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Gossip as a Way of Knowing: A Reply to Adkins's Review

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> Our globe discovers its hidden virtues,[1] not only in heroes andarchangels, but in gossips and nurses (Emerson 1909, 12).

We continue a dialogue with Karen Adkins following her review of Kathryn Waddington's *Gossip, Organization and Work* and bring new voices to the conversation—those of Annie Topping and nursing. We ask whether Ralph Waldo Emerson's words were prescient of the enactment of one of the ways that nurses uncover, name, and communicate knowledge about the contexts in which they work, and those they care for and interact with in order to do the work of nursing. One framework that articulates the patterns of knowing integral to the enterprise of nursing was described by Barbara Carper in 1978. This epistemology of nursing illuminates the ways nurses create, generate, understand and use knowledge described as empirics, ethics, aesthetics, and personal ways of knowing. We re-frame Carper's epistemology through the lens of gossip as a constitutive component of organizational knowledge and communication. This opens up new pathways for practice-based research examining meaning and purpose inherent in understanding the role of gossip in the professional practice of nursing. Our reply spans the historical social context of 17th and 18th century England's coffeehouse gossip and the 'penny universities' of London and Oxford to contemporary healthcare settings.

Image credit: Kathryn Waddington. Taken outside the British Library, September 2019.

Prologue

In writing our response to Karen Adkins's (2023) review of *Gossip, Organizations and Work* we begin by setting the scene in the form of a prologue to introduce further our scholarly and practice-based interests in gossip. And also to foreground the material that follows in our response regarding the role of arts-based research and creative academic writing.

Kathryn: my interest is grounded in my early clinical experience as nurse, which preceded and prompted my career shift into academia. I noticed a subtle difference between the 'formal

[1] Other versions of Emerson's quotation use the term 'bidden', this is as cited in the E-Book: Online Library of Liberty: *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 4 (Representative Men).* https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/emerson-the-works-of-ralph-waldo-emerson-vol-4-representative-men.

handover' of information about patients that was important and clinically relevant, which could slip into 'informal talk' that was also useful and enlightening information. And then noticing how informal talk could also slip into gossip about hospital politics, who you could trust, who was a bullshitter, and so on. The term bullshitter is used deliberately (and provocatively) because it is my belief that academic writing and the scholarship of gossip should 'tell it as it is' and go 'beyond bullshit' (Waddington, in press). Or as Adkins's review puts it, taking gossip at "face value" (2023, 35).

Annie: I too experienced gossip in my early career in nursing and its use as a vehicle for moral evaluation of patients, sometimes family members and part of the everyday organizational chatter of healthcare settings. Now, as a professor of nursing, senior clinician, academic and educator, attending to gossip as an early warning alert or granular intelligence for what doesn't necessarily show up in the metrics or providing substance and texture to their interpretation. Gossip being a source of covert pockets of informal knowledge about what is 'really going on' behind the bedside screens and behind closed doors and often giving voice to what is hidden in plain sight—implicit in the discourses of handovers, one to ones, snatched corridor talk, snippets in team meetings and strategies for getting things done . In my experience, another source of gossip are nursing and other healthcare students. Often astute commentators and with their wonderfully naïve intelligence serving as insightful sense checkers—'out of the mouths of babes …' comes the (implied) truth or wisdom. But also gossip is a barometer of safety, judging who can be trusted, who has one's back, information to assist in interpretation of the mountain of surveillance data that surrounds the management of risk that permeates contemporary care work and used to judge performance in higher education.

Introducing our Response

Our response to Karen Adkins's review advances practice-based ways of knowing from a standpoint of Carper's (1976) nursing epistemology, which we re-frame through the lens of gossip as a constitutive component of organizational knowledge and communication. It also introduces a wider context of care and compassion into the conversation. This positions our response as one that will appeal to a SERRC readership using nursing as an example of a practice based discipline; but also one that is often seen, portrayed, positioned in a support of medicine. Traditionally seen as the gatekeeper to healthcare work, medical hegemony is itself increasingly challenged by role creep, role substitution and technology (Susskind and Susskind 2018).

Practice disciplines such as nursing do not just derive their knowledge from other disciplines, they generate it. Nursing revels and celebrates its eclectic approach to knowing. Yet the utility of knowledge is ultimately the test of "knowing how, when, why, whether and for whom" (Sandelowski 2004, 1367) it can be implemented. This is reflected in the pragmatic selection of tools to generate nursing knowledge and a willingness to embrace different methodologies to answer research questions. This resonates with Adkins's observation that the research methods advanced in *Gossip, Organization and Work* echo Bent Flyvberg's (2001) call for phronetic social science.

Waddington (2022) argues that research should be based on 'lived rather than laboratory experience', questioning the relevance of experimental research into gossip conducted in

13 (8): 38–50. 2024.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-95v

psychology laboratories with student populations and gaming software. She also questions the relevance of research which tries to measure and manipulate everyday experiences of gossip, and associated concepts such as rumour. Extending the American writer E. B. White's analogy that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog (few people are interested, and the frog dies) Waddington contends that extensive academic analyses and measures of gossip can result in dead descriptions and disengagement on the part of readers. In other words, we need to recover meaning, telling it as it is, and taking the social part of the social epistemology of gossip at face value.

While Adkins appreciated how the book opened up new approaches such as arts-based methods and practices, she also found that research poetry "seemed less useful for social epistemology" (2023, 38). We respond to this point by reflecting further upon poetry as a way of knowing in professional practice and research (e.g., Alma and Amiel 2020; Brown, Kelly, and Finn 2021; Jack and Illingworth 2017). But first, a very brief history of gossip in the academy.

Gossip: Then, and Now

As Adkins (2017) notes, when we look upon the history of gossip as a practice it has been relied upon, resisted and vilified; women's gossipy conversations were seen as idle talk at best and witchcraft at worst. Yet gossip spread throughout the 17th and 18th century in English coffee house culture, first established in the 1650s in Oxford, where the mind stimulating benefits of coffee complemented the spirit of sober academic discussion and debate at the university (White 2018). These early coffee houses were christened 'penny universities' and seen largely as the exclusive resort of the educated and rich—places where learned men and their students came to demonstrate their wit and intellectual talents. They provided the grounds (!) for relationship between gossipy conversations over coffee and research to flourish. Now, gossip is seen as a constitutive component of organizational knowledge and communication. A 'state of the art topic' in business research: "Recent advances in theory, methods and applied knowledge ... have presented researchers with challenges in seeking to stay abreast of their fields and navigate new scholarly terrains ... as a foundation stone for a new generation of research [into gossip]" (Routledge n.d., 1-3).

Gossip as Social Science with Something to Say

Waddington argues that research examining workplace gossip that reflects everyday complexities and important 'in the moment' experiences has much more to say than statistically significant but 'sterile' studies. This aligns with Flyvberg's position that academic scholarship should create socially useful knowledge with meaningful impact on public policy and practice. In *Return to Meaning: A Social Science with Something to Say,* Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulson (2017) critique contemporary universities as knowledge factories producing publishable 'nonsense'. A term they use to denote theoretical knowledge that fulfils all the criteria for 'good publishable research' but with little contribution to the cannon. Thus serving only to create career-focused credentials using increasingly esoteric language with little real world relevance. The UK satirical current affairs magazine *Private Eye* has a regular section called 'pseud's corner' which lists pretentious pseudo-intellectual media quotations.

Is there an associated risk that 21st century universities are drifting towards elite and esoteric 'epistemological enclaves' of pseudo-academic scholarship? Do we need to think differently about building socially useful knowledge?

Arts-based practices offer a different approach to knowledge building, public scholarship and usefulness in social science and applied disciplines such as nursing. McNiff (2018) asserts that using art in, and as, research is a transdisciplinary process that deals with issues concerning human experience, communication and knowing. Crucially, he argues that art-based processes (which are inherently practical, open-ended and aesthetic) can have a positive influence on the quality of future social science research, but without being wrapped up in endless interpretation. But what might this look like? What is the socio-epistemic value of art?

The Socio-Epistemic Value of Art

> Scientists, humanists, and art lovers alike value art not just for its beauty, but also for its social and epistemic importance; that is, for its communicative nature, its capacity to increase one's self-knowledge and encourage personal growth, and its ability to challenge our schemas and preconceptions (Sherman and Morrissey 2017, 1).

The Belgian artist Pol Ledent's painting entitled *Gossip* is a powerful illustration of the socio-epistemic value of art, and how it challenges preconceptions, stereotypes and assumptions about gossip.

Gossip
Image credit Pol Ledent (https://pol-ledent.pixels.com/ reproduced with permission)

Ledent's painting vividly challenges stereotypical images of gossip as either (usually white) men and women in business attire around a water cooler, or as trivial talk between women. It is ambiguous in regard to age, gender and ethnicity. The clothing could be that of medieval merchants or social media brand influencers. There is a seriousness to it, a warning

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Review & Reply Collective
13 (8): 38–50. 2024.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-95v

perhaps? The paint is dark and rough, suggesting that it lends weight to gossip of a more sombre nature.

This leads us to consider the question: *Is there an art to gossip as social epistemology and professional practice?* The question was initially prompted by conversations and email correspondence[2] between Kathryn and a UK consultant paediatrician and designated doctor for safeguarding children and child death reviews. I was curious, wanting to know more about their experience of gossip in professional practice, and they responded:

> In my experience gossip often has negative connotations; but should it be re-framed as useful data that can be an early indicator of the *reality of what is occurring within the system?* The 'gossip' is usually shared freely i.e. in everyday conversations. So the *art of using gossip as useful data will be in receiving it with an open mind*; if recurring and from several sources, be curious and interrogate the information being shared. Does it have any meaning that can be attributed to it? Are there other sources of information that need testing out to check the accuracy of the gossip? It may be useful in giving early indications of what is good in the system but also what is not going well that needs addressing before it becomes a serious/significant incident (Extract of email, July 03, 2020, emphasis added, reproduced with permission in Waddington 2020).

In the next part of our response, Annie considers further the role of gossip as social epistemology in the professional practice of nursing.

Nursing Epistemology: Then, and Now

Healthcare organizations like universities are highly dynamic organizations "made up of multiple, complex, and overlapping subgroups with variably shared assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviours" (Mannion and Davies 2018, 2). They are often the largest employer in an area playing a crucial role in any local economy and are part of the fabric of communities. Nursing and nurses contribute to that ecosystem. They are often the single largest staff group in hospitals or providing services in primary care. Student nurses also form a sizeable proportion of the student body in higher education institutions and like other healthcare students spend much of their education in healthcare settings. Student nurses learn their craft by navigating the social structures of both settings, become embedded in their cultures and familiar with institutional norms and behaviours through contact and working with clinical staff in wards, units and as part of teams, ultimately becoming acculturized. In other words student nurses learn to adopt the cultures of other healthcare professionals.

They also in parallel navigate their way through modules, timetable, supervisors and tutors, and assessments. Through exposure to the visible manifestations of both universities and

[2] We were planning an interprofessional safeguarding training course for practitioners working with children and young adults (e.g., nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers).

healthcare organizations, they learn the different institutional ways of thinking, absorbing values and beliefs and the "largely unconscious and unexamined underpinning of their day to day practice(s)" (Mannion and Davies 2018, 2). They not only learn to be a student of nursing in higher education and student nurse in clinical settings but become socialised in anticipation of their future career as a registered nurse. An aspect of that learning is appropriate professional behaviour, comportment, or way of being as a nurse so they fit, appear naturalized, and perform. Indeed one of the 'impressions' that inform the judgements made about student nurses, and used by assessors to describe what is a 'good nurse', is the student's ability to assimilate into the ward teams (Burden, Topping, and O'Halloran 2018).

Gossip has a bonding effect in teams (Thomas and Rozell 2007) and therefore it would be surprising if students did not listen to gossip, engage in gossiping, and use it as a source of learning; to understand and formulate their expected role in ward cultures and possibly use to ensure they receive a good placement report (Burden et al. 2018). There are many ways gossip is manifest in nursing talk but one is the way it is used to label patients. Where the label, or social judgement, is applied and used in talk about an individual patient it forms a shorthand way of communicating value-laden information about patients to staff. In Stockwell's (1972) seminal work the *Unpopular Patient* although the term gossip was not used, she identified:

> … the most spontaneous and frequently given reasons for enjoyment in looking after patients related to patients being fun or amusing, having a good sense of humour and being friendly and easy to get on with (1972, 49).

This throws a light on the social relationship between nurses and patients although one that has inherent differential power relationship (Johnson 1997). From first contact nurses are assessing patients, judging their capability to do the 'work' of being a patient, and that opinion results in a label. Although there is some debate about whether the label impacts on care received nevertheless a 'good patient' engages in informal talk and that may or may not include gossip. It is front of house in public gaze in a clinical environment where the assessment that generates an impression that leads to a label, but the labelling occurs in the sluice, during handover of patient information, in the kitchen, during breaks and all the various backstage settings available for informal talk (Waring and Bishop 2010).

Nurses historically, despite their numbers in the workforce, inhabit a subordinate position in healthcare organizations (Ramsay, Birks, and Hartin 2022). Worldwide scientists and doctors are the most respected professions; yet in many Western countries such as the UK, nursing is also one of the most respected professions and often perceived as patients' allies (Smith 2021). This brings an expectation that nurses will speak up to power and advocate for patients; yet there remains a professional view that a nurse will be silenced or ignored if they speak out, so they learn to keep heads down.

Nurses and other healthcare professions acquire learnt behaviours like silence in response to the power dynamics of operational priorities, the social ordering of professions and possibly coercive patterns of control exerted by managers. This was starkly brought to the fore in the Lucy Letby case—the UK nurse found guilty of murdering seven babies and attempting to murder six others (see Whiteing 2024). It is unsurprising that institutions like healthcare settings where staff may feel they are voiceless become a fertile ground for gossip and for

13 (8): 38–50. 2024.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-95v

nurses gossip may constitute a means of resistance against real or perceived oppression (Alfano and Robinson 2017).

Returning to epistemology, one of the many and enduring puzzles is what is nursing? There was a period where a plethora of theories emerged to explain nursing and Carper's (1978) ways of knowing in nursing made an important and highly influential contribution. As Thorne points out "Carper's four 'ways of knowing' became ubiquitous in nursing curricula and served to justify many of later trends in thinking about the nature of the discipline" (2020, 3). This, and returning to ways of generating knowledge in nursing, she contends encouraged the use of art, literature and poetry to teach and understand nursing and better understand patient experience (see also Hahessy 2016). Creative methods were often used to counterbalance what was seen as undervaluation of certain types of knowledge (Rolfe 2012).

The trend toward atomisation of professional preparation wrought by modularisation, assessment of competencies and 'performance-first' as evidence of capability for practice have all contributed to reducing the art of nursing to skills done on patients and knowledge delivered in, and acquired through, discrete packages of learning. This fails to recognise the hidden work of nursing (Jackson, Anderson and Maben 2021), which is inextricably linked with engagement in complex social processes whether that be interpersonal transactions with patients, carers, families or other members of team. The very nature of these interactions involves communication (Macdonald 2016).

Most nursing activity or interventions incorporate everyday conversation or 'chit chat'. Indeed this way of talking, the use of informal talk, may serve multiple functions including gleaning useful information, assessing functional ability, eliciting needs, wishes and goals, normalising unpleasant procedures, and used to avoid difficult subjects by deflection (Burm et al. 2019). In contrast, when informal talk is absent, or indeed the nurse is (unusually) silent this communicates the gravity of a situation.

Given the inherent normality of informal talk in the practice of nursing we would contend it is probable that similar characteristics are present in other interpersonal communication between nurses and other members of the healthcare team. It is unlikely the structure and characteristics of nursing talk changes radically except in highly formalised or scripted interactions such as 'breaking bad news'. The natural consequence being that the informality of nursing talk encourages gossip, which may be a particularly salient in sense-making and organizational know how, and most importantly when it is listened for, and to. This highlights the relevance of gossip and the social epistemology of nursing, pointing to a new and different understanding of gossip as a form of organizational communication and knowledge.

Poetry as a Way of Knowing in Professional Practice

Adkins's review concluded that research poetry may be of less use for social epistemology. Although poetry may still be marginal in academic writing generally, it has for some time been recognized as an effective form of representation in qualitative research For example, Fitzpatrick (2012) draws on a school-based critical ethnography of marginalized youth in

New Zealand, arguing that poetry can be used as a method of bringing the personal and political together in ethnographic writing. Here, we reflect on the role of poetry as a way of knowing in professional practice by considering the relationship between poetry and reflective writing in nursing and health care[3] more broadly. We also offer some pointers for wider application, and further reflection on 'poetic knowledge' as new ground for social epistemology.

Poetic Knowledge

The Martinican poet Aimé Césaire wrote: "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge" (1990, 17). Not only is Césaire making an argument against positivism, but he is also making a directly political one by linking this to questions of racism and oppression. Sacks' review of Césaire's writing about poetry and knowledge notes his reframing of the "science versus art dichotomy in the service of an anti-colonial struggle for a new society that consciously affirms the value of black/African culture and identity". (2017, 1). The anti-colonial struggle for a new society continues into the second quarter of the 21st century and requires a new *ecology of practice* (see Abegglen et al., 2023). This is urgently needed in order to encourage the emergence of a more equitable, democratic, de-colonized world. An ecology of practice is a collaborative epistemological space, populated by networks of heritages, stories, narratives, conversations and—we suggest—of course, gossip! But a new ecology of professional practice is nothing without critical and creative reflection.

In nursing, and many other areas of professional life, critical reflection is core to thinking about practice at a deeper level, questioning assumptions and values, and practising in an anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive way (Bassott 2023). Jack and Illingworth (2017) explored ways in which nursing students used self-authored poems to think about important but difficult aspects of nursing practice such as perceived inadequacies in care provision. Their argument is that a strong focus on the empirical side of nursing has overshadowed the more emotional and personal aspects of practice. Kerr (citing Holmes [1998]) contends that poetry as a way of knowing in nursing can enable nurses to "improve their practice by becoming more perceptive, attentive to image, metaphor, and meaning" (2010, 297). However nurses and other health care professionals do not work in isolation, but as part of a collaborative interprofessional response[4] and team/s, for example in the field of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Interprofessional collaborative practice is emotionally charged and difficult work. The poem *Like You* (reproduced below with permission), was written by Jodie Das, a UK practitioner, educator, and consultant working in the field of domestic violence and abuse. Jodie wrote the poem after an online (during Covid-19) meeting with practitioners working across multiple professional disciplines during her professional doctoral studies (Das 2023).

[3] The efforts made to maintain, restore, or promote someone's physical, mental, or emotional well-being especially when performed by trained and licensed professionals. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/health%20care

[4] Where health workers from different professional backgrounds work together with patients, families, carers and communities to deliver the highest quality of care across settings. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/framework-for-action-on-interprofessional-education-collaborative-practice.

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Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective
13 (8): 38–50. 2024.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-95v

Like You

My meaning's sincere, I aim to provide,
I *so* want to fix all the things you confide.
The problem *I* have, is I'm vulnerable too,
I'm tired and I'm broken and hurting like you.

The pain that you feel, infused with my own,
Is heavy between us and hasn't a home.
I'll ignore it, like you, it might go away,
After all, it's just 'work', at the end of the day.

So, forgive what I've mastered, a skilled attitude,
Like you, I'm defensive, dismissive and rude.
And gone are *my* dreams that were held at the start,
The hope that I'd keep both our interests at heart.

I wanted to help you, but who's helping me?!
Like you I have targets, and nothing for tea.
Like you, I feel torn, and I don't have a voice,
My presents are empty, though the label says 'choice'.

I've boxed up compassion, and filed it away,
It can't write reports, so has nothing to say.
So next time you feel that my gestures are token,
Remember, like you, I've had promises broken.

What Jodie's poem illustrates beautifully and poignantly is the role of poetry as an aspect of critical and creative reflective professional practice, arts-based reflexive research practice and social epistemology. The first line of the final verse: *I've boxed up compassion, and filed it away* leads us to our concluding epilogue.

Epilogue: An Invitation to Explore Emerging Landscapes of Care

Our response has introduced and included concepts of care and compassion into the scholarly conversation about gossip as social epistemology. We began by asking whether Ralph Waldo Emerson's assertion that the world discovers hidden virtues in gossips and nurses was prescient of the ways that nurses uncover, name, and communicate knowledge about the contexts in which they work, and those they care for. West's (2024) recent review of Casey Rebecca Johnson's *Epistemic Care* notes that she builds upon Joan Tronto's characterization of care as a collective social and political activity. This highlights the inequalities in care work caused by societal power structures that devalue and continue to conceal the hidden work of nursing. Care encompasses the actions necessary to establish a world where we can exist while *reducing suffering*, while compassion is about *noticing suffering*, feeling empathy, and taking action to alleviate it. Compassionate organizational cultures

require high levels of psychological safety, which involves attending to concerns expressed as gossip with an open-minded approach. Key to such an approach are networks which facilitate the exchange of knowledge, such as:

> Shared academic-practitioner research narratives that could explore further the positive role of gossip as a means of developing and maintaining psychologically safe 'speak up' and 'listen up' team and organizational cultures ... There is also another angle that could be explored further. That is speaking up [about] *harmful aspects of gossip as bullying, microaggression, and abuse of power in organizations* (Waddington 2022, 93, emphasis added).

As we write this epilogue, an independent culture review into the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC 2024) has just been published. The NMC, a professional regulatory body, commissioned the review into its own conduct "after concerns were raised about the organization's culture, including racism and fear of speaking up" (3). The review found evidence of a dysfunctional culture, and harmful 'highly toxic gossip', which undoubtedly would also have been gossiped about as a cause for concern. Gossip is thus both *virtuous* and *vicious*. To borrow a well-used phrase from the Roman poet Juvenal: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (which quite literally means who will guard the guards themselves) we must continue to ask who will challenge politicians, leaders, regulatory bodies and so forth, and hold them accountable? And how can social epistemology as a collective practice help 'the guardians of care' hold themselves accountable?

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