EFFECT OF WORKPLACE GOSSIP ON WORK-RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract
The concern of this study is to investigate the effect of workplace gossip on work relations and organizational performance. Survey method, which employed closed ended questionnaire, was used to gather information from purposive selected participants. The data collected from the sample were analysed using simple percentage and presented in graph, area, and charts. The study reveals that workplace gossip is prevalent among female workers. The study shows that poor communication system, management/leadership style, idleness and inadequate responsibilities breeds workplace gossip. It further shows that workplace gossip affect work relations, information dissemination and the overall performance of formal organizations. The paper recommended policy option among others as panacea for addressing the sources and the negative effect of workplace gossip on work relations and organizational performance.

Keywords: Workplace gossip, work relations, organizational performance, formal organization.

Introduction
Formal organisations in Nigeria as in elsewhere are setup to achieve specific goals through optimal performance. The goals and performance of formal organisations are significantly tied to a number of factors including human and capital resources (Agba, Ushie & Agba, 2009; Agba, Atta & Ebon, 2005), management communication competence, and mentorship (Ushie, Agba, Ingwe, & Igbaji, 2005). Others are motivational incentives, workplace design, work environments and leadership style (Agba & Ushie, 2010; Ushie, Igbaji & Agba, 2015; Ushie, Agba & Okorie, 2015; Eteng, Agba & Enang, 2016). However, workplace gossip is the least considered among these factors; despite the fact that it has potentials of influencing goal attainment, work relations and performance of organisations or any establishment in a long run. Noon and Delbridge (1993) observe that workplace gossip is a subject that has not attracted significant attention among industrial sociologists. This is because workplace gossip is often view by organisation experts as insufficiently important to merit serious academic attention.

Gossip occurs everywhere in formal organisations (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell & Labianca, 2009). It is a complex phenomenon that is widely practice in different organisations including private, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and public institutions (Waddington, Undated). About 70 per cent of employees' and management speaking time/conversations revolve around gossips (Emler, 1994; Dunbar, 2004). Noon and Delbridge (1993:1) argue that workplace “gossip is one of the most pervasive activities within organisations, yet rarely does it receive serious attention by organisation theorist”; and where attempts are made, many of such analysis tend to be too simplistic and with negative undertone. This notion informed advocacy among some organisational analysts for the total elimination of workplace gossip.
The centrality of workplace gossip in understanding social organisation of work remains under researched area of inquiry in organisational studies (Waddington & Michelson, 2007). Despite its complicated and unattractive nature, workplace gossip is even more interesting than what people think (McAndrew, 2008). The relative neglect of workplace gossip as a vital area of study by most industrial sociologists shows that the discipline underscores some revealing facts about its impact on work relations and organisational performance. Noon and Delbridge (1993) posit that, workplace gossip provides advantages and discourse in formal establishments.

The fact that workplace gossip remains an intrinsic process in formal organisations, with a mixed bag of blessings and discourse, as well as the divide between scholars and the want of empirical evidence on the effect of workplace gossips on work relations and organisational performance informed this study. The concern of this research therefore, is to bridge empirical gaps, and reduce the divided among scholars on the effect of workplace gossip on work relations and organisational performance. Specifically, the study examined how gossips affect work relations among co-workers, management and workers, labour union executive and members and how such relationship affects the performance of government establishments in Southern Senatorial Districts of Cross River State, Nigeria.

**Theoretical consideration**
Social or work relations are vital in organizational effectiveness and goal achievement. Consequently, there are huge number of theories that attempts to establish the links between gossips, work relations, and organizational performance. However, this study adopts “Harold D. Lasswell’s gossip theory, which is also called Lasswell’s propaganda theory. The theory was developed by Harold D. Lasswell in 1948 and elaborated by R. Braddock in 1958.

Lasswell’s theory is a blend of ideas from behaviourism and Freudianism, which attempts to explain the effect of gossip or propaganda on social order. Lasswell posit that the power of gossip is not in the substance of the message but on the vulnerable state of mind of the recipient. The theory holds that when average persons (workers) are exposed to powerful threat that erodes their personal interest and means of sustenance, they turn to gossip, and use it as a weapon to overcoming the threat and reassure themselves of the future. This suggests that gossip can be a tool of maintaining or obstructing social relations in organizational and society.

Lasswell argue that industrial democracy allows for debate in formal organizations and when this results to conflict among advocates of opposing ideas or interest, the spectators (other members of the organization) are traumatized and become psychologically unbalance and vulnerable to manipulation by any of the contending parties (debaters). Under this circumstance, gossip becomes inevitable. It suggests that contending parties may results into gossip to win the support of spectators. Likewise, spectators may gossip to overcome the threat, psychological imbalance, and trauma they face because of the conflict between opposing ideological groups in the organisational (Lasswell, 1948).

Although Lasswell’s theory emphasized on the role of “mind set” in gossips, he however do not “play down” the importance of the “message content” and the relationship between the producer and the recipient. This suggests that the relationship between the sender and the receiver determined the gossip. He argues further that, gossip in every human setting including organizations should be analysed using the following sequential questions: Who is the sender of the message? What is the content of the message? What is the channel of communication? Who is the receiver? In addition, what is the effect of the message? Lasswell’s theory has been flawed for ignoring the intentions of the communicators.

Consequently, R. Braddock in 1958 elaborated and expanded Lasswell’s theory to include the sender, the message, the channel of communication, the receiver, and under what circumstance was the message sent? For what purpose was, it sent. Moreover, what is the effect of the message? This implies that, every gossip has its social origin/circumstance, and it is purpose to either obstruct or support harmonious social relations in formal organization. It further suggests that gossips have effect on group relationship and the entire organization. Since gossip has effect, it can be negatively or positively
influence relationship between departments or units in formal organizations. The analysis of the origin, spread and consequence of gossip as expressed by Lasswell and Braddock will enable this study to understand the social relationships among workers, management, and staff and how gossips affect such interactions and the overall performance of the formal organization.

**Elucidation and etymology of gossip**

Gossip is idle talk by two or more persons about the private affairs of others who are not participating in the conservation. It is a discussion about a third party who is not participating in the conservation (Witteki, 1998; Grunert, 2010). Gossip entails idle talk, scandal, rumour, malicious tattling and tattle-tale. It is “the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting” (Noon & Delbridge, 1993:2). It is a talk that breaches confidence and escalates falsehood or a talk that produces future harms than good (Westacott, 2000).

Gossip is derived from an old English word *godsibbs* meaning *godparents*. This definition disappeared into obscurity in the 16th century (Noon & Delbridge, 1993) when the word assumed the meaning of persons especially women who delights in idle talk, tattler, and newsmongers. Gossip has historical links to childbirth, being that birth used to be a social gathering where neighbours and pregnant women converge to welcome the newborn, during this process, chattering or talking about others becomes inevitable. Historically therefore, gossip is stereotypically been seen as pejorative women talk (Waddington & Michelson, 2000; Kartzon, 2009).

There is also religious etymology of gossip. In Judaism, gossip is seen as sin; it demeans the dignity of human beings. In Islam, gossip is seen as harm to the third party. It harms victims without offering them opportunity to defend themselves. Similarly, Christianity sees gossip as sin and in the likeness of other sins such as sexual immorality, haters of God, boosters, despitiveful, proud, covenant breakers, and inventors of evil things (Daniels, 2012). Most world religions condemn gossip. In Britain for instance, laws were made from the 14th to the 18th centuries that penalised mongers or gossips (Emler, 1994; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell & Labianca, 2009).

**Workplace gossip**

Workplace gossip is talk about the affairs of a third party in the work-floor who is not participating in the conversation. Gossip in formal organisation is a form of attack; it is essentially a form of workplace violence. It is a hidden form of communication that does not show in the organisation’s chart. It is an informal communication network within a formal organisation which is sometimes faster than formal channels of communication. It includes rumours and propaganda that are spread among employees that significantly influence the organisational-wide information flow (Cliffnotes, 2011).

Workplace gossip entails a process of informally communicating value-laden information about employees or other members of a formal organisation. Workplace gossip is therefore a complex social interaction process that involves both individual decisions and group dynamics, located within a formal organisation and regulated by its formal and informal rules (Noon & Delbridge, 1993:1). It involves positive or negative information exchanged about an absent third party (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell & Labianca, 2010). This definition denounces assumption that gossip is trivial, negatively oriented, violence attack, and traumatizing.

Most managers see workplace gossip as impediment to organisational effectiveness; consequently, many firms establish formal policies that kick against gossip. Cliffnotes (2011) argue that rather than suppress workplace gossip, managers should tune into it, identify the rumourmongers and feed then with the right information that they want them to spray. This according to Noon and Delbridge (1993) could help protect and promote harmonious work relationship in the organisation. It suggests that proper understanding of gossip provides an inside into the social organisation of work and the informal structures that exist in formal organisations.

Gossip in formal organisation could focus on achievement of employees or management; such gossip is refers to *as praise gossip* (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Praise or laudable behaviour gossip is called
positive gossip (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Workplace gossip can be cause by competitive self-interest; and as such, gossip is seen as part of human nature. The struggle for survival and supremacy by groups or cliques could occasion gossip; in this regard, gossip is use as weapon of propaganda to suppress the opponent (Gluckman, 1963).

The discourse about gossip in formal organisation is based largely on the assumptions that it obstructs productivity, create climate of distrust, and promote low morale among workers (Burke & Wise, 2003). Workplace gossip is a social cement with positive and negative consequences (Waddington & Michelson, 2007). It can be a medium of feedback on management policies, as well as could inform organisational change. Workplace gossip can be a weapon in which people can undermine each other but can also be a gift. It could also help co-workers bond and promote information dissemination. Consequently, rather than ban gossip, management should emphasis/encourage the culture or mutual respect (Gallagher, 2009:1).

Workplace gossip can be a weapon in reputational warfare among colleague. The study of workplace gossip enables management to understand how work is actually done and the influence of informal chart on the formal (Halleet, 2009:1). Workplace gossip is unseen sources of power that enables workers to boost their success and happiness in formal organisations. Workplace gossip helps employees to access management through informal communication channels. In most establishments, the informal channels of information dissemination are even more effective and powerful than the formal channels. This makes the study of workplace gossip even more imperative (Helge, 2003). Fallis (2010) argue that communication incompetence creates workplace gossip. He observes that, absence of clear information breeds workplace gossip. Waddington and Michelson (2007) posit that workplace gossip increases with changes introduced by management in the organisations; as workers have to discuss and speculate about the proposed or the on-going change.

**Functions and dysfunctions of workplace gossip**

Workplace gossip directly or indirectly affects relations and performance of formal organisations. It offers opportunities and impediments; it affects organisations positively and negatively. Workplace gossip provides a medium for peer-to-peer dissemination of information in organisations. It helps workers learn about one another without personal contacts. It informs employees on behaviours that are socially acceptable within the organisation. It is a process of social grooming and means of building social solidarity among worker. Gossips promote social interaction at work and could help protect and perpetuate formal organisations. It is the most important channel of reaffirming shared values and a means of revealing how tightly knitted workers are in formal establishments (Elias & Scotson, 1965; March & Sevon, 1988; Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Gossip in formal organisation plays vital role in group formation, regulation and perpetuation. Workplace gossip does not only promote system-maintenance but could help in communicating values, morals and facilitates the diffusion of organisational tradition and history among workers (Noon & Delbridge, 1993:5-6). Workplace gossip serves as a good early warning system. It provides feedback and can be used to ascertain reactions from employees on a given policy (Waddington & Michelson, 2007). Gossip enables employees identify whom their mentor or coach is at the organisation as well as whom to run to when faced with challenges at workplace (Gallagher, 2009; Haulman, 2009).

Gossip is a channel of reminding workers about organisational norms, values and goals (McAndrew, 2008). It is a medium of sharing key information with others in formal establishments (Rodgers, 2008). Gossip is an informal channel of pre-testing management policies before they are introduced (Michelson, 2011). Workplace gossip enables employees to talk indirectly to management or communicate with individuals who manage the managers (Helge, 2008:1). Gossip provides means of social exchange and integration in formal organisations (Mills, 2010). Workplace gossip is the interlocking of informal social structure that gives management insight into how employees work together in practice (Mirajker, 2008).
On the other hand, workplace gossip could obstruct organisational efficiency and thus lead to low productivity. It erodes trust among colleagues and time wasting. It create division among workers and could escalate disputes in formal organisation. It increases anxiety among workers and create unhealthy work atmosphere. It is a willful waste of time for both the organisation and employees (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Hallet (2009) observe that gossip can hamper management’s ability to administrative workers, obliterate camaraderie, and promote high turnover in most establishments.

Organisational performance
Organisational performance is a concept that describes how effective an establishment achieves it set goals within a given time. It connotes how effective and efficient an organisation is accomplishing its goal (Etzioni, 1964). It captures the efficacy and effectiveness of an organisation. It reveals organisational competence in achieving intended goals. Organisational performance also entails the ability of the organisation to efficiently acquire scare resources and the capacity to satisfy its owners, employees, clients/customers, and society. It includes the ability of the organisation to adapt to new opportunities, obstacles and the capability to survive in a dynamic world (Ricahard, Devinney, Yip & John, 2009).

Different strategies are adopted by most organisations to boost their effectiveness. Some create sustainable competitive advantage through business strategies. Mergers are another management strategy to restore and boost organisational capacity to function more effectively. Workplace talent management could be used to enhance organisational performance. Strategic workplace alignment is also vital in increasing effectiveness. This strategy provides a unique interactive process for executives to assess and prioritise employees’ needs, workplace demands, and workforce strategies. It entails effect management of communication with the organisation.

Organisational performance is severely been reported by Taylor (1911), Fayol (1949), and Mayo (1933). For instance, Taylor (1911) and Fayol (1949) observe that organisational performance is determined by factors such as production maximisation. Mayo (1933) argues from the human relations perspective, that organisational effectiveness is a function of productivity occasioned by employees’ satisfaction at workplace.

Consequently, a number of approaches that attempts to measure organisational performance have emerged. These include internal process approach, system resource approach and resources-based approach. The first deals with the ability of the organisation to excel in output goals. The second is the ability of the organisation to excel in coordination, motivation and satisfaction of employees for efficient productivity. While the third is the ability of the firm to acquire scare resources from the environment for the performance efficiency of various units/departments of the organisation. The forth deals with the ability of the entity to meet and satisfy the needs of its multiple constituencies within and outside the organization (Cool, Almeida Costa & Dierickx, 2002; Peteraf & Barney, 2003).

Study Area
This study is carried out in government parastatals and agencies in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria. The district is situated within the tropics of Africa and shares boundary with Yakurr Local Government Area in the North, Republic of Cameroon in the East, in the South-west by Akwa Ibom State, in the South by Calabar Sea. It is border in the North-west by Ebonyi State. It covers an area of 9,972 square kilometres and as such, one of the largest senatorial districts in the Niger Delta region. It comprise of seven local government areas including Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Biase, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South and Odokpani Local Government Area. According 2006 national population census, the area has 1,190,354 persons.

South Senatorial District homes a huge number of private and public organisation from where some government agencies and parastatals were selected for the study. Apart from white-collar jobs, farming and trading remains a dominant profession of the area. The district is housed a number of tourist
sites and institutions making it tourists delight; this helps in attracting the presence of other auxiliary institutions/organisations.

Methodology
The study adopted survey method. It was opted for because it allows for objective sampling of opinions. It is cheap as compared to other research designs (Agba, Ocheni & Akpunudoedehe, 2014; Agba, Ocheni & Nkpoyn, 2014; Emeh, Isangadighi, Asuquo & Aggba, 2011). It allows researchers to establish correlates among variables. Structured questionnaire was used to gather information from purposively selected employees’ in government parastatals and agencies in Southern Senatorial Districts of Cross River State. To easy interpretation, elucidated data were presented in percentages, pie chart, bar chart and graphs.

Findings
The findings of this study are quit revealing. Figures 1 shows that gossip is very common among female workers than men employees. The study also reveals that poor management/leadership style, poor communication, idleness and inadequate responsibilities to workers are key factors that causes gossip in organisations. Among these factors, poor management/leadership style ranked most, followed by idleness and inadequate responsibilities, and then poor communication channels (see figure 2 for details).
Furthermore, the study shows that gossip creates distrust among workers. It reveals that 93.75 per cent as against 6.25 per cent of the respondents agree that gossip creates an atmosphere of distrust among co-workers. Gossip causes conflict among employees as well as discourse between management and workers (see figure 3). It reveals that 93.75 per cent and 75 per cent of the respondents respectively held that gossip causes conflict and discourse among co-workers and between staff and management. Figure 3 also reveals that 81.25 per cent of the respondents against 18.75 per cent agree that gossip do not only causes conflict among workers and between employees and management but is largely responsible for conflict escalation in most government organizations. It shows that, the frontiers of an conflicts between management and staff or among co-workers can be advanced by gossip.
The study shows that gossip causes disunity and lack of cooperation between labour union leaders and their members. Seventy five per cent (75%) of the respondents also agree that gossip causes disunity and discourse among union executives in government agencies/organisations (see figure 3). In a general note, the study reveals that gossip creates unhealthy work environment in government establishments over 80 per cent of the respondents as revealed in figure 3 agree that gossip creates unhealthy work relations. Figure 4 shows that gossip can be an early warning system to management. Over 56 per cent of the respondents agree that gossip help management to test the popularity of an existing policies. However, only 31.25 per cent of the respondents agree that gossip can be used to pre-test management policies. Fifty per cent (50%) of the respondents respectively accept that gossip provide feedback to management as well as promote information dissemination in government organisations (see figure 4 for details).

Discussion
Gossip occurs every day, its effect on work relations and organisational performance are revealing in this study. The study shows that gossip is prevalent among female workers than men. It suggests that units or departments with high consecration of female staff are more likely experience high level of gossips. The implication is that, management should ensure gender balance in the distribution of staff among...
units/departments in the organisation. It further suggests that during recruitment exercise, gender balance should be taken into consideration. Waddington and Michelson (2000) as well as Kartzon (2009) have early observe that gossip has been historically link to childbirth where women converged to welcome the new born and during this process, tittle-tattle becomes inevitable. Gossip is stereotypically been ascribed to women.

Poor management/leadership style, poor communication channels, idleness and inadequate responsibilities accounts for the frequent occurrence of gossips in government establishments. This collaborate with Helge (2003, and Fullis (2010) who posits that communication incompetence breeds workplace gossip. Gluckman (1963) observe that leadership style that use gossip as a propaganda tool may breed further gossips in the organisation.

On the effect of gossip on work relations, the study shows that “idle talk” or “tattle” (gossip) create distrust among worker. It causes conflict among workers as well as escalates existing conflicts. It is significantly responsible for conflict between labour and management. This is because gossip could help spray false information among workers and provide wrong feedback to management. In this regards, gossip is seen as violence attack on harmonious work relations. It is negatively oriented and traumatizing to workers in formal organisations. Cliffnotes (2011) observe that management should use gossip to the advantage of the organisation by feeding the rumourmongers with the right information. This because, if rumourmongers are allowed to get the wrong information they will spray them and mire existing good work relations between co-workers and between employees and management.

Gossip create unhealthy work environment, disunity and discourse among union executives. Gossip importantly account for lack of cooperation between labour union leaders and their members. According to Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell and Labinca (2010), gossips create a great lot of conflict and disunity in organisations because it encouraged negative information exchange among workers, management and labour union executives. Although gossips negatively affect work relations, the study reveals that, it serves as feedback and as early warning system to management. It promotes information dissemination in work organisations. According to Noon and Delbridge (1993), and Cliffnotes (2011), gossip help management spray right information and promote harmonious work relations among employees in work organisations. Elias and Scotson (1965), Fine and Rosnow (1978) observe that gossip can be use positively as a tool of praise and motivation to workers.

Waddington and Michelson (2007) posit that gossip is a medium of feedback to management, thereby enhancing information dissemination in formal organisations.

This study shows that gossip affect the performance of organisations, since it lowers workers morale and negatively obstruct their commitment to work. It reveals that workers effectiveness at work is affected by gossip. It shows that gossip affect the overall performance or effectiveness of organisations. Westacott (2000) argue that gossip breaches workers confidence, commitment, effectiveness as well as escalate falsehood among employees, and this largely harms performance of work organisations.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Workplace gossip occurs in every formal setting. It is prevalent among female workers and largely caused by poor management style, poor communication channels, idleness and inadequate responsibilities. It offers great opportunities for information dissemination and serves as feedback medium/mechanism for management. It obstructs harmonious work relations as it breeds distrust, conflict, discourse and escalate existing conflict among work and between management and employees. It accounts for conflicts among union executives, and between them and their representatives. Gossip charges the work environment and create atmosphere of conflict between workers and management. It is significantly responsible for low morale among workers, and poor workers commitment, effectiveness, and efficiency. We therefore recommended that the source of gossip should be addressed through policy option. Sex balance should be considered during recruitment and deployment of staff in formal organisations. The advantage gossip
creates should be used for the benefit of organisations while its negatives consequences should be obstructed through policy remodelling.

References


