easily gets lost, and in the end, becomes "rather meaningless" (p. 376).

Therefore, as Bochner (2012) put it, "Most published research omits concrete details of connected lives, eclipsing lived experiences with concepts, categories and typologies. Readers are not encouraged to see and feel the struggles and emotions of the research participants" (p. 159). Muncey (as cited in Wall, 2008) also stated that "in the world of traditional science, objective distance seems to protect researchers and readers from the emotional and intimate details of human lives" (p. 44).

Moreover, the majority of these quantitative studies use questionnaires in which participants are anonymous. Peters and Kashima (2015), for example, asked 206 university students to fill in an anonymous online questionnaire, responding to gossip scenarios using a 7-point Likert scale. Dijkstra, Beersma, and van Leeuwen (2014), sent a survey to 97 Dutch policemen to study how they gossip about their managers. Martinescu et al. (2014) had 183 undergraduate students complete an online survey. Similarly, Farley (2011) as well as Cole and Scrivener (2013) asked (mainly) university students to fill out a questionnaire. In all of these cases, participation was kept anonymous and/or confidential. Therefore, the researchers did not have to worry about potentially harming their participants. They could stay in the background and not risk influencing the research process. Data were more easily collected, and correlations were neatly drawn. Because quantitative studies avoid the ethical pitfalls that many qualitative studies face (see below), I found them particularly tempting to use. However, at the same time, similarly to Bochner (2012) and Van Iterson et al. (2011), I believed that by using quantitative research methods, I would lose a lot of meaning and nuances of the gossiping process; with this type of research, participants could never be caught in the act of gossiping.

### **Ethnographic Methods**

Since I wanted to study my participants in situ, I was immediately drawn towards organizational ethnography. According to Yanow, Ybema, and van Hulst (2012), "organizational ethnographers can potentially make explicit often overlooked, tacitly known, and /or concealed dimensions of meaning making" (p. 335). Moreover, the authors note, "Ethnographies can have a direct, critical, even shocking quality, laying bare otherwise hidden and even harsh social realities" (p. 335). Although several researchers acknowledged the potential of participant observer or ethnographic studies to research gossip, Foster (2004) noted that relatively few studies actually used such methods. Those that do tend to focus on the customs of very specific populations, such as the Pacific Isles (Besnier, 1989), a rural Spanish community (Gilmore, 1978), a small town in Newfoundland (Szwed as cited in Foster, 2004), or a high school population from a Midwestern community (Eder & Enke as cited in Foster, 2004). Few actually study gossip in organizations. According to Watson (2011), organizational studies tend to not take ethnographic research too seriously, and organizational ethnographers

tend to have difficulty publishing their work in academic journals. Perhaps, while it is widely acknowledged that organizations too are cultures (Morgan, 1986), dominant research methods still do not reflect this.

However, more and more researchers are now acknowledging the advantages that ethnography and qualitative research designs have over quantitative ones (see Winkler, 2014), especially when it comes to researching sensitive topics. According to Dickson-Swift et al. (2008), one explanation for this is that “it allows people to develop and express their own reality” (p. 7). By spending more time with their participants, researchers gain deeper insights about them. Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) note, however, that conducting such research often has consequences that participants and researchers are not always aware of. For example, they describe how researchers often have feelings of guilt towards their participants, especially when the study is over. Researchers and participants cannot always predict the impact such sensitive research topics may have on them. Even small methodological choices may turn into substantial ethical dilemmas.

Indeed, even at the earliest stages, conducting research on gossip quickly turned out to be loaded and sensitive, starting with the definition of gossip itself. The first dilemma that I faced was: should I tell the participants of my study that I am researching gossip?

### Using the Word “Gossip”

While most academic researchers use the neutral definition of gossip, “Two people exchanging positive or negative information about an absent third party,” this definition does not come to most people’s minds when they hear the word gossip. Rather they often think of Joseph Epstein’s (2011), “telling things about other people that they would rather not have known” (p. 4). There’s a sense of secrecy and betrayal (see Costas & Grey, 2014).

Moreover, according to Foster (2004), “Many ethical condemnations of gossip revolve around presumed rules of privacy” (p. 78). Indeed, (as mentioned above), generally, “gossip is regarded as a socially undesirable activity” (Nevo et al. as cited in Van Iterson et al., 2011, p. 386).

Therefore, when choosing the more neutral, academic definition for my research, I wonder, am I really doing research about *gossip* (as it is generally understood)? And since I *do* want to research gossip using the more neutral, academic definition, should I then tell my subjects that I am doing research about gossip? Is it ethical for me not to?

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), researchers should always be clear about their research design. However, the authors point out, if researchers reveal their roles and intentions, this will certainly affect their subject’s behaviours and skew the results of their research. Indeed, most gossip researchers avoided using the word when conducting their studies. For example, Martinescu et al. (2014) told their participants that they were doing a study about “informal group communication” (p. 1672). Cole and Scrivener (2013) asked their subjects to take part in a study about “sharing information about others” (p. 256), and Farley, Timme, and Hart (2010) said that their survey was about “informal communication in the workplace” (p. 365). Similarly, Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) used the definition rather than the word *gossip* itself to “avoid social desirability effects” (p. 2649). After conducting interviews and/or surveys, they debriefed their subjects and revealed the purpose of their study.

Therefore, I decided to tell participants that my study was about informal communication, and about “how people speak about their colleagues and managers when they are not there.”

### **A Fly on the Wall**

Since there are still no official ethical committees for universities of applied sciences in The Netherlands (de Knecht, 2017), the director of my research group, two senior colleagues, and a few members of the steering committee of the project reviewed my research proposal and agreed with my approach. I therefore started my field research by interviewing a few of the participants, asking for their permission and guaranteeing confidentiality. Using Spradley's (1979) methodology of conducting ethnographic interviews, I performed a "series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants" (p. 464). Keeping the meetings informal (over coffee or casually, at our desks at the research group), I asked them how things were going with the project and let them talk. Since the project took place in a different faculty than my own, I assumed that I could observe the process while keeping a certain distance. The organizational change my participants were going through did not concern me directly (as they all came from a different faculty) and I did not have preconceived notions about any of the participants. But since we were all working for the same university, I did enjoy the benefit of some insider knowledge about the organizational culture.

During the interviews, I observed whether participants would start gossiping with me when talking about the change they were going through. I tried to keep my questions as neutral as possible and asked them to talk about their role in the change process. What did they think of the change? I then observed what was mentioned, who was talked about, and in what way. I wondered how would my communication with my participants change as I got to know them better? Of course, I realized that I could not just be a simple observer, as I would become a key player in the process myself. The interview itself then became an ethnographic observation, where I was an active participant, and where I became "actively involved in the (co-) construction of data," and see my "narratives as also constructing the organizational 'realities' they report" (Yanow et al., 2012, p. 343).

Before having a firm idea on how to properly handle these issues, I decided to start keeping a detailed (private) journal. However, already after conducting only a few interviews, I started to feel conscious about my role, and the power that I quickly acquired as I suddenly became the one in the know. Despite the tape recorder being on (after having asked for consent), and without being prompted, the interviewees all spoke fairly freely about one another, when discussing what was and was not working with the project. For example, certain employees criticized management for not knowing the direction they should take. Others talked about certain colleagues contradicting and antagonizing others.

### **A Fly in the Soup**

After a fairly short period of time, I had the impression that my relationship with the colleagues from the research group and those from the steering committee (who had given me permission to conduct my research) started to change. In the beginning, before I met any of the members of the project, my colleagues from the research group were all very friendly and open. However, as soon as I started to speak with some of the other participants, some of them seemed to become more distant. At one point, one of them told me (s)he had a problem with my research (although nothing had changed with my methodology or approach). Even if the managers had given me the green light to proceed, this person informed me that (s)he was "not very happy about that."

Soon after, all kinds of obstacles appeared. In an email, one of the managers said that (s)he did not want me to do ethnographic research, but rather, use methods such as "*appreciative inquiry*:" "*Each question should be an intervention in itself and should lead the*

*process in the right direction. (...) I notice that people like to talk a lot, so they will love to be interviewed, but this will probably get in the way of moving the project forward.”*

Another manager told me over coffee that (s)he was not interested in ethnographic research at all: *“What’s in it for me? How will this help me reach my goals?”*

A few days later, I received an e-mail from one of the managers:

*“I’ve decided to put your research on hold. The work flow within and between the projects is a bit too vulnerable to allow for the kind of research you propose. Furthermore, there seems to be an assumption hidden in your design (the idea that whether a project functions or not correlates with personality) ...”*

I had no idea how this person came to the idea that I would want to correlate project function to participants’ personalities. Were they talking to my colleagues from the research group? I suddenly felt like I (and my research) had become the object of gossip. I was also disappointed to have been put on hold. Despite the fact that I had vowed not to gossip about the managers or any of the participants, I could hardly resist the urge, and discussed some of my experiences with another colleague from the research group. I wanted to find out whether (s)he had heard anything from our colleagues? Did (s)he think that one of them could have been causing my setbacks? What did (s)he think of some of the participants of the project? The more insecure I felt, the greater my urge to gossip. After the chat with my colleague, however, the initial pleasure of talking was quickly replaced by an overwhelming feeling of guilt... (Not only was I potentially harming certain colleagues, but I was failing miserably in my role as “objective” researcher).

### **Self and Autoethnography**

As I started to analyze my emotions and reflect on what pushed me to engage in and respond to gossip, I realized that the focus of my research had shifted. By trying to observe how people gossip, I found myself reflecting more and more on my own role and behavior in the process. I therefore wondered whether it would not be more authentic to reflect on what triggers *me* to gossip? Would conducting an *autoethnography*, “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 1), not be a better method to understand the mechanisms of gossip within my organization? Contrary to ethnography, rather than being in the background, I would place myself in the foreground.

Moreover, by focusing on my own environment (as opposed to other faculties), I would also be conducting what Alvesson (2003) calls a *self-ethnography*, where the researcher is not an ethnographer in the sense of a “professional stranger” or a “participant observer,” but rather where s/he becomes an “observing participant” (p. 174). Although self-ethnography does border on participant observation, the main difference, according to the author is that

The conventional ethnographer uses any kind of active participation for instrumental purpose—the ethnographer working as a lumberjack does so in order to produce research about lumberjacks, not because of an inner urge to cut down trees—whereas the idea of a self-ethnography is to utilize the position one is in also for secondary purposes, i.e., doing research on the setting of which one is part. (Alvesson, 2003, p. 175)

As an insider, the researcher becomes better positioned than an outside ethnographer to reveal the true story, as s/he has a natural access to his/her surroundings. Researchers have used

autoethnography, for example, to analyse the role of teachers (Brown, 2014), to reflect on immigrants' experiences in academia (Popova, 2016), to conduct narrative identity work while learning a foreign language (Winkler, 2014), and to explore the impact of dyslexia on medical studies (Shaw, Anderson, & Grant, 2016). Because of their privileged position and access, and due to the reflexive nature of their work, such accounts provided insights that few studies on similar topics could ever provide. For example, Popova (2016) was able to explore "the meaning and feelings of being a colonized person" and could connect her experiences "to the dynamics of power and privilege" she encountered regularly (p. 175).

Therefore, rather than focusing on the managers and project coordinators, who, as Alvesson (2003) described, tend to try and "control the situation and produce their own versions of the world" (p. 179), in order to regain some control over my research, I considered shifting the focus more towards myself and document my interactions with the colleagues from my research group involved in the project. Since I worked with them fairly closely, and did have "inner urges" to gossip, maybe my observations could provide "novel and interesting material" and may be more authentic than interviewees who may try to cover up their real motives and attitudes in order to appear in the best way possible. According to Doloriert and Sambrook (as cited in Winkler, 2013), for this reason, "autoethnography has become increasingly popular within organization studies" (p. 196).

Similarly to Sikes (2012), I also found autoethnography appealing because "it is an approach which offers a privileged opportunity to look at the meaning and experience of private 'troubles' in an evocative manner" (p. 130). Moreover, even if "troubles" are not the focus of the actual research itself, "autoethnography could prompt critical reflection on the personal experience of aspects of life as lived in particular social contexts, thereby broadening knowledge and understanding" (Sikes, 2012, p. 130). As Wolcott (as cited in Wall, 2008) noted: "In autoethnography, the goal is to convey a patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions and behaviors that portray a more complete view of life" (p. 44). And indeed, as a researcher, am I not in a better position, (and more willing) to analyze and reflect on my feelings and actions than any of my interviewees would?

According to Bochner and Ellis (as cited in Ellis et al., 2011), autoethnographers write about *epiphanies*: "remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life" and "events after which life does not seem quite the same" (p. 2). Therefore, on a much smaller scale, I considered the events that triggered me to gossip as small "epiphanies," as they did impact the trajectory of my relationships with my colleagues. Having my research being put on hold, (even after having received the green light from the director of my research group and from key members of the steering committee of the project), triggered feelings of frustration and insecurity, which provided me with a huge temptation to gossip.

I re-read my field notes and interviews looking for such "epiphanies" and noticed certain things I said that I was not even aware of. For example, after conducting an ethnographic interview with one of the colleagues involved in the project, I found myself (very subtly) nudging the conversation towards one of the actors.

*Me: I spoke to X, I spoke to Y, and spoke to Z. Z worked on this big project...*

*Interviewee: I don't know Z very well. I heard someone say "yeah, he's a friend of Y, so that's why he's here."*

Would my interviewee have gossiped negatively about Z if I had not mentioned that Z worked "on this big project"? Since I personally found Z to be rather arrogant, was I (unconsciously) probing my interviewee to give me his opinion of Z? In any case, this seemingly trivial comment, "Z worked on this big project" triggered my interviewee to gossip, which he may not have done had I not mentioned it.

## Reflexivity

Looking for such “epiphanies” in my field notes, I realized just how difficult it is, though, to “break out from the taken for grantedness of a particular context” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 176). Even if I had only been working at my university for 4 years, and am not Dutch, I still feel that I have adapted quite well to our organizational culture. Therefore, if an interesting account “touches upon a mix of familiarity/surprise, and this mix assures some element of generalization” and “some element of identification” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 182), how can I recognize what could be interesting to my readers? Which gossip incidents or epiphanies would elicit such reactions of identification?

Moreover, to what extent are my perceptions and reactions justified? For example, I had the impression that one of the colleagues from my research group was less friendly to me and that (s)he may have caused my setbacks. But was this perception solely the figment of my imagination? Would another researcher in such a situation have felt the same way I did? How would researchers conducting autoethnographies address such questions when making their methodology choices and how can they ever be certain of their conclusions?

Moreover, even if I believe that a few of my epiphanies are accurate and could be of interest to my readers, how can I write about these in an academic paper without harming my subjects?

## Protecting Interviewees

Initially, a very appealing reason for using autoethnography (other than regaining access and a greater authenticity) was to protect my interviewees. As many who have turned to autoethnography, I too felt the need to resist “authoritatively entering a culture, exploiting cultural members, and then recklessly leaving to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). I found it a lot easier to expose my feelings and experiences than someone else’s, as I felt that I did not have to worry as much about overstepping boundaries when it came to protecting my subjects’ privacy. Moreover, getting consent from my interviewees and having my research approved by my research group would be less of an issue, as Forber-Pratt (2015) put it: “Do I have to provide consent for me to study myself?” (p. 3).

However, according to Tullis (as cited in Forber-Pratt, 2015), “while doing an autoethnography may seem like a way to side-step the political bureaucracy, it may in fact open the door for more complex ethical dilemmas” (p. 11). Indeed, Ellis et al. (2011) noted that there cannot be a Self without an Other. Researchers do not exist in isolation, and it is not possible to talk about oneself only without implicating others.

For instance, if a son tells a story that mentions his mother, she is implicated by what he says; it is difficult to mask his mother without altering the meaning and the purpose of this story. Similar to people identifiable in a community study such as the minister, town mayor, or other elected official, the author’s mother is easily recognizable. Or if an autoethnographer writes a story about a particular neighbor’s racist acts, (...) she may try and mask the location of the community, but it does not take much work to find out where she lives and consequently, may not take much work to identify the neighbor about whom she speaks. (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 6)

Similarly, I wondered whether I could really mask the identities of the actors in my research project, since some were close colleagues from my research group, and others were managers.

Even if I remove the names and fictionalize the accounts significantly, to what extent can I achieve what Martin Tolich (as cited in Sikes, 2012) calls “internal confidentiality,” “where the internal refers to the network of internal relationships which allow the insiders to know and identify who and what is being described?” (p. 132).

Moreover, even if I choose to highlight certain examples that I believe may not produce harm, how can I be certain that my subjects will interpret these in the same way that I do? According to Ellis et al. (2011), such concerns often obligate autoethnographers to show their work to others implicated in or by their texts, allowing these others to respond. In an autoethnographic account of a day in his academic life, Winkler (2013) also implicated his colleagues and students indirectly. He considered seeking consent of those involved, as well as “retrospective consent,” and even what Ellis (as cited in Winkler, 2013) calls “process consent” which involves “checking at each stage to make sure participants will still want to be part of the project” (p. 198). While Winkler was not able to do this as he was no longer in touch with the 250 students he had taught in the past, he worked with the assumption that those mentioned in the story could read it: “I have paid attention to not publishing anything that I would not show to those referred in my narrative” (Winkler, 2013, p. 198). The author also used “pseudonyms and composite characters in order to ensure the anonymity of the people included in the research” (p. 198). Certain authors chose to remain anonymous, such as one doing an autoethnography on his relationships with his father and sons (Anonymous, 2014).

However, since my reason for writing this paper is for others to read it and engage with me in a discussion, the choice of remaining anonymous does not appeal to me. Instead, I decided to make my participants anonymous, change certain facts around and omit (quite a lot) of very damaging ones. Then, I discussed the first draft of my paper with certain members of my research group. I was surprised at how different their reactions were to the question, how much can I reveal about my subjects. While some found it problematic to divulge even the slightest detail (even when participants were anonymous) others said that my interviewees “are not made of sugar” and that they should be able to take it, should they recognize themselves.

One colleague wrote to me after reading my first draft:

*“I love the frankness of your paper. I also think it is not at all insulting for anyone we know.”*

However, even after having received their blessing to write about my findings and present them at a conference, I was still not completely convinced about this; I still feared that the participants would be able to recognize themselves and/or certain colleagues, and that my paper could eventually harm them in some way. Therefore, I chose to make them even more anonymous by blurring out their gender and creating composite characters. While writing this paper, I constantly struggled between providing clarity about my research findings and trying not to give away clues about the identity of the actors involved in my research. While ethical considerations are extremely important to me, I also feel that the more information I blur out, the less accurate and meaningful my research becomes (see below).

### **Protecting the Self**

I soon realized that the challenge of the autoethnographer does not only limit itself to protecting one’s interviewees. Warren et al. (2000) also noted that many may “suppress parts of what might have gone into field notes in order to protect some aspects of his or her own self” (p. 187).

In an autoethnography about her experiences as an adoptive mother, Wall (2008), for example, discussed the vulnerable position this process put her “in revealing herself, of not

being able to take back what has been said, and of not having control over how readers will interpret what is being said” (p. 41).

In an autoethnography about his career switch to academia in middle age, Humphreys (2005), openly revealed many of his insecurities, failures, and rejections. For example, after hearing that his application for senior lectureship was rejected, he wrote:

This was not unexpected, as I felt that I had made a mess of the presentation in the morning of the previous day (...) There was no spark, no goose bumps, I never left the ground but bumped along feeling foolish at being unable to take off. I felt that my performance was amateurish, my voice was tremulous, my hands were shaking, my mouth was dry. (p. 849)

The author discussed the “anxiety” that this type of writing provoked, thinking that “colleagues, strangers, even enemies” (p. 844) might read his paper. However, by sharing his experiences in such an honest way, he strove to provide some authenticity to studies usually conducted by scholars who “often conceal their presence within third-person research accounts and sterile, formulaic curriculum vitae” (p. 843). The author wanted to encourage others starting an academic career: “I tell my own autoethnographic story *pour encourager les autres*, to show that not all academics have the ‘standard’ career that begins with an early PhD and continues with smooth and rapid advancement” (p. 852). However, while he did reveal a lot of his trials and tribulations, his stories always ended well: he re-applied for senior lectureship a bit later and obtained it after having a paper accepted. If things had not turned out as well, I wonder, would the author have been as open?

While it may be difficult to reveal one’s failures and insecurities, it is certainly more difficult to confess one’s moral shortcomings. Would many scholars admit to feeling jealousy towards more successful colleagues, for example? Or of having gossiped negatively about others? This study illustrates this well:

In her fieldwork in the lesbian and bisexual community, Robinson heard talk about other graduate students, instructors, undergraduates, staff and professors within the university. In response to this..., Robinson omitted all such references from her fieldnotes, protecting the other (and in a sense, herself), as one who does not gossip.” (Warren, 2000, p. 189)

Since there is visibly such a taboo about gossiping, will I not be, more or less consciously, inclined to censor myself? Even if I were completely aware that I am tempted to gossip negatively about a subject “because of negative feelings or an urge to get even” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 181), would I want to admit this in a research paper? One of my colleagues asked me, “By writing about what triggers you to gossip, you are the one that may look bad, stupid, jealous, or petty. Is that not a problem for you?” For example, recognizing that envy often triggers people to gossip (Canen & Canen, 2012), would I then not mask such an emotion in a research paper? I do admit that protecting my reputation is rather important to me.

As I changed my text and omitted certain juicy details, I became aware of how such “protective devices” could influence the integrity and validity of my research (Ellis, 2011, p. 6). I saw just how tempting it was to paint a more flattering picture of myself or of my direct colleagues to avoid making enemies out of them. Warren et al. (2000) observed in their study of fieldnote writing that researchers often experience what they called a “tension of ethnography”: “the tension between thickly descriptive representation on the one hand and protecting the people in the setting on the other” (p. 186).

## Objectivity

I do wonder, though, how far one can disguise actual content of interviews and field notes to protect one's subjects and self. How far from the truth can you sway while still remaining scientific? I felt that omitting so many facts and accounts in order to protect my subjects and to ensure their confidentiality affected my research considerably. By censoring myself, many valuable insights were lost and will remain forever buried in my field notes. Therefore, is having the aim of "evoking a sense of feel, place, empathy or understanding, or to encourage readers to question their taken for granted assumptions" (Sikes, 2012, p. 127) valid enough? According to Sikes, it is. As long as one acknowledges "both the inevitable gaps between reality, experience and expression" and also "that the life as told or otherwise depicted is not, and never can be, the life as lived" (Sikes, 2012, p. 127). While facts are important in an autoethnographic study and need to be checked, Bochner (2012) claimed that it is not the transmission of facts that make a study significant and meaningful. "Facts don't tell you what they mean or how they feel" (p. 161).

Indeed, Winkler (2014) recognized that autoethnography is certainly subjective, but are other methods so much more reliable? There seem to be double standards in qualitative research, according to the author. "Why are such authentic, emotional and often evocative tales less valid than for example passionate interview accounts?" (p. 295).

Similarly, Humphreys believes that the autoethnographer's reference to his/her own life story "does not reduce the reader's trust, it enhances it. It does not reduce the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work, it gives them clarity" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis as cited in Humphreys, 2005, p. 851).

Nonetheless, however honest and open I tried to be, focusing on feelings more than facts, I still questioned how valid these actually are. Indeed, Van Maanen (2011) claimed that we never have "direct access to the truth of our own perceptions or emotions," as "no one is free of culture, prevailing discourse, unreflective rituals, and habits of thought" (p. 227).

To what extent can I claim to even know myself fully? For example, Luft (as cited in Schein, 1999), stated that the self is composed of four components or windows: 1) The Open Area, known to self and to others, 2) The Hidden Area, known to self but unknown to others, 3) The Blind Spot, known to others but unknown to self, and 4) the Unknown Area, unknown to self and to others (see Figure 1).

<b>OPEN AREA</b> Known to self and others	<b>BLIND SPOT</b> Known only to others
<b>HIDDEN AREA</b> Known to self but unknown to others	<b>UNKNOWN AREA</b> Unknown to self and to others

**Figure 1. The Johari Window Model.**

According to this Johari Window model, the reader is only privy to the Open Area, and if I strive to be extremely honest and open, (s)he may get a sense of what goes on in the Hidden Area. However, the Unknown Area would be impossible to access, as it "embeds a Freudian

assumption that there are parts of the unknown self that remain unknown for everyone,” such as the id or subconscious process operating in our mind (Luft as cited in Schein, 1999, p. 7).

However, even if the autoethnographer can only make visible the two left quadrants of the Johari window (the open and hidden areas), would this still not shed more light on the issue of gossip than most traditional studies presently could do?

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In order to find an adequate way to research how employees in my organization gossip, I first explored using ethnographic interviews. While this method certainly provided me with quite some insights (as interviewees spoke quite freely with me), it became increasingly difficult for me to stay in the background and keep my interviewees in the foreground, prompting the managers to put my research on hold. Therefore, in order to regain a certain amount of authenticity, I decided to put myself in the foreground and my subjects in the background, by conducting a self and autoethnography. Moreover, by taking the spotlight off of my colleagues, I hoped to protect them. Paradoxically, though, I soon realized that my subjects would be placed in an even more vulnerable position in the background than in the foreground. When conducting ethnographic interviews, for example, I report what people say to me about other people; I can only try to guess what they really think, as they will never reveal all of their thoughts and knowledge to me. However, by placing myself in the foreground and revealing what triggers me to gossip, I would be forced to divulge what I think of my subjects and put them (and myself) in a potentially very negative light. I also found that protecting their privacy and assuring internal confidentiality was very problematic.

While ethical issues in auto-ethnography have “scarcely been raised, and there is little guidance in the auto-ethnography literature for dealing with them” (Wall, 2008, p. 49), adopting this method, I found, is certainly challenging.

### **Taking the Fly out of the Soup**

As I grapple with questions of ethics and objectivity, my research is still on hold. In the meantime, I have gotten to know my colleagues from the research group a bit better; some have shared their problems at work with me, which makes writing about them even more difficult.

I presented the ideas of this paper at an international conference, sharing with my audience (all experts in the field of ethnography), the anecdotes and epiphanies I felt I could not write about in this paper. Many strongly related to my observations and felt the discussion on such issues were very valuable. They assured me that conducting such autoethnographies certainly contributes to the body of research aimed at understanding the mechanisms of gossip in organizations. Leaving the gossip acts in context and analysing what triggers me to gossip as honestly as possible provides valuable insights that would never appear in most other studies (especially quantitative ones).

One participant suggested letting time go by before trying to publish my actual research findings: with time, the greater the likelihood that I could have been working on different (yet similar projects). Even if my subjects think they can recognize themselves or their colleagues, they will never be certain that it is actually them I am talking about.

While I cannot pursue the initial case study that I had intended to conduct on the specific project taking place at my university, I intend to use the data that I have already collected by adding it to data that I plan to collect from other (future) projects. Rather than focusing on a single case study to explore the mechanisms of gossip, I plan to conduct several case studies (either from the same university and/or from others as well). Despite the fact that it will be easier to ensure internal confidentiality and protect my interviewees, I will still remain

vulnerable though, and my objectivity and interpretations of the facts will always be put into question. While it is tempting to shy away from researching a topic such as gossip, I agree with Dickson-Swift et al. (2008), that to avoid conducting research on sensitive topics should not be an option, as it is a certain evasion of responsibility.

Many scholars believe that gossip is “an unresearchable topic” (Waddington, 2012, p. 54) because of all of the ethical minefields that occur when trying to research such a morally loaded activity. However, Waddington argues that such a topic should definitely be researched and recommends adopting a reflexive approach: instead of looking at ethics as a “formalized compliance to bureaucratic rules,” researchers should rather scrutinize “themselves and their practices and acknowledge the dilemmas that permeate the research process” (p. 55).

By conducting this preliminary research, this is what I have attempted to do. Even if there is a danger of falling into “self indulgent subjectivity” or “ego-ethnography” (Hurdley as cited in Waddington, 2012, p. 55), I found that using autoethnography is an effective way of taking into account the “broader social context” of gossip in organizations (Waddington, 2012). Moreover, I would recommend that researchers collect data by using several case studies, creating composite characters, and by continually reflecting on their role in the process.

While I can see the attractiveness of quantitative studies to study sensitive topics, (as participants can easily remain anonymous), using qualitative methods such as ethnography and/or autoethnography certainly leads to more interesting insights. By “allowing the research topic to emerge gradually on its own terms is a theoretical as well as a methodological strategy” (Brannen as cited in Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, p. 7). While this path is not straightforward and certainly fraught with difficulties, it is certainly worth pursuing.

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