# TROUBLES TALK AS A RELATIONAL STRATEGY IN INTERCULTURAL TEAMWORK

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics

University of Warwick, Applied Linguistics

June 2018

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| DTC | Discourse Completion Task |
| FTA | Face Threatening Act |
| IC | Indirect Complaint |

# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work except where acknowledgement is given to outside sources. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I am greatly indebted to my supervisors Helen Spencer-Oatey and Daniel Dauber for their invaluable support, wisdom, encouragement and inspiration. Thank you for believing in me and pushing me onwards, for all the fascinating debates and for the possibly shortest feedback turn-around times on written work in PhD history. Our joint supervision meetings will be some of the fondest memories I will have of this time.

I also wish to thank the participants in this study who gave me access to so much of their lives, and to their team facilitator and course coordinator who gave me invaluable support throughout. Thank you for the team you were – without you this study could not have happened.

I am also deeply grateful to Sophie Reissner-Roubicek for her friendship, mentoring (and for at least 200 life-saving coffees). You have made academia more fun and more accessible than I ever thought it would be.

Thanks also to Sherry Cai for her friendship and unwavering support throughout. I cannot imagine this PhD journey without your companionship.

I also thank Ema Ushioda, Troy McConachy and Jo Angouri for their comments on earlier versions of this thesis and the members of the Working and Communicating across Cultures (WACC) Group for their feedback on data presentations and analysis.

Throughout my PhD I was supported by the ESRC and the *Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*, for which I am deeply grateful. The summer academies, PhD meet-ups and language courses organised by the *Studienstiftung* have enriched this entire experience, broadened my horizon and brought perspective to my own work.

To a large extent this work was also supported by Finsy house. Thank you for letting me stay and for all the joint breakfasts, dinners and shared teas. You are the best flatmates I have ever had, and I cannot believe that it ends with this PhD.

Lastly, I would like to thank Ben Heuer who has been there every step of the way.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Claudia, Katharina and Lara – three of the strongest women I know and always a source of inspiration, strength and joy; and to my father who would have been proud.

# Abstract

Building good relationships at work is crucial for individual wellbeing and workplace satisfaction. Yet, managing these relationships is far from easy and concerns over relationship management and getting along well are integral to people's daily lives (Knobloch, 2010). Research indicates that good relationships are particularly scarce in intercultural teams (e.g. Mannix & Neale, 2005; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010), yet little research has been undertaken to investigate just how it is that team members and colleagues get along and how they relate around working together.

To address this gap, this thesis draws on 25 hours of interactional data from the meetings of an intercultural team of MBA students recorded over 8 months. Analysis of the transcripts is supplemented by observations and interviews conducted with team members at the start and end of their teamwork. The study investigates one talk activity in depth, troubles talk, that is demonstrated to have played a central role in relating in the team. It explores how rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) is done in troubles talk across different domains and provides a thick description of troubles talk itself. It also explores the functions troubles talk seems to fulfil for relating in the team including building common ground, a shared perspective, shared norms, empathy, solidarity and trust, team member identity and group mood, in addition to supporting team member coping.

The findings reveal that these functions are realised through a number of different strategies that can be used in troubles talk, including: (reciprocal) self-disclosures, troubles humour, swearing, commiserating and developing shared narratives. Troubles talk as such appears as a kind of super-strategy (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987) in which many other strategies for relating can be embedded, and which seem less permissible in other types of talk. The thesis thus advances our understanding of relational strategies and practices around relating especially in workplace contexts and of troubles talk, a seemingly ubiquitous everyday talk phenomenon. It concludes by proposing some theoretical developments around relating and rapport management and offering recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Study

Relationships are a crucial part of human life and conceivably even the reason humans developed speech and language (Enfield, 2013). However, managing these relationships is far from easy and concerns over relationship management and 'getting along well' are integral to people's daily lives (Knobloch, 2010). This may be challenging enough even in one's ingroup, yet in a globalising world, individuals more frequently encounter and subsequently need to relate to individuals who might be (perceived as) different from themselves. Relating across cultural boundaries can be even more challenging, as different norms and communication practices can be in place and various studies have drawn attention to intercultural encounters that were relationally problematic (e.g. Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2000).

A key context in which social encounters across cultures occur is the workplace. Here interlocutors typically have to work with others while having little to no control over who these others are. This can be particularly important in teamwork, as team members generally spend a lot of time together and depend on each other to achieve their tasks (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Most individuals have a desire to get along well with their team colleagues, which has been found to be crucial for both performance (Evans & Dion, 1991; Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995) and individual well-being (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000). It does however require engaging in interactional work in order to manage and nurture these relationships, which has been found to be particularly challenging in intercultural teams where cohesion tends to be notably low (Picazo, Gamero, Zornoza, & Peiró, 2015; Stahl et al., 2010), which in turn can have detrimental effects for individuals and organisations (Mannix & Neale, 2005).

Despite this crucial importance, exactly how team members and colleagues manage these relationships and try to nurture and create *good* relationships has been little explored. This is surprising given the ubiquity and high stakes of the challenge. While research in the field of interpersonal pragmatics has investigated the mitigation of potential face threats and problematic situations to a considerable extent, less research has been conducted on the interactional work interlocutors do that is focused on "constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships [...] establishing and maintaining solidarity between team members, [...] networking and creating new work relationships" (Holmes & Marra, 2004, p. 381).

In doing this I have been motivated by my many experiences of being a member of intercultural teams in diverse workplaces, including Higher Education institutions, but also by my observations of teams around me, in part also among the students I have been teaching. Working together offers an opportunity for building bridges across cultures, as individuals might encounter and engage with others they would have not interacted with outside of a

workplace. At the same time, these encounters are often fraught with tensions, and relational challenges often seem to be at the heart of problematic team experiences. I have accordingly observed and recorded the meetings of an intercultural team and among the many interesting relational facets present in the data, in this thesis I focus on and explore one talk activity that the team under scrutiny engaged in frequently which seemed particularly interesting from a relational viewpoint: troubles talk. Doing troubles talk in this study is defined as: engaging in talk about negative issues or experiences that oneself or others have encountered that are not blamed on or attributed to the person/people addressed, and can range from very severe issues to only mildly inconvenient or completely other-focused issues.

Troubles talk is ubiquitous in workplaces (Heck, 2001), yet it has received almost no attention in workplace research (Mewburn, 2011), despite the importance it seems to have for relational management (e.g. Clyne, 1994; Pouthier, 2017). Investigating it further, especially in a context where relating is seen as challenging – that is, in a diverse team – can generate interesting new insights into strategies for relating and rapport enhancement, increasing our knowledge of these issues and ultimately improving relational management by informing team building policies.

As elaborated in section 1.2, I recorded the interactions of a diverse team over a number of months. Members of the team engaged in troubles talk in every meeting recorded, often repeatedly and about a number of different issues and topics. The tone of these interactions was often surprisingly cheerful and team members seemed relaxed, relationally inclined and energised by them. I thus decided to investigate this specific talk activity in depth in order to understand how troubles talk was structured and achieved by an intercultural team, what functions troubles talk fulfilled in the team, how rapport was managed in troubles talk and how team members constructed and nurtured relationships within this specific talk activity.

## 1.2 Methodological and Theoretical Approach

To address the research gap outlined above, I conducted a single longitudinal case study of a diverse team of MBA students. This setting was chosen as it features commonalities with a large number of workplaces around the world: 1) Team members were given a number of different projects to complete across a longer span of time (the entire duration of their degree); these projects were completed fairly autonomously and in three out of four cases were conducted for client organisations for whom the team acted as consultants; 2) As in many workplaces, team members were not able to choose who they worked with – teams were allocated by administrators and team members had to 'deal' with whoever ended up in their team; 3) Team members were chosen based on complementary skill sets, that is, with the goal to reflect the maximum amount of diversity to enrich the pool of knowledge and approaches they could draw on. Diversity thus existed with regards to functional expertise, previous work experience, age, gender, first language and country of origin.

On Day 1 of their MBA, team members thus found themselves in a situation many people experience across the world, especially those starting a new job, entering higher education institutions for the first time, or joining a new project: They were put in a room with a group of strangers chosen to be as different from them as possible, with whom they knew they would have to collaborate over an extended period, and on whom they were at least somewhat dependent to achieve the tasks they were assigned.

My theoretical approach to this study is a pragmatic one in the broader understanding of the term (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014). The study is in particular located within interpersonal pragmatics, which "deals with the interpersonal or relational side of language in use in that it explores in what ways social actors use language to shape and form relationships in situ" (Locher & Graham, 2010, p. 1) and is located at the intersection of socio and cultural pragmatics (Huang, 2016).

Within pragmatics calls have recently been voiced for a generally larger consideration of relationships in interactions, most notably by Enfield (2013) who argues that understanding the management and enactment of relationships in interactions is an indispensable aspect of understanding meaning, persons and utterances in the first place. Enfield further suggests that the management of status (defined as "a collections of rights, duties and dispositions at a given moment, relative to other members of the social group" p.57), and its changes between interlocutors are a "constantly demanding feature of social life" and this study focuses on some of the interactional work interlocutors put into dealing and managing such relational statuses in small ways in everyday interactions.

Thus, in line with Enfield's (2013) arguments, I understand any interaction as inevitably constituting a relationship. Every utterance further consists of relational and transactional components although they might sometimes be leaning heavily towards one side of the spectrum.

While I am interested in strategies for relationship management used in interaction, I understand any interaction as co-constructed and thus by definition the same is true for relationships and how they are managed. My analysis therefore focuses much more on tracing how interlocutors strategically and jointly create and nurture relationships at specific moments in time and how they jointly manage them, than on identifying strategies as used by individuals.

I further conducted this investigation into relationships in the setting of an *intercultural* team. Studying an intercultural encounter "involves examining behaviour when members of two or more groups interact" (Gudykunst, 2000, p. 314). Since interactions are always co-constructed, an intercultural approach does not allow for any conclusions about anyone's 'culture' but only an exploration of how interactions are structured and meaning is negotiated between individuals. Gudykunst (2000) refers to "different groups" in the context of intercultural communication, yet defining those is clearly a challenge as it involves

assumptions about individuals but also suggests a certain homogeneity and cohesiveness within groups that is largely imagined (Anderson, 2006), even more evidently so in the age of globalisation with its flows of ideologies, media and people (Appadurai, 1996). Piller (2017) points out that an analyst should avoid any a priori assumptions about culture and cultural identities when studying communication, especially when considering this interconnectedness. The participants in this study are a case in point for this: All of them are at minimum bilingual and all had lived and worked abroad. At the point the study was conducted five out of six had relocated to a different country (the UK) for the pursuit of the MBA degree. This, however, did not mean that they experienced no *otherness* in any of their encounters with each other. In fact, the different nationalities and languages were frequently salient in the team and especially in the initial interviews team members referred to each other regularly by nationalities in addition to names to identify team members. Team members also frequently referred to their team as intercultural, which is why I adopt the term here for the purpose of this study as it mirrors participant beliefs about their team.

Beyond the potential (but not necessary) differences in communicative approaches or assumptions about teamwork, this seems particularly relevant in a study on relating, as psychological research has found strong evidence that perceived similarity is important for developing liking (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008), yet this is more likely to be lacking if team members are perceived as cultural other. This might add additional challenges to relating in the team, but also makes relationship building and management a particularly pertinent topic of research in encounters that are considered intercultural by interlocutors.

## 1.3 Aim and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is twofold: Firstly, I aim to shed light on relating and rapport management in an intercultural context, with a particular focus on how good relationships are created and nurtured. I wish to better understand how culturally diverse interlocutors manage relationally successful interactions. In doing so, I aim to enrich the theoretical understanding of relating in interactions, but also to gain insights that can inform practices.

Secondly, I intent to provide a thick description of the interactional activity of troubles talk in the workplace, allowing for a better understanding of a little-explored everyday talk phenomenon.

## 1.4 Significance and Contribution of the Study

Both outlined aims make important contributions both practically and theoretically. With regards to managing relationships, I contribute to the topic of relational strategies, going beyond mitigation strategies, which is of concern to the field of interpersonal pragmatics, and address a fairly under-researched area especially with respect to intercultural settings. Gaining a better understanding of how, even at very local levels, meaningful and positively

evaluated connections between individuals perceived as culturally different are made seems pressing, given the ever-increasing rate of mobility in all aspects of life, but also the ever-more debated (relational) challenges this creates for individuals as well as societies. More rigorous theoretical underpinnings are necessary that eventually can be used to inform practices of relating and relationship management in different settings. Thus, my main goal is to contribute to the understanding of how relationships and rapport can be managed and nurtured successfully.

Regarding my second aim, troubles talk has been seen as problematic and as something that needs to be eradicated within workplaces (e.g. Heck, 2001), yet it seems to fulfil important interpersonal functions that could be exploited by individuals and organisations alike. An in-depth account of the way troubles talk is conducted successfully can provide insights into how the potentially negative aspects of troubles talk can be mitigated and managed successfully (e.g. how negative attitudes that could develop towards one's organisation or boss are warded off). Theoretically this allows for a more nuanced understanding of an everyday talk phenomenon that seems to be ubiquitous in people's lives (Boxer, 1993b). Studies of troubles talk span a broad range of countries, including Turkey (Bayraktaroğlu, 1992), Japan (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2014), Italy (Riccioni, Bongelli, & Zuczkowski, 2014) and Australia (Clyne, 1994) to name just a few (see section 2.5.4 for a more in-depth discussion) and while this does not necessarily mean that it is a universal phenomenon, it seems that in a large number of contexts people do feel the need to talk about problems and annoyances of all sizes and degrees with others, even if those others are not equipped to provide solutions.

While troubles talk is likely done differently in different settings, within the intercultural team studied here it often seemed nonetheless a fairly unproblematic type of talk, accessible and apparently familiar to all team members. As such I am also aiming to contribute to intercultural communication research by giving an account of the successful accomplishment of talk over a long period of time by a culturally diverse group.

## 1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature. In the first part of the chapter, I will discuss previous research on relating and rapport management, first by tracing some of the origins and recent developments in the field of interpersonal pragmatics and later by looking beyond interpersonal pragmatics to insights from conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, organisational behaviour and from workplace sociology and psychology. In the second part, I present a comprehensive review of the literature on troubles talk and outline some gaps in the research, concluding with the research questions I developed in response and that this study addresses.

The first part of Chapter 3, Methodology, provides an account of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this study as well as an account of the study design, an overview of the site of the data collection and information about participants and data. The

second part outlines the analytical approach and provides some further details on the analytical framework used in this study, namely rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Chapter 4 provides a concise overview of the relationships team members built with each other across the teamwork, as an important reference point and backdrop for the examination of troubles talk following in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 is divided into three parts. In the first part I provide a more macro account of the topics covered in troubles talk and the occurrence of troubles talk in meetings. The second part focuses on the interactions at a more micro level and analyses a number of troubles talk episodes to understand how the talk is brought on and how it is structured. Collaborative as well as more competitive features occurring in the talk are investigated to shed light onto how good relationships are constructed in troubles talk. Finally, in the third part of the chapter the functions that troubles talk fulfils in the team are examined.

Chapter 6, the discussion, summarises the findings and relates them back to the literature. Special attention is paid to theoretical issues arising from these findings.

Chapter 7 summarises the overall insights, and formulates explicit answers to the research questions, before highlighting limitations and offering suggestions for future research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review is divided in two parts. In the first part, I will discuss the insights that have been put forth regarding relationship management. Within pragmatics the field specifically focusing on this is *interpersonal pragmatics* which I will discuss first, before discussing the insights gained by some of the adjacent fields. After this, I will turn to studies investigating the relationship management done more specifically in workplace settings. Finally, while relating has received little focus within the teamwork research, which tends to be conducted within organisational behaviour, I will briefly discuss their approach to teamwork and the resulting understanding for relationships in teams. I will conclude this first part by outlining the research gap that seems to exist within the study of relating.

In the second part of this literature review, I will examine troubles talk. Since this is the interactional activity this study focuses on, I have conducted a comprehensive literature review. Part two thus provides a broader overview of the topic of troubles talk, especially where it seems relevant to relationship management. The variation in terminology regarding 'troubles talk' might limit the exhaustiveness of this review, although every attempt has been made to take this into account. I will conclude this part with my research questions.

## 2.1 Relating - Insights from Interpersonal Pragmatics

Interpersonal pragmatics began with the study of politeness, with a broader understanding of relating in interactions beyond politeness only appearing later. Given the size of the field, I will only broadly trace some of the traditions in the field to understand the current approaches and concepts, without any claim of exhaustiveness. A number of very good more in-depth discussions of the field are available elsewhere (e.g. Culpeper & Haugh, 2014; Sifanou, 2010; Watts, 2010).

### 2.1.1 Classic studies and the notion of face

Initial research on politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983), mostly drew on Grice's account of implicatures (Grice, 1975) and conversational principles (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983). Both Leech (1983) and Lakoff (1973) suggested that next to Grice's *cooperation principle* a *politeness principle* (Leech, 1983) operates which is responsible for the flouting of the cooperation principle, for example by answering indirectly or evasively instead of clearly and directly. Brown and Levinson (1987) on the other hand have studied politeness from a viewpoint of mitigating face-threatening acts. I will elaborate on their framework in some more depth as it has been by far the most influential work on politeness and researchers for decades afterwards have refined, tested, criticised and deconstructed their framework.

In their theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) draw heavily on the notion of face, originally put forth by Goffman (1967). Face also features heavily in later studies (e.g. Locher & Watts, 2005, Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005, 2008), although the supposed universality of the concept (Brown & Levinson, 1987) has been heavily criticised (e.g. Gu, 1990; Matsumoto, 1988) and more nuanced accounts have been made (e.g. Arundale, 2010; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). I will outline *face* only briefly, as readers are likely to be very familiar with the concept. The notion of face was adopted from Goffman who defined face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). He further highlights that a person has different faces and different face needs in different situations, and that face therefore is "not lodged in or on his [sic] body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifested only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). While Brown and Levinson's adoption of Goffman's concept has been criticised (for a particularly insightful discussion see Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003) for being somewhat narrower and portraying face as more situated on an individual than in Goffman's original definition, this fuller definition has been recovered in recent years and most interpersonal pragmatics frameworks now operate with a fuller understanding of face at least partially located within the flow of events, which is also the understanding of face in this thesis. Goffman (1967) further maintains that people will have an "immediate emotional response" (p.6) to face threats and are not just involved with their own face but also with the face of other people. Within an interaction, interlocutors are thus expected to take both self and other's faces into account.

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested that interactions consist of a string of face threats with many speech acts being inherently face-threatening (e.g. requests, apologies, compliments). These face threatening acts (FTA's) thus need to be mitigated and interlocutors do this by using different politeness strategies. Interlocutors are seen to have different face needs that are addressed by use of different strategies; this can be either their positive face (the need for approval), or their negative face (the need for independence). The amount and type of politeness strategies needed to mitigate an FTA is determined by the extent of the face threat, which is determined by the degree of the imposition or threat and the perceived power and social distance between the interlocutors.

Depending on these factors, interactants might choose to not commit the FTA or to commit the FTA with varying degrees of mitigation. Brown and Levinson suggest 5 broad strategies available: (1) bald on record, (2) positive politeness, (3) negative politeness, (4) off record and (5) don't do the FTA. Politeness in this framework is thus seen as a way to mitigate conflict and threats rather than as a way of establishing good relationships (although this is seen as a bi-product) and the same is true for Leech's and Lakoff's accounts (Sifanou, 2010). In all three classic frameworks politeness is heavily associated with indirectness, while other strategies of doing politeness are much less explored.

Brown and Levinson's framework (1987) later received a number of criticisms, mostly regarding their claim over universality and the differentiation between positive and negative face (Grainger, 2013; Gu, 1990; Haugh, Kádár, & Mills, 2013; Matsumoto, 1988), but also their reliance on speech act theory and their strict designation of indirectness as polite and directness as impolite. Finally, the sole focus on face has also been subject to criticisms with researchers seeking broader approaches (Locher & Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). A comprehensive critique brought forward by Eelen (2001) finally sparked a "discursive turn" within the field of politeness research (Kádár & Haugh, 2013).

### 2.1.2 Relating and rapport management – the shift from "politeness" to "relational work"

With the growing number of criticisms of Brown and Levinson's framework, researchers explored new ways of investigating politeness in a way that addressed the criticisms their framework had garnered and to develop broader and more encompassing frameworks that move away from a focus on speech-acts to an investigations of longer stretches of talk to investigate the discursively constructed forms of politeness, explore parameters beyond face and consider more modes than just the presence or absence of politeness.

The work of Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) and Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2005, 2008) stand out in this regard as they have addressed many of these criticisms, while also shifting the focus of the field from a focus on politeness to relating more generally. Politeness in this approach becomes "just one facet of a whole complex of forms of human behaviour that become evident when two or more persons are involved in social practice" (Watts, 2010, p. 58).

Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) emphasise the discursive approach and discursively analyse how relational work, i.e. "the work people invest in negotiating their relationships in interaction" (Locher & Watts, 2008, p. 78), is done. They suggest that interactional behaviours can also be "politic", which means that they could go unnoticed, while being impolite, polite or overpolite was likely to be marked in some way – in the case of over-politeness and impoliteness, most likely in a negative way. Like the earlier work on politeness, Locher and Watts asserted that "communicative acts always embody some form of relational work" (2008, p. 78) which makes relational work ubiquitous, but also broadened the outlook on phenomena under investigation. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, impoliteness, for example, was only considered as absence of politeness or as a failure or refusal to select the right mitigation strategy. Only later it became clear that impoliteness should be seen as an interactional phenomenon in its own right that could very well be strategic (Culpeper, 2011).

Locher and Watts' (2005, 2008) framework has, however, been criticised for its lack of analytical tools, which only allows for a very descriptive analysis of the interaction (Grainger, 2013). Grainger (2013) also disputes their classification of an interaction into normative, and therefore politic, and non-normative or not expected and therefore polite, as a deterministic

view of social interaction. While the authors acknowledge the occurrence of impolite behaviour, no theoretical proposition for its occurrence seems to be made.

Spencer-Oatey (2005, 2008) took a different approach in her framework of rapport management. Drawing on an empirical investigation into relationship management, she suggested three crucial issues that need to be managed in an interaction: face, sociality rights and obligations, and interpersonal goals. Rapport is defined as "people's subjective perceptions of (dis)harmony, smoothness-turbulence and warmth-antagonism in interpersonal relations" (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 102). Her rapport management framework includes a number of analytical tools and seems to address many of the previously voiced criticisms. In addition, it derived from intercultural workplace data, which seems relatively closely related to the data collected for this study.

### 2.1.3 Managing rapport in interactions

Spencer-Oatey's rapport management framework (2005, 2008) seems particularly useful for exploring how team members build and manage relationships with each other over the course of their team life. Her framework accounts for a number of contextual factors such as different rapport orientations, different face needs and different sociopragmatic principles, thus making it suitable for a wide variety of (intercultural) contexts. In line with much of the former criticisms it focuses on interactions more broadly, not just on speech acts and significantly extends the interactional domains relevant to managing rapport. It also takes a more encompassing view of face, but adds other components, thus allowing a broader view on relating beyond just facework. I will lay out the components in the following sub-sections.

#### 2.1.3.1 The bases of rapport

Spencer-Oatey (2008) suggests that beyond face, interactional goals and perceived sociality rights and obligations also play an equally important role. She also draws on Goffman's definition of face and understands face as a "positive social value" (Goffman, 1967, p.5). She specifies that face "is concerned with people's sense of worth, dignity and identity, and is associated with issues such as respect, honour, status, reputation and competence" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and in this way adopts a wider understanding of face than Brown and Levinson (1987) did. She links face closely with the identities people claim for themselves and argues that their face-sensitivities are subject to context and constructed in interactions.

Sociality rights and obligations differ considerably from face as they relate more to normative expectancies regarding appropriate behaviour. Spencer-Oatey explains:

> The management of sociality rights and obligations, on the other hand, involves the management of social expectancies, which I define as 'fundamental and social *entitlements* that a person effectively claims for himself/herself in his/her interactions with others'. In other words, face is associated with personal/relational/social value, and is concerned with people's sense of worth, dignity, honour, reputation, competence and so on. Sociality rights and obligations, on the other hand, are concerned with social experience, and reflect people's concerns over fairness, consideration and behavioural appropriateness. (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.13-14)

Sociality rights are conceptualised as perceived *entitlements*. This is an important part of the definition as otherwise sociality rights and obligations could be understood to simply mean social norms, which are also recognised by several other authors as important (Holmes, Marra, & Vine, 2012; Locher & Watts, 2005). Spencer-Oatey's (2008) use of the concept is, however, much more specific. She is not suggesting that harming or obliging just *any* social norms will influence the relationship of the interactants – only expectations that are seen as *entitlements* are likely to affect relationships to a greater extent.

Sociality rights and obligations can be derived from legal contracts or explicit rules but are often based on more implicit value-laden principles. Perceptions of sociality rights and obligations are thus likely to differ, especially across cultures. Spencer-Oatey (2008) further divides these value-laden principles into *equity* and *association rights*. Equity rights refer to people's sense of fairness, while association rights refer to people's sense of social consideration and involvement. If one of these is violated, rapport is likely to be harmed within an interaction.

Finally, Spencer-Oatey (2008) includes a consideration of people's interactional goals for rapport management. Interactional goals can be relational as well as transactional. While she maintains that interlocutors do not have to have an interactional goal that they pursue, it seems likely that in workplace contexts this is often the case. Furthermore, it seems likely that the interactional goals of different interlocutors will regularly conflict in workplaces and in teams, and so team members need to develop strategies for dealing with this.

These three aspects all need to be managed in order for a relationship to be perceived as smooth. If any of the three bases for rapport is threatened, be it by face-threatening, rights-threatening or goal-threatening behaviour, the framework predicts that rapport more generally is threatened.

#### 2.1.3.2 Interactional domains

Threats to face, goals or rights can occur within a number of different domains, which all need to be handled appropriately for rapport not to be harmed. While Brown and Levinson (1987) have mostly focused on the illocutionary domain, i.e. speech acts as face-threatening acts and the way they are mitigated, Spencer-Oatey maintains that this is only one amongst a number of different domains that need to be attended to. These consist of the discursive, the participatory, the stylistic and the non-verbal domain (See Table 1.1 for an overview).

The discursive domain captures what interlocutors talk about. A debate about politics or religion might be deemed as violating sociality rights and obligations and possibly also people's face, depending on the contexts, but might be completely appropriate or even rapport enhancing in another situation. Secondly, the participatory domain focuses on the distribution of turns and the in- or exclusion of people present. If turn-distribution is perceived to be unfair or backchannels are withheld towards one person but not to others this might threaten equity-rights, and possibly also face. Thirdly, the stylistic domain deals with the tone of an interaction

and with the appropriate choice of words and syntax in a given context. Swearing, for example, could greatly harm rapport in some contexts, as could joking at a serious matter – whereas it might be rapport enhancing in another (see Daly, Holmes, Newton, & Stubbe, 2004 for an example of this). Finally, the non-verbal domain also plays an important role: Proxemics, gaze or gestures can all threaten or enhance rapport depending how they are handled. Research into domains beyond the illocutionary domain seems, however, almost completely absent, which makes this an important area for research, given the likely relevance for managing relationships.

Table 1.1 Overview of politeness domains (adapted from Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.21)

| **Politeness domain** | **Description** |
|---|---|
| Illocutionary domain | Primarily concerns speech acts and the way they are performed; the domain Brown and Levinson's politeness theory deals with |
| Discursive domain | Concerns discourse content and discourse structure including: Topic choice, topic management, the organisation and sequencing of information |
| Participation domain | Concerns the procedural aspects of an interchange, such as turn-taking (overlaps and inter-turn pauses, turn- taking rights and obligations), the inclusion/exclusion of people present, and the use/ non-use of listener responses (verbal and non-verbal) |
| Stylistic domain | Concerns the stylistic aspects of an interchange, such as choice of tone (for example, serious or joking), choice of genre-appropriate lexis and syntax and choice of genre-appropriate terms of address or use of honorifics |
| Non-verbal domain | Concerns the non-verbal aspects of an interchange, such as gestures and other body movements, eye contact and proxemics. |

### 2.1.3.3 Rapport orientation

While all these domains need to be managed appropriately in order to maintain or enhance rapport, Spencer-Oatey (2008) suggests that positive rapport does not always need to be the focus of an interaction or the goal of an interlocutor – another important departure from Brown and Levinson's model. Instead she suggests that interlocutors can hold different orientations towards rapport. An interlocutor's orientation can be to enhance rapport, to maintain rapport, to neglect rapport or to harm rapport (see Table 1.2 for an overview).

Table 1.2 Overview of rapport orientations (adapted from Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.)

| **Rapport Orientation** | **Definition** |
|---|---|
| Rapport Enhancing | A desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations between the interlocutors |
| Rapport Maintaining | A desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between the interlocutors |
| Rapport Neglecting | A lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors (perhaps because of a focus on self) |
| Rapport Challenging/Harming | A desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors |

As such, her relational framework is the only one that seems able to explain both politeness as well as impoliteness phenomena, as well as to accommodate phenomena around interactional priorities beyond relating. Considering interpersonal goals as well as different orientations to rapport seems to be particularly relevant for investigating relating in a workplace setting, as variation in people's goals is relatively likely and a focus on task might easily supersede an orientation to rapport enhancement. For these various reasons, I decided to use rapport management as the analytical framework for this study.

Spencer-Oatey's focus on different domain opens up more possibilities for the analysis of interactions than other frameworks seem to allow. For example, if an interlocutor wishes to harm or challenge rapport, this could be done by a violation of goals, face, or rights and obligations and within any of the domains discussed or within a combination of them. Depending on the strength of the neglecting/harming orientation, more veiled challenges, like an impetuous tone, or more overt challenges like shouting insults can be chosen. Spencer-Oatey (2008) emphasises that unless explicitly stated by an interlocutor, their rapport orientation cannot be known for sure (and even then, it needs to be considered with care). It can, thus, only be inferred by the analyst and interlocutors themselves based on interactional behaviour.

The rapport orientation an interlocutor holds is thus likely to influence their interaction in a number of ways including tone, topic, participation, directness, word choice and non-verbal behaviour. In order to design an utterance or an interactional strategy appropriately (i.e. in line with their rapport orientation) interlocutors nonetheless also need to take a number of other aspects into account. These include the context and a number of different contextual variables. I will discuss these contextual variables further in section 3.6 where I will provide details on how these variables relate to the context of the study and how Spencer-Oatey's framework can be used to explore the relational management done within an intercultural team around the tasks they are given. Image 1.1 provides a summary overview of all important components of the framework.

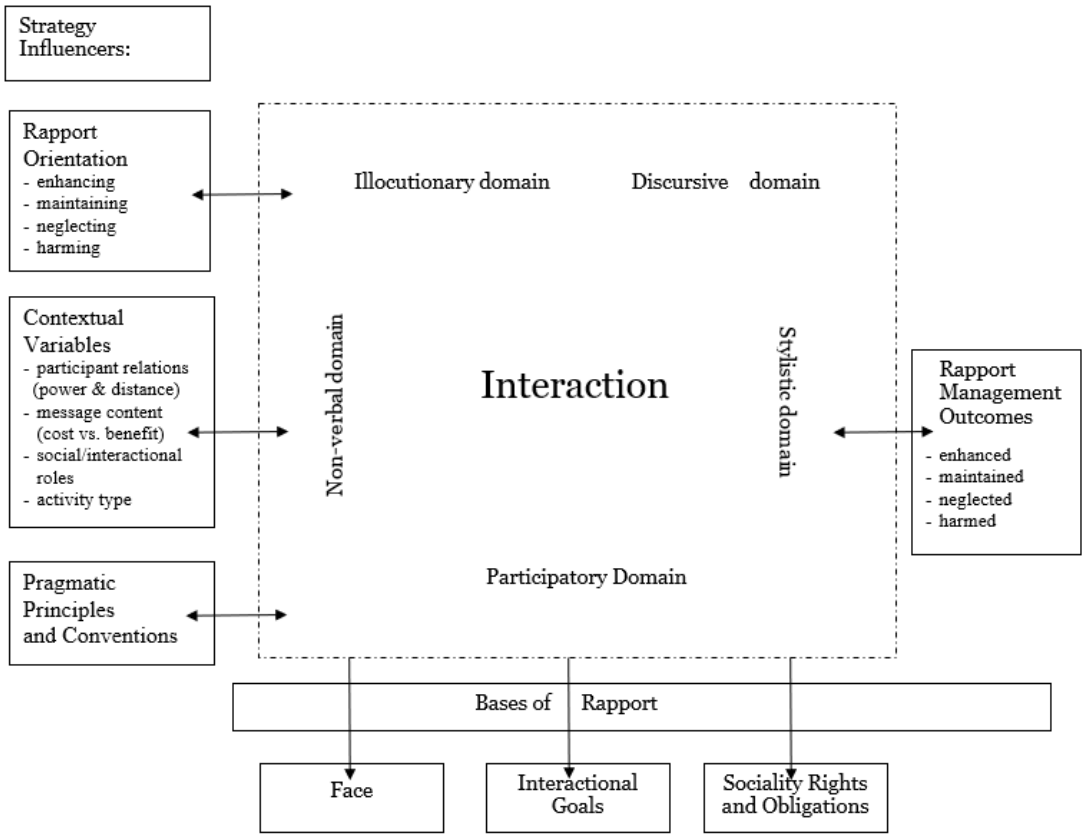


Figure 1.1 Overview of the rapport management framework (adapted from Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

### 2.1.4 Recent developments in interpersonal pragmatics

Recent years have seen a solidifying of the field with the publication of a Handbook of Interpersonal Pragmatics (edited by Locher and Watts, 2010) and a special issue in the Journal of Pragmatics specifically focused on Interpersonal Pragmatics (edited by Haugh, Kádár & Mills, 2013). They demonstrate a clear interest in research beyond politeness phenomena and a focus on the "interpersonal or relational side of language in use in that the area explores in what ways social actors use language to shape and form relationships in situ" (Locher & Graham, 2010, p. 1).

In the introduction to their special issue, Haugh et al. (2013, p.4) identify four areas as crucial issues to be explored further within interpersonal pragmatics research:

> Interpersonal relations: "mutual social connections amongst people that are mediated by interaction, including power, intimacy, roles, rights and obligations" (Culpeper and Haugh, [2014])"
>
> Interpersonal attitudes: "perspectives, usually value-laden and emotionally charged, on others that are mediated by interaction, including generosity, sympathy, like/dislike, disgust, fear and anger" (Culpeper and Haugh, [2014])

> Interpersonal emotions: which encompasses embodied feelings or state-of-mind often characterised by participants as "irrational and subjective, unconscious rather than deliberate [and] genuine rather than artificial" (Edwards, 1999:273)"
>
> Interpersonal evaluations: "appraisals or assessment of persons, or our relationships with those persons, which influence the way we think and feel about those persons and relationships, and consequently sometimes what we do" (Kádár and Haugh, 2013:61)
>
> (Haugh et al., 2013, p. 4)

These areas are clearly interlinked and an in-depth account of the way relationships are managed in interactions, like in the study here, is likely to at least touch on all four.

With this shift to a focus on relating rather than politeness or face alone, along with the move away from a focus on speech acts, researchers have highlighted the importance of the local context and the different layers of norms influencing interactions (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Previously in the earlier studies in the field they had been rather restricted to a focus on mostly power and distance. In addition, the need to consider the relationships as part of broader networks of relationships, also across time, especially one's relational history, is emphasised (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Exploring this, however, would require more longitudinal studies that can explore these embedded relationships in their local context and as they relate to other relationships around them. On the one hand, this bodes well for the study here – researching relationship management in a team inevitably means a focus on a (small) network of relationships that takes the context and different relational configurations into account as they form. At the same time these are situated in a wider web of relationships, which somehow has to be restricted to make any study feasible. However, little research providing good examples of such an approach has been published to date. The same seems true for a more longitudinal approach, as there seem to be hardly any studies conducted on relationship management that study these over a longer period of time.

Interestingly, most of the work done in interpersonal pragmatics is of a more conceptual nature than of empirical investigations, which seems partially due to the debates sparked by Brown and Levinson (1987). Much less empirical work has been conducted to underpin these debates or to illuminate what individuals actually do in interactions to get on well, beyond taking care of face-needs. Longitudinal studies, exploring how relationships develop and are managed across time, what affects these changes and how interlocutors deal with them seem particularly rare. While more empirical studies have been conducted on relationship management in specific contexts such as *getting acquainted* (e.g. Haugh, 2011; Haugh & Carbaugh, 2015; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984), few concrete strategies have been identified on how interlocutors try to get others to like them, or how they try to re-construct relationships after relational tension. I will now turn to discussing some of the few studies that considered such issues, firstly from within the field of interpersonal pragmatics and sociolinguistics, and afterwards from other relevant fields.

## 2.2 Relational Practices in the Workplace

While there are few studies looking into relationship management in workplaces in depth, across time and under deeper considerations of the contexts, the work done by Janet Holmes and her colleagues on the Language in the Workplace Project[1] is a very notable exception to this claim. The team has conducted extensive empirical studies into relating in a number of different workplaces in New Zealand, reporting some really interesting findings in this particular area.

Holmes and Marra (2004) point out that relating at work often fulfils two different functions. On the one hand it is "concerned with damage control: RP [Relational Practice] oriented to constructing and maintaining workers' dignity, to saving face and reducing the likelihood of offense being taken, to mitigating potentially threatening behaviour, and to minimising conflict and negotiating consensus" (Holmes & Marra, 2004, p. 381). According to the authors, strategies to achieve this might include covert facilitation and mitigating humour. The second function on the other hand is concerned with "constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships, to establishing and maintaining solidarity between team members, and to networking and creating new work relationships" (Holmes & Marra, 2004, p. 381).

The more traditional approaches to politeness seem much more closely related to the relational work done as part of the first function. The second function, on the other hand, seems much closer to the focus of this study which explores how team members build and manage good relationships around working together. Holmes and Marra (2004) point to some concrete communicative strategies as to how interlocutors pursue this, including: Small talk, humour and voicing of (off-record) approval. Vine (2010) later adds "narratives" to the list of communicative strategies that can help create solidarity. She also stresses that narratives can establish and justify social norms, as can humour. Holmes and Marra (2004) also stress that a lot of strategies found are not clear cut but can serve both of these functions simultaneously. They show how humour in particular can be used in competitive or collaborative ways (Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2002, 2004), with collaborative humour being characterised by "echoing, mirroring, or completing each other's contributions" (Holmes, 2006, p. 47). Schnurr (2010) also discusses the importance of humour for relating by emphasising its importance for showing solidarity and emphasising similarity. She further highlights the impact of culture and ethnicity on how humour is used and understood, as attempts at humour might fail or even be interpreted as an insult, which could be a source of relational trouble in an intercultural team.

Nonetheless, risky types of humour can be important for building positive relationships. Daly, Holmes, Newton and Stubbe (2004, p. 952) observe about a factory team that "their particular blend of verbal humour, jocular abuse and practical jokes contributed to a unique team culture, and generally helped to create positive relationships within the team". They further

[1] https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/centres-and-institutes/language-in-the-workplace

investigate the use of the term *fuck*, which they found to signal solidarity and emphasise the good relationships among the team that permitted the use of this term with team members but not with outsiders. This mirrors Jefferson's earlier findings (1974, p. 198), who suggest that: "rudeness, blasphemy, and obscenity can operate as indices of intimacy, their occurrence in some ongoing talk constituting an offered formulation of degree of intimacy, that formulation being negotiable in subsequent talk". In fact, it was found that the avoidance of swear terms in interactions was used to create social distance, while the usage of swearing emphasised in-group status (Beers Fagersten, 2001, 2005 reported in Stapleton, 2010). The same was found by Jaworski and Coupland (2003) who suggest that improprieties and transgressive story-telling increase intimacy and ingroup-status among interlocutors.

Beyond swearing, a number of other strategies for building positive relationships have been described. Spencer-Oatey and Xing (1998) report the following strategies as used by a chair in an intercultural business meeting beyond the initial introductions: 1) Claiming common ground by displaying shared knowledge, shared relationships or shared assumptions; 2) Positively discussing interpersonal relationships by paying compliments, attributing value to relationships and mentioning future contact, 3) Showing concern and interest by offering help, making caring comments and asking social questions, 4) Using humour.

I will provide a summary of all these strategies at the end of the next section (Table 2.4), but here will first discuss some additional insights into relationship building in interaction, derived from other areas of pragmatics, conversation analysis and sociolinguistics as well as ethnography.

### 2.2.1 Insights from other fields

Relationship and relationship management are of such crucial concern to the human experience that they are investigated in a number of different fields. I will discuss some the findings here, especially those derived from a workplace setting or seemingly directly related to Holmes and Marra's second function, in other words, to strategies that seem to help in "constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships, to establishing and maintaining solidarity between team members, and to networking and creating new work relationships" (2004, p. 381).

An ethnographic study into women working in an engineering company also specifically focused on relational practices (Fletcher, 1999). Fletcher (1999) provides a list of behaviours that form part of relational practice in the workplace as shown in Table 2.3. Some of these are concerned with maintaining equal status, giving attention to individuals, as well as with being aware of the relational-web one's own relationship with an interlocutor is situated in and taking this into account. Many of the strategies thus seem to embed themselves well in an interpersonal pragmatics approach.

Several of the practices are concerned with interactional aspects of workplace relationships, but Fletcher also highlights cognitive and emotional processes and stresses the importance of the relationship developed not with colleagues but with the task itself.

Table 2.3 Relational practices (Fletcher, 1999, p.85)

| **Preserving** | **Mutual Empowering** | **Self-Achieving** | **Creating Team** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Focus on Task:** *Shouldering the responsibility for the whole in order to preserve the life and well-being of the project by:* | **Focus on Other:** *Enacting an expanded definition of "outcome" to include outcomes embedded in others such as increased knowledge or competence by:* | **Focus on Self:** *Using relational skills to enhance one's ability to achieve goals by:* | **Focus on Team:** *Creating background conditions in which group life can flourish and the feeling of team can be experienced by:* |
| Resolving conflict and disconnection to keep project connected to essential resources<br><br>Anticipating and taking action to prevent problems<br><br>Extending job beyond defined boundaries and ''doing whatever it takes''<br><br>Extending responsibility beyond the technical definition of the job (up, down, lateral)<br><br>Placing project needs ahead of individual career concerns | Teaching with an awareness of the learner's needs and barriers<br><br>Sharing information<br><br>Facilitating connections<br><br>Supplying relational skills<br><br>Protecting others from consequences of their relational ineptitude<br><br>Giving help without making receiver feel guilty or inadequate<br><br>Eliminating barriers and cutting slack | Recognizing and accepting responsibility for breaks in relationships that could impede achievement<br><br>Re-connecting after disconnection<br><br>Reflecting on one's behaviour<br><br>Using feelings as a source of data to understand and anticipate reactions and consequences<br><br>Responding to emotional data (emotional context, others' emotional realities) to understand situations and strategize appropriate responses<br><br>Asking for help in a way that takes the helper's needs and likely responses into account (relational asking) | Affirming individual uniqueness through listening, respecting, and responding<br><br>Facilitating connections among individuals by absorbing stress, reducing conflict, and creating structural practices that encourage interdependence |

While some of Fletcher's strategies seem to directly involve the mitigation of face threatening acts, such as 'giving help without making the receiver feel guilty or inadequate', others seem broader, with a range of possible interactional behaviours and strategies able to achieve the goal, such as "re-connecting after disconnection" or "eliminating barriers". Her framework thus opens up a considerably broader perspective on relating than tends to be conceptualised and considered within interpersonal pragmatics.

Outside of a workplace context, interactional research has highlighted a number of interactional moves that can construct and nurture good relationships. Many of these revolve around the theme of enacting familiarity/intimacy including: Making elliptic and oblique utterances (Enfield, 2013; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005); Finishing the other's sentence or finishing in unison (Enfield, 2013); Displaying shared knowledge or shared experiences (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984); and closely related to this: Gossiping (Eggins & Slade, 1997). This display of shared experiences often manifests itself in shared storytelling, though beyond enacting sharedness, stories can also help to establish and create shared perceptions:

> "Storytelling is very common in casual conversation. It provides conversationalists with a resource for assessing and confirming affiliations with others [...] [Stories give] the participants the opportunity to share experiences and to display agreement and shared perceptions. Stories involve both representations of the world [...] and reactions to those events (e.g. sharing and attitudinal response). [...] Thus, in stories values, attitudes and ways of seeing the world are created and represented." (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 229)

In line with this, Maynard and Zimmerman (1984) also include emphasising and displaying similarity as crucial for building positive relationships. McCarthy (2003), on the other hand, emphasised the importance of 'small' response tokens indicating involvement, engagement and interactional bonding and being a part of good listenership. He concludes: "As with other aspects of relational talk, the smallness of small actions often hides the contribution they make to the ongoing talk and can easily be overlooked in the analysis of dense, extended stretches of discourse." This seems encapsulated in Fletchers' (1999) category of "affirming uniqueness through listening, respecting and responding" and as such is likely to be relevant to a workplace setting. All other cited strategies are reported from non-workplace settings and while it seems likely that they nonetheless frequently occur, little research has investigated this, with the exception of narratives and story-telling (e.g. Holmes, 2005).

With regards to types of talk, the most explored type that is seen as crucial for relating is phatic talk (Laver, 1975; Malinowski, 1923) or small talk (Coupland, 2014). From her studies of workplaces, Holmes (2003, p. 66f) concludes: "The most fundamental function of small talk is to construct, maintain, and reinforce positive social relationships or solidarity between coworkers [sic]." How negatively a lack of small talk can affect relationships in the workplace has been documented, as individuals failing to engage were judged negatively by co-workers (Holmes, 2003). This might be in part due to their failure to adhere to conversational routines, which Kecskes (2016) suggests would be important for establishing a core common ground relevant for building social relationships or could be seen as a failure to fulfil one's relational obligations.

Common ground is another aspect that seems important for building and maintaining relationships. Enfield (2008) highlights that common ground is essential for relationships as it has implications both on a cognitive as well as on an affiliative level. On the cognitive level Enfield suggests that common ground allows for an *economy of expression*: Inferences can be made and expected, and their likelihood of being accurate increases with more common ground, thus communication becomes easier and mental representations become more shared (Žegarac, 2007), which could be particularly important in an intercultural context.

On the affiliative level, common ground allows interlocutors to maintain and convey interpersonal affiliation with each other, which Enfield specifies to include: "(trust, commitment, intimacy) proper to the status of the relationship, and again mutually calibrated at each step of an interaction's progression" (Enfield, 2008, p. 221). He further suggests that the way common ground is managed indicates one's commitment to particular relationships, as sufficiently large amounts of common ground are needed in order to form close relationships, which require an investment of time (Enfield, 2013). This management and commitment seems to correspond with one's *rapport orientation* in Spencer-Oatey's (2008) framework.

While I have discussed the strategies here that seem to enhance rapport between interlocutors, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) point out that relating happens within a number of dialectic

tensions, with some of the most crucial ones being closeness-separateness, certainty-uncertainty and openness-closedness. This draws our attention to the fact that relational management is not necessarily successful if interlocutors construct the relation as ever closer or ever more open, as even good relationships need breaks and space. Baxter together with Bridge (1992) have investigated these relational tensions amongst workers who consider some of their colleagues as friends and have shown that they tended to experience five dialectical tensions in particular in these relationships: autonomy-connection, equality-inequality, impartiality-favouritism, judgment-acceptance, and openness-closedness. The five tensions thus likely need to be managed in many workplace relationships, although the authors stress that not all of them appear in all relationships.

Table 2.4 summarises these various different findings on interactional strategies of relating beyond the ones specified by Fletcher (1999), to provide a better overview of the findings discussed in this chapter. What has become clear, though, is that while there are quite a number of findings in this area they appear somewhat disjointed. Since the literature on relational strategies is so dispersed, no claim to exhaustiveness is made regarding these strategies.

This also means that there appears to be no cohesive research agenda exploring empirically how interlocutors nurture and create good relationships in interactions and in specific contexts and systematic approaches into how this is done seem equally rare.

Table 2.4 Overview of interactional strategies for building and enacting good relationships

| **Strategies for building/enacting positive relationships** | **Ascribed Functions (where specifically stated beyond "building positive relationships")** | **Author** |
|---|---|---|
| Small talk | Solidarity<br>Expressing friendliness | Holmes & Marra, 2004; Holmes, 2003; Coupland, 2000 |
| (Supportive) humour<br>(including: echoing, mirroring, or completing each other's contributions) | Solidarity, establish and justify social norms | Holmes, 2002; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Holmes & Marra, 2004; |
| Humour | | Spencer-Oatey, 1998 |
| Humour | Showing solidarity and emphasising similarity | Schnurr, 2010 |
| Jocular abuse and practical jokes | Solidarity | Daly, Holmes Newton & Stubbe, 2004 |
| Voicing of (off-record) approval | Solidarity | Holmes & Marra, 2004 |
| Narratives | Solidarity | Vine, 2010 |
| Story-telling,<br>Gossip | Claiming and displaying in-group membership | Eggins & Slade, 1997 |
| Transgressive Story-telling | Creating Intimacy and In-group status | Coupland and Jaworski, 2003 |
| Improprieties/Swearing | Creating intimacy and in-group status | Jefferson, 1974; Daly, Holmes Newton & Stubbe, 2004; Stapleton, 2010 |
| Displaying shared knowledge, shared relationships or shared assumptions | Claiming common ground | Spencer-Oatey, 1998; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984 |
| Paying compliments, attributing value to relationships and mentioning future contact | | Spencer-Oatey, 1998 |
| Offering help, making caring comments and asking social questions | Showing concern and interest | Spencer-Oatey, 1998; Fletcher, 1999 |
| Producing 'small' response tokens | Showing involvement and engagement | McCarthy, 2003 |
| Finishing each other's sentences/finishing it in unison | Creating intimacy | Enfield, 2013 |
| Elliptic/oblique utterances | Creating intimacy | Enfield, 2013; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005 |
| Building common ground | Share & indicate interpersonal affiliation, develop shared mental representations | Enfield, 2008 |

Before turning towards the field of organisational behaviour, one word of warning regarding the strategies outlined in the table needs to be made. This table provides merely an overview of relational strategies as previously identified in the literature. While I have looked here at strategies that mostly seem to work across contexts and relationship types, their effectiveness

is nonetheless dependent on the specific contexts interlocutors are located in, including the relationship they have constructed at the point of strategy enactment. So whether any of these strategies in fact aid in building and nurturing good relationships will always depend on the context in which it is used.

I will now turn to the field of organisational behaviour and briefly outline their approach to teamwork and the relationship management that seems an indispensable component of a successful team.

## 2.3 Doing Teamwork

### 2.3.1 Teamwork, relationships and team cohesion

It seems first of all important to define what is meant by the term *team* here as there is a large variety of different types of teams and this has implications for relationships. Teamwork here always refers to project teamwork, which is characterised by a strong work interdependence, complex, non-routine tasks and a clear beginning and end (Picazo et al., 2015).

While such project teamwork might vary considerably, during the course of completing a project, team members are nonetheless likely to engage in some specific activities crucial for working together interdependently on a non-routine task, such as: Brainstorming, information sharing, problem-focused discussions and decision making. In addition to these task-focused activities, process-focused interactions are also likely to occur, such as scheduling, dividing work, progress reporting etc. At least some of these activities, if not all, are essential to completing the project, otherwise it would seem unnecessary to give the task to a team of people instead of an individual. This implies that project teamwork is most crucially an interactional activity. Teams are, however, frequently chosen to reflect (functional) diversity (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993), which might affect the ease with which team members engage in effective interactions. Yet, despite the crucial importance of this, there is nonetheless a great paucity of research focusing on exactly how team members interact with each other (Leenders, Contractor, & DeChurch, 2016).

This is due to the dominant paradigm within organisational behaviour team research, which tends to be quantitative and follow a rather mechanical Input-Process-Output approach to teamwork, where traditionally team composition, mediating variables and resulting performance are assessed. While this approach has been criticised (e.g. Ancona & Isaacs, 2007; Leenders et al., 2016) a wider turn to a more dynamic systems view has yet to occur.

Within this paradigm, the construct usually used to approximate and measure relational issues is team cohesion, a group-level construct measuring the attraction team members feel towards each other at the group level, which is sometimes also divided into task cohesion and interpersonal cohesion (see Picazo et al., 2015 for a discussion). Components referred to frequently include categories such as trust, affinity with each other, and satisfaction with the

work (Greer, 2012). Given the overall focus in the field on performance, most studies involving cohesion have targeted its role in performance in some way. Two meta-analyses have clearly linked cohesion with team performance, usually with moderately positive effects (Evans & Dion, 1991; Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995). Cohesion has also been found to keep task-conflict from turning into personal conflict (Ensley & Pearce, 2001), which is important as personal conflict has been found to negatively affect performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Cohesion seems to be more likely to be lacking in heterogeneous teams (Picazo et al., 2015; Stahl et al., 2010), which might be due to the important role that perceived similarity plays in developing positive affect (Montoya et al., 2008). This factor can have detrimental effects for organisations and individuals alike, as Mannix and Neale (2005) summarise:

> Members of heterogeneous groups (particularly those with a majority–minority structure) show less attachment to one another and less commitment to their organizations (Harrison et al., 1998; Tsui et al., 1992), are absent from work more often (O'Reilly et al., 1989; Wagner et al., 1984), take more time to reach decisions (Hambrick et al., 1996), and experience more conflict (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Pelled et al., 1999). (Mannix & Neale, 2005, p. 41)

Despite all the findings supporting the importance of cohesion and of good relationships for individuals and organisations alike, hardly any research can be found that investigates how exactly team members establish cohesion, which is a gap this study aims to begin to address.

### 2.3.2 Peer-relationships in the workplace

More qualitative studies into relationships among peers have been conducted from a work sociology and work psychology perspective. Research into peer-relationships nonetheless remains limited as not much attention is paid to relationships overall (Dutton & Ragins, 2009) and, even amongst relationship scholars, more attention is paid to manager-subordinate relationships rather than to peers, despite them being much more frequent than hierarchical relationships (Sias, 2009).

Kahn (2009) suggests that relationships in the workplace differ from other relationships as they tend to be entered and maintained for more instrumental functions than relationships outside of work. Workers therefore perform "a certain calculus" (p.202) to determine which relationships to invest in, to fulfil their need to have certain categories addressed. Kahn (2009) identifies the following five main categories that relationships fulfil and are constructed around: Task accomplishment, career development, sense making, provision of meaning and/or personal support.

Other researchers have approached relationships from a less instrumental perspective, although they often highlight what colleagues with good relationships do for each other in the workplace, stressing two interactional activities in particular: Information sharing and providing social support (Sias, 2009). In an early study, Kram and Isabella (1985) provided a continuum of peer relationships in the workplace, on which three main relationship types are located: Information peers, collegial peers and special peers. Each of these relationships is

characterised by different types of interactions between the peers that require and create increasing levels of intimacy and trust as shown in Figure 2.3.

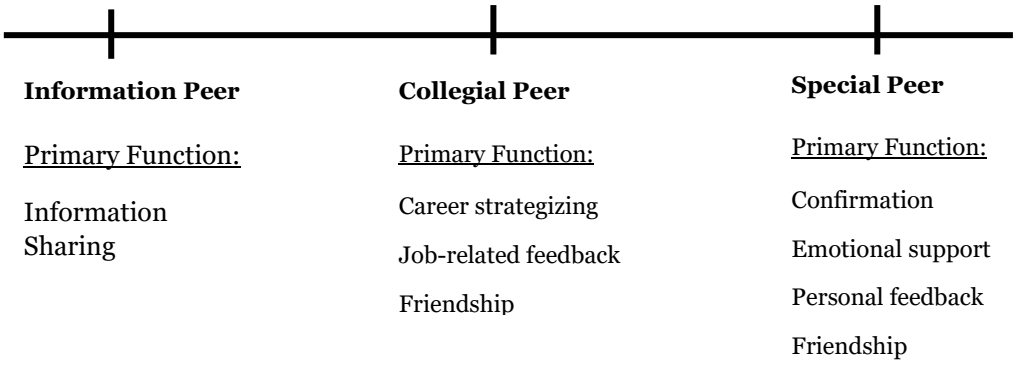


Figure 2.3 Continuum of peer relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 119)

Drawing on these categories Sias (2009) highlights that all peer relationships are crucial for information gathering and exchange, especially for new employees as a crucial way of minimising uncertainty. What information gets exchanged is however mitigated by the closeness of the peer relationship. In addition to information sharing, peer relationships are crucial for social support, especially against workplace stress, with researchers suggesting that peer relationships at work can offer support that family or friends cannot (Sias, 2009). How this social support is delivered, however, has been less explored. Sias, for example, states: "Much research indicates that peer relationships are important sites of social support. However, we have little understanding of what social support 'sounds like'" (2009, p. 75). While there are undoubtably numerous forms it can take, there is some evidence, that troubles talk plays an important part of collegial and special peer relationships. Kram and Isabella (1985) provide the following interview quotes regarding *collegial* and *special peer* social support:

> "When one of us has a tough thing we'll wander over to the other's office and bitch a little bit and commiserate." (from Kram & Isabella, 1985, p.121)

> "I can say anything to Art and he will be understanding. I am able to get frustration and anger out in a more constructive fashion talking to him. We do that for each other." (from Kram & Isabella, 1985, p.121)

The talk that these utterances describe seems to be very much in line with what is considered troubles talk in this study. Thus, this study will provide insights into what at least one type of social support "sounds like" (Sias, 2009, p.75). Additional findings for the importance of troubles are also made by Sias and Cahill (1998). The authors investigate which factors lead to relationship development between colleagues from acquaintance to friends and find that "work-related problems" are an important factor leading to more affect and intimacy in relationships in addition to: Physical proximity, shared tasks, perceived similarity, life events, extra organisational socialising, benign work-related factors (such as unexpected breaks in the work), time and personality (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 287). The authors stress that while

traditionally *similarity* is seen as a crucial factor in creating liking, it was not necessary for the development of good relationships among colleagues, but that proximity alone could be sufficient. Being friends with one's colleagues can however come with its own challenges as role requirements might contradict and lead to relational tensions (Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

Sias and Cahill (1998) also note the way communication changes as relationships grow closer and suggest that the closer relationships become, the more interactions are characterised by: Decreased caution, increased discussion of non-work related personal issues, increased intimacy, increased frequency, and – most relevant for this study here – increased discussion of work-related problems. From a pragmatic point of view, these communicative changes are in fact crucial in constituting closer relationships instead of being merely a by-product of such a change spurred on by outside factors. Yet, outside factors clearly influence the types of talk available to interlocutors and there seems to be strong evidence that *special peer relationships* tend to develop in problematic environments "as their communication about the problems becomes more intimate and more frequent" (Sias, 2009, p.74).

This research seems to confirm my original sense that troubles talk seemed in some way important to the relationships that were being constructed. While social support and problematic environments can lead to a number of different interactions – the data provided in some of the above cited studies clearly suggest the presence of troubles talk and its relevance for relating in regard to special colleagues. Before turning now to a more in-depth review of troubles talk, a note of caution nonetheless seems required. All of the above cited studies seem to have been conducted in the United States of America in English speaking workplaces and reference to any diversity is hardly ever made. Given that interpersonal relationships are enacted within socially constructed normative relational roles it seems likely that insights may differ in non-US workplaces, where constraints and expectations of collegial relationships and behaviours might be quite different.

## 2.4 Summary of Part 1

The reviewed literature has highlighted a number of insights and approaches to the study of managing relationships in interactions. I provide a very brief summary here, as many of these developments influence the study conducted here.

Within interpersonal pragmatics mostly conceptual work has been done, which means that more empirical work, especially regarding strategies of relationship management are likely to generate new insights and be welcome contributions to the field. At least in the early approaches, studies of strategies were almost completely limited to investigations of directness and indirectness in language use. More exploratory approaches that look into other relational strategies, in domains beyond the illocutionary domain, seem likely to generate interesting new insights.

Moreover, inspired by these early approaches much research seems focused on the mitigation of face threats and the smooth management of problematic interactions, yet relational work does not only occur in order to mitigate face threats. Some of these insights, as well as plenty of anecdotal evidence, show that interlocutors put considerable effort into positively constructing relationships in many ways, i.e. in getting others to like them and making interactions pleasant beyond an absence of face threats. The strategies used and the interactions in which this relational orientation is displayed deserve more attention as they constitute an equally important aspect of people's lives as does the mitigation of challenging interactions.

While we have accounts of such relational strategies from several different fields, these are quite dispersed and there does not seem to be a cohesive research agenda. Interpersonal pragmatics approaches definitely have something to contribute to these findings. In addition, a more systematic exploration of a wider set of strategies seems like a useful contribution to current debates. In addition, research exploring these issues over time seems almost completely absent and longitudinal studies might make an important contribution on how relationships and relational management change and shift over time. This might also be interesting from an organisational behaviour perspective as many studies conducted on cohesion or relationships seem to treat them as relatively stable concepts only measuring them at single points in time.

Troubles talk has implicitly already been identified as a potentially important type of talk in the more psychological research into relationships in the workplace, yet it has not been studied from an interpersonal pragmatics perspective. In the next part of the literature review I will provide an in-depth account of troubles talk research up to today with a special focus on how it contributes to relationships and relational management more broadly.

## 2.5 Troubles Talk

### 2.5.1 Literature overview

As outlined in Chapter 1, I understand doing troubles talk as engaging in talk about negative issues or experiences that oneself or others have encountered, which are not blamed or attributed to the person/people addressed and can range from very severe issues to only mildly inconvenient or completely other-focused issues. In order to explore previous research on this type of talk, I have conducted a literature review that is comprehensive to the best of my knowledge. While an initial search on the EBSCO Host database only rendered 17 hits, an additional 15 publications that directly investigate troubles talk were found by following the references provided in those articles. Other search tools including google scholar, Mendeley and library search tools were used, but did not render any additional publications beyond the 32 already identified. While troubles talk is a fairly established label for the type of talk investigated here, some alternative terminologies including "whingeing", "moaning" or

"bitching" were also searched for and relevant results are also reported. The list of reviewed articles is provided in Appendix 1. In the following I will give a brief overview of the focus and methodology of these studies, before discussing their findings in more depth.

The vast majority of studies investigate troubles talk conducted in English, with the usual research sites being the UK, US and Australia. Only two studies could be found investigating troubles talk in other languages, namely in Italian (Riccioni et al., 2014) and Turkish (Bayraktaroğlu, 1992).

Almost all papers (with the notable exception of Goldsmith, 2004, which I will discuss later in more depth) follow an assumption first put forth by Jefferson (1988), who worked on telephone conversations, that troubles talk is achieved between a troubles-teller and a troubles recipient. The troubles-teller lays out a trouble in a context and with a person who is deemed appropriate (sometimes assumed to take a narrative form) and a troubles recipient listens and then responds appropriately (or not) to the trouble. With very few exceptions (Haugh, 2016; Kyratzis, 2000), troubles talk is studied as occurring between dyads in which roles are assumed to be quite clearly allocated. Following this view, we have a number of studies focusing specifically on the troubles telling (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Mewburn, 2011; Ouellette, 2001) and a surprisingly large number that is more concerned with the responses to a troubles-telling (e.g. Goldsmith, 1999; Grainger, Atkinson, & Coupland, 1990; Haugh & Chang, 2015; G. Miller & Silverman, 1995; Pudlinski, 2005). In fact, more than half of the studies seem to focus more on the responses made by troubles recipients upon hearing of a trouble, suggesting that the response might be even more complex and interactionally challenging than the telling itself.

A number of different methodological approaches have been used to explore troubles talk including: Questionnaires (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2014), focus groups (Haugh, 2016) or other types of prompted talk (Barraja-Rohan, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004; Ouellette, 2001), ethnography (Faircloth, 2001; Kyratzis, 2000), and discourse completion tasks (DCT's) and Vignettes (Bodie, Cannava, Vickery, & Jones, 2015; Bodie, Vickery, Cannava, & Jones, 2015; Goldsmith, 1999; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004; MacGeorge, Guntzviller, Branch, & Yakova, 2016; Michaud & Warner, 1997). Most studies have focused, however, on naturally occurring data. While the majority of studies have focused on troubles talk in informal settings, a small number of studies have also been conducted on more formal settings such as counselling or other health care settings (Edwards, 1995; Feo & LeCouteur, 2013; Grainger et al., 1990; G. Miller & Silverman, 1995; Pritchard, 1993).

Two quite famous scholars have investigated troubles talk and have aided in popularising the concept: Gail Jefferson and Deborah Tannen. Jefferson's work will be discussed in more detail in section 2.5.2 below, however I will briefly discuss Tannen's understanding of troubles talk here as her research has sparked some follow-up studies investigating her claims. Tannen discussed troubles talk in her book "You just don't understand" (Tannen, 1991) in which she

proposed that men and women have been socialised into different cultures and speech communities, leading to a number of conversational mismatches that couples have to cope with. According to Tannen one such problematic instance of talk is troubles talk as men and women have different expectations as to how troubles talk should be responded to. She maintains that while women prefer commiserating and emotional support, men prefer solution-focused responses such as giving advice on how to deal with the trouble. Since Tannen mostly relied on anecdotal evidence and observed instances, a small number of scholars investigated these claims using more rigorous means of measurement, and found mixed results (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Feo & LeCouteur, 2013; MacGeorge et al., 2004; Michaud & Warner, 1997).

Michaud and Warner (1997), using vignettes and a questionnaire that asked participants to indicate their reactions, indeed found a difference between men's and women's reactions to troubles talk, with women being more likely to commiserate and men being more likely to change the subject. There was no difference however for advice giving, contrary to Tannen's claim. In addition, effect sizes were so small that the authors pointed out that there is a "very substantial overlap in the behaviours of men and women" (p. 538). These findings were similar to Basow and Ruben's (2003) findings, who focused on female and masculine *types* instead of men and women, and came to the conclusion that 'type' and not gender mediates the variation found.

Clear counter-evidence to Tannen's (1991) claims was also provided by MacGeorge et al. (2004), who, using a similar methodology of vignettes and a verbal discourse completion task, found that irrespective of gender, participants showed a preference for "messages that focus on the explicit elaboration and exploration of the distressed other's feelings and perspective" (p.171) and thus concluded that "at present, then, there appears to be virtually no relevant, credible evidence that supports the claim that men and women constitute different communication cultures or speech communities, especially with respect to supportive communication" (p.172). A qualitative study into a men's helpline seems to also contradict Tannen's claim. The study found that councillors who were briefed to give advice and be solution-focused, were confronted with a large number of callers who 'just wanted to talk' (Feo & LeCouteur, 2013).

I will now turn to Jefferson's work who has conducted the first and most comprehensive investigation of troubles talk. She provides fascinating insights on the way troubles talk is done. Afterwards I will explore the different themes that emerged from reviewing the literature.

### 2.5.2 The structure of troubles talk

The structure of troubles talk was extensively studied by Gail Jefferson in the 1980s. How relevant these studies still are today, especially for the field of conversation analysis can be seen by the recent publication of an edited volume of her troubles talk papers by Drew,

Heritage, Lerner and Pomerantz (Jefferson, 2015). While this study is not taking a conversation analytic approach, Jefferson revealed in her research several components of troubles talk that are of crucial importance to relationships. In fact, she points out that the very structure of troubles talk mirrors its relational properties:

> There is a trajectory which starts out at attending to business as usual, moves gradually towards an attention to the trouble, and then moves back to attending to business as usual. Interactionally as well, a simple corresponding design seemed apparent. The parties start out at an interactional distance appropriate to their routine conversation, become gradually closer, arrive at an intense intimacy as the trouble is focused upon, and then return to a more distant relationship as they re-engage with business as usual. (Jefferson, 1988, p. 419)

Jefferson (1988) describes troubles talk as a larger sequence, consisting of six smaller parts: 1) Approach, 2) Arrival, 3) Delivery, 4) Work-up, 5) Close implicature, 6) Exit. In a number of papers, she examines these different stages in more depth, yielding fascinating insights into the organisation of larger chunks of talk than conversation analysis traditionally focuses on.

During the first stage (Approach) Jefferson found interlocutors to be purposefully vague, allowing the troubles-recipient to resist the troubles telling or to show receptiveness. Jefferson calls this *systematic ambiguity* and while she is not interested in face as such this systematic ambiguity is likely to fulfil face saving functions in many instances (Jefferson, 1980, 1988). After a troubles recipient has aligned with the troubles, the troubles teller proceeds to share those. Jefferson has focused on one feature of these troubles tellings in particular: Laughter (Jefferson, 1984b). What interested Jefferson was the departure from the normal pattern of laughter in interaction: one interlocutor begins to laugh and usually the other interlocutor joins in the laughter in a move that aligns both interlocutors. Jefferson found this pattern virtually absent during troubles talk. Instead the troubles teller might start to laugh, while the troubles recipient refuses to laugh alongside the teller and instead produces a serious response, thus aligning properly with the troubles that are being told. Jefferson finds plenty of evidence in her data that this refusal to laugh is indeed the relationally appropriate response of a "properly aligned troubles recipient" (1984b, p.366). At the same time, she points to the important function laughter fulfils for the troubles teller:

> It appears that in troubles-talk, a laughing troubles-teller is doing a recognizable sort of job. He [sic] is exhibiting that, although there is this trouble, it is not getting the better of him; he is managing; he is in good spirits and in a position to take the trouble lightly. He is exhibiting what we might call 'troubles-resistance'. (Jefferson, 1984b, p. 351)

Jefferson's explanations point us to issues relevant for face and positioning in interactions. Laughter constitutes an important mitigation device, but also a tool for positioning oneself as an agent rather than a victim in the face of a trouble and as capable of dealing with it.

If laughing along is not the appropriate response to a troubles telling, what is? Jefferson dedicated another paper to responses to troubles talk, mostly focusing on advice giving (Jefferson & Lee, 1981). In it, the authors develop a very nuanced understanding of advice giving in troubles talk that goes far beyond the gender divide suggested by Tannen (1991).

Jefferson and Lee (1981) found advice being rejected with surprising frequency, as well as advice being accepted "although a recipient has no intention of using them" (Jefferson & Lee, 1981). The authors suggest that this might be due to the location and timing of advice giving in a troubles talk sequence, with advice that is given too early in the sequence being rejected independent of its quality or appropriateness. Advice is usually located near the closing of the troubles talk and so if its appearance seems premature, the troubles teller might reject the closing more than the advice itself. This also suggests however, that there is a sequence of responses that are made during a troubles telling of which one of the final steps can be advice – a notable different reading from Tannen and the papers following her research on gender, which seem to anticipate that only one type of response is given during troubles talk. Jefferson (1988) suggests that an affiliation with the trouble and its teller is also a usual response in the sequence as is some form of exploration of the trouble. At least in the examples given in her publication a gender bias in who gives advice prematurely seems absent.

Before turning to the closing of troubles talk, we need to look at one further observation that Jefferson and Lee make in their study of giving advice that seems especially relevant from a relational viewpoint:

> Upon the offering of advice, an incipient or ongoing Troubles Telling converges with a Service Encounter, with the concomitant shift of relevant categories and activities, and, as well, the concomitant shift of focus, away from the troubles teller and his or her experiences, on the trouble itself, as a 'problem to be solved'. Again, then, the rejection of advice may be accomplice to a rejection of those shifts; an attempt to preserve the interaction's status as a Troubles Telling with its particular categories and activities, and its focus upon a matter to which the Service Encounter is 'essentially indifferent'. (Jefferson & Lee, 1981, p. 416)

This again foregrounds the meaning of individuals and their relationships in troubles talk sequences – the focus is firmly on the individual and their experience with the trouble, not on the trouble itself. This suggests a much narrower definition of troubles talk than is ever explicitly given by Jefferson, as a type of talk (rather than a type of content) which has at its core the wellbeing of an individual and not a topical interest in a trouble.

According to Jefferson, advice appropriately placed occurs just after the most intimate point of the troubles telling, already a premonitory of its end. This end of a troubles talk sequence also marks a "return to a more distant relationship" (Jefferson, 1988, p. 419), which Jefferson found to be interactionally difficult to accomplish. Jefferson found that in fact many troubles talk sequences ended with a close of the conversation altogether, or with a re-start in which interlocutors had to do considerable interactional work in order to change the topic away from troubles talk. Topic changes away from troubles talk were often either other-oriented or focused on new topics that invoke some kind of intimacy, most notably with suggestions of meeting up or spending time with each other. This might be an interesting area to explore in this study, as interlocutors do often not have the option of hanging up but need to continue their meetings and work-related discussions, which might be a difficult shift.

This section has provided only a brief overview of Jefferson's extensive work on troubles talk, foregrounding its relational aspects and glossing over some of the structural details Jefferson reported on. Jefferson's work shows how closely aligned structure and relational aspects are in troubles talk. Turning to the functions of troubles talk next, these relational aspects again feature prominently, but not exclusively.

### 2.5.3 Functions of troubles talk

Troubles talk can be a problematic and precarious type of talk. Given that troubles talk is by definition about some kind of trouble, that is a negative experience or a problematic issue, the act in itself is likely to be face-threatening to all interlocutors involved and potentially diminishes one's own position (Bayraktaroğlu, 1992) fleetingly or even more permanently if not carefully managed. What this careful management consists of exactly, likely depends on the relationship of the interlocutors and on the gravity of the troubles that are being discussed. However, as discussed in the previous section, Jefferson did clearly identify recurring themes that seem at least in part to mitigate the face threat and counter-act the potential weakening in one's own position, including laughter and an ambiguous initial telling, until the listeners indicated an alignment with the trouble.

Given this problematic nature of troubles talk, the question as to why it is engaged in in the first place seems more than warranted. While seeking help and advice might appear as the obvious answer, Jefferson and Lee's (1981) study suggests that advice and with it a focus on the trouble itself and away from the person telling the trouble is only desirable later on in a troubles talk sequence. Other studies also confirm that advice is often neither sought not positively received (Feo & LeCouteur, 2013; Riccioni et al., 2014).

Yet, if finding a solution to one's troubles is not the goal, what is it? Different studies have emphasised very different functions that troubles talk can fulfil including the provision of social support (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2014) or communal coping (Goldsmith, 2004), as well as functions that seem quite unrelated to the troubles itself. Faircloth who conducted an ethnographic study of a community of elderly people at first found that a community was hardly visible and only later realised that:

> When the residents talked of each other, they were talking into reality collective communicated problems of the neighbourhood. Community was blossoming in their talk of troubles. In essence, I began to consider that community was actively constructed through communication between residents. In Shady Grove, this communication was built around and on troubles talk. (Faircloth, 2001, p. 336)

Troubles talk here was an absolutely crucial ingredient distinguishing the members of the community from the world outside, for creating the sense of living in a community and for talking it into being. Faircloth's first missing of the significance of troubles talk in the community he studied seems unsurprising given his later assertion:

> Research on troubles talk has not been connected, in any way, with the issue of community construction. Sociological attention has not specifically focused on troubles as making a constructive contribution to social life. (Faircloth, 2001, p. 337)

A similar finding is mirrored by Kyratzis (2000) who has conducted ethnographic research on a very different demographic: The interactions of 4-year olds in same sex-groups. Troubles talk featured prominently in the girls group (Kyratzis is also adopting Tannen's different cultures assumption) and was found to fulfil a group-affirming function, while at the same time functioning as a device to confer status and power:

> When comembers ratify a particular girl's troubles, this confers status upon her in the friendship group. Nonratifications of one's troubles by other members of girls' friendship group indexes one's low status in the group. (Kyratzis, 2000, p. 294)

Whether adults use troubles talk in a similar vein remains to be seen. However, Jefferson (1980) stated clearly that people do not always align with troubles talk, leading to its non-ratification. Haugh (2016) also reports on disaffiliative responses to troubles talk sequences, yet he did not see status as a reason for this disaffiliation, but found that utterances that too specifically blamed others tended to be disaffiliated with. Mewburn also warns of the negative consequences troubles talk might have including "the marginalisation and othering" (2011, p.330) of people excluded from the so formed groups. As such, while functions overall seem positive the negative aspects that can occur as a result of troubles talk cannot be ignored.

Boxer (1993a) investigated troubles talk from a speech act perspective of indirect complaints. She points to a number of functions of indirect complaints, mainly that of creating solidarity, but also "venting frustrations, checking the validity of a negative evaluation, or seeking agreement" (p.167). Her analysis also indicates that indirect complaints (IC's), and with that troubles talk, can be differentiated according to the focus, which can be the self, others and situations. Depending on the focus and the addressee, functions of troubles talk differ, for instance self-IC's often serve as apologies to strangers but as "fishing for compliments" when used with friends (Boxer, 1993a, p. 172).

Troubles talk was also found to be an important component of identity construction (Haugh, 2016; Mewburn, 2011). In an examination of troubles talk done by PhD candidates during the completion of their PhD's, Mewburn (2011) emphasises the importance troubles talk has in enacting an emerging academic identity as well as in constructing a community among PhD candidates who otherwise might share few things in common. She summarises:

> Troubles talk seems to emerge in boundary spaces where doctoral identity is precarious, but this does not necessarily mean that everything is going to fall apart. Quite to the contrary: troubles talk may do work to keep the PhD candidature assemblage together or even build a community where there was none before. (Mewburn, 2011, p. 330)

At the same time, she also points to ways in which troubles talk gets mitigated in order to achieve its positive effects, emphasising the use of humour: "Troubles that are laughed at become, potentially, troubles that can be endured - even if one loses moral high ground, status

or the appearance of authority in doing so" (Mewburn, 2011, p.326). In the second part of the quote, she also points to the more precarious aspects of troubles talk already mentioned. I will now turn to discussing troubles talk across cultures, though we will encounter this dilemma between community and relationship building and potential status loss throughout the section.

### 2.5.4 Troubles talk across cultures

As stated in the introduction to this section much of the research conducted on troubles talk has been done in English. While these studies have been conducted in different countries (US, Australia and UK), no comparison between troubles talk in these three contexts could be found, nor does the present set of studies allow for any claims about similarities or differences in form or function in the different national contexts and Englishes. To the best of my knowledge only two studies could be found that study troubles talk in more depth in a language other than English (Bayraktaroğlu, 1992; Riccioni et al., 2014), which I will discuss first before turning to cross-cultural studies of troubles talk.

Studying troubles talk in a Turkish context, Bayraktaroğlu (1992) notes a large number of disagreements in response to troubles talk. Following Pomerantz' work on contexts in which disagreements constitute the preferred response rather than dispreferred ones (Pomerantz, 1978; Pomerantz & Heritage, 1984), Bayrakteroğlu concludes that troubles talk constitutes just such a context: Disagreeing with specific troubles tellings is required in order to save the teller's face and to maintain the interactional balance and equal status between the interlocutors, which might otherwise be negatively affected by an unmitigated agreement with the troubles plaguing one person. While she suggests that this might be a phenomenon that can be found in any culture "where 'face' is an important factor in social interactions" (p.319), she suggests that the ways in which these disagreements are done are more narrowly defined by the cultural context of the interaction. When considering Bayrakteroğlu's (1992) considerations of face and interactional balance, it seems important to note that she seems to use a narrower definition of troubles talk than used here, namely where troubles are synonymous with "personal problems" (p. 319), which are considered only one type of troubles interlocutors might talk about in this study. Thus, it remains to be seen whether disagreements are as frequent in interactions outside of Turkey and in types of troubles talk different to the type researched by Bayrakteroğlu.

Riccioni and colleagues (2014) are similarly interested in specific response types to troubles talk (again conceptualised as the sharing of personal problems), namely the giving of advice. They report that in about 70% of cases advice is rejected or ignored and only tends to be accepted where it was specifically solicited by the troubles teller. The authors suggest that this is due to the roles allocated or occupied by the interlocutors and specifically to the epistemic stance claimed. A more knowledgeable position tends to be claimed when giving advice to

another person and this seems to get rejected unless this position was previously allocated by the advice recipient.

A third study (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2014) was conducted on troubles talk in a non-English speaking country, however troubles talk was neither recorded nor investigated in depth; instead, the correlation of marital satisfaction and of doing troubles talk between Japanese couples was tested using a questionnaire. While the authors found that satisfaction levels increased with larger amounts of troubles talk – which bodes well for its importance as relational practice – the results nonetheless have to be taken with caution as many other variables seem not to have been tested (like the overall amount of talk between a couple).

In addition, two studies were conducted featuring a mix of first and second language speakers of English. The first one consists of an attempt at a cross-cultural exploration of troubles talk between French, Korean and US American speakers by investigating the number of hedges and indirect complaints produced by each group in conversations with co-nationals (Ouellette, 2001). While some cross-cultural differences are found, the study design seems problematic, as only one group of each 'culture' consisting of three individuals were recorded. In addition, French and Korean participants also conversed in English with each other and not in their native languages, which further casts doubt on the findings.

Finally, a study by Barraja-Rohan (2003) reported significant challenges for non-native speakers to produce appropriate responses and to manage troubles talk interactions, which led to some troubles tellings remaining rudimentary or being treated as mere "information" instead of a relational and emotional interactive event. Considering the apparently problematic nature of appropriately responding to troubles even among native speakers this does not come as a surprise.

Given the overall scarcity of research on intercultural interactions of this nature, it seems more than important therefore to continue working in this area, especially since much of the literature points to the importance that troubles talk seems to have for relationships, while also seeming to be relatively difficult to manage. Thus, there is the opportunity to further investigate how troubles talk in culturally diverse contexts might be able to facilitate or hinder the emergence of intercultural relationships.

### 2.5.5 Positions, face and interactional equilibrium in troubles talk

In almost all studies, troubles talk is conceptualised as occurring between a teller and a recipient, thus pre-allocating specific relational positions to interlocutors, understood here as relatively fleeting interactional and relational roles. In addition to these two positions, interlocutors can of course take other and more nuanced ones. Riccioni et al. discuss the positions of troubles recipients and for example state:

> He/She can be a container (coinciding with Jefferson's troubles recipient), an advice-giver, an ally, a confider on her/his turn (shifting the focus onto her/his own problems), but also an opponent (sharing critical attitudes). These roles are constructed, defined and negotiated in the

> course of the interaction. The taking on of these roles seems to wield a strong influence over confider's reactions, relational and interactional attitudes and, as a result, over the outcome of the conversation. (Riccioni et al., 2014, p. 54)

Thus, the authors list a number of available positions amongst the constraints of being a recipient. I will discuss the more flexibly available positions shortly, but will first focus further on the teller-recipient roles, as it seems that we might miss important aspects of troubles talk due to the strict adherence to this rather constraining model, whose prevalence is in many ways surprising.

From the review of the literature it seems that these two positions allocate interlocutors to an unequal or unbalanced relationship, with the troubles teller being the one in the weaker position and the troubles recipient having more status allocated to her purely by virtue of currently not having a trouble to share and being the one chosen to hear the trouble. However, even within a teller-recipient model, different scenarios can be envisioned where this allocation of status does not hold. Boxer (1993a) for example discusses *frequent complainers* and highlights that when troubles talk is seen as done too often by the same person or too indiscriminately, it loses its ability to strengthen relationships. By the same vein this might (but does not have to) change the positions allocated in such an exchange.

In addition, some evidence has been provided that a teller-recipient model is altogether too restraining. In a notable departure from this model, Goldsmith's (2004) research on couple's trouble talk found that instead of remaining in teller-recipient roles couples tended to jointly construct troubles narratives, blurring the lines between troubles-teller and troubles-recipient to the degree that both interlocutors alternated between and performed both roles. In these instances, she identified features of the troubles talk that seem noticeably different from the ones discussed so far. Partners made: 1) explicit statements of one's orientation to the problem, 2) used plural, possessive pronouns in referring to a problem/solution, 3) proposed participation in a solution benefitting both partners, 4) alternated in the enactment of problem disclosures and support behaviours. Her research suggests that troubles interlocutors can be in altogether different positions than discussed so far and that the rather strict differentiation in positions we have seen might actually mask some of the intricacies inherent in troubles talk. While her research was conducted on couples, situations in which friends, colleagues, neighbours or mere acquaintances discuss shared troubles can also easily be imagined, thus fundamentally changing the positions occupied by interlocutors and with it the nature and focus of the troubles talk done.

One thing to note is that problems seem to frequently arise in matching the position of the other appropriately in troubles talk resulting in frequent misalignments (Feo & LeCouteur, 2013; Jefferson & Lee, 1981; Riccioni et al., 2014), which seem to negatively affect relational and interactional attitudes (Riccioni et al., 2014). As alluded to above, while there is a variety of positions available there might nonetheless be consequences for doing troubles talk or for doing it about certain troubles and in certain ways. As Mewburn's (2011, p.330) quote above

clarifies, one can lose ones 'moral high ground, status or the appearance of authority' in complaining or doing troubles talk and therefore one has to carefully manage these shifts in status, rights and obligations that can occur during troubles talk. Several of the papers have already pointed to face saving strategies, which fascinatingly seem to often consist of behaviours that constitute dispreferred responses in other contexts, such as not laughing along, rejecting advice or disagreeing with the troubles.

### 2.5.6 Troubles talk in the workplace

Only limited attention has been given to the topic of troubles talk in the workplace (Alicke et al., 1992; Heck, 2001; Kowalski, 1996), despite its apparent ubiquity (Heck, 2001). Only a small number of studies could be found that investigate phenomena such as "venting", "griping", "whingeing" or "non-instrumental complaining" in the workplace. This research seems mostly separate from the studies discussed above as none of the articles substantially draw on any aspect of the troubles talk literature despite discussing very similar – if sometimes slightly differently defined – phenomena. As there is no consistent terminology in the papers, I will continue to use the term troubles talk here.

Strikingly, the research found vastly differently assessments of the benefits and drawbacks of troubles talk in workplaces, with case studies and ethnographic studies tending to report mostly positive outcomes of troubles talk, while more quantitative studies emphasise negative outcomes. In an investigation of interactions in diverse workplaces in Australia, Clyne (1994) recorded a significant number of whinges in his data. He explains: "Whinge is an Australian-English word for a long or repeated expression of discontent not necessarily intended to change or improve the unsatisfactory situation. Whinges are a regular feature of general and workplace conversation in Australia" (p.49). Despite the diversity of employees and workplaces represented in the study Clyne noted that "there is not much cultural variation in the whinges" (1994, p. 60), though it should be noted that the overall number of participants in the study per country of origin represented is not large enough to generalise this finding too broadly.

Nonetheless, whinges were not found equally in all workplaces and Clyne noted:

> They occur particularly in workplaces where there is time and scope for them, social distance between a small number of colleagues is minimal. Whingeing tends to be a solidarity promoting speech activity, through repetition, echo, or parallel discourse. (Clyne, 1994, p. 62f)

Whether social distance is further diminished by the whinges or is a necessary antecedent of them is not further discussed but seems to be at least a possibility. Daly et al. (2004) report on whinges in a New Zealand workplace and, in addition to the function of creating solidarity, describe the functions as: "off-loading negative feelings in a safe environment, and since they typically elicit sympathy, they function to build rapport with others" (p.953).

The promotion of solidarity and of off-loading negative feelings was also found as one benefit in an ethnographic study of *venting* between residential assistants (Burchard, 2001). He summarises:

> RAs [residential assistants] reported that they vented for a myriad of reasons, all of which fell under the pedestal phrase, "talking helps." Specifically, they reported venting's purposes were (1) Externalizing; "To Get it Out There," (2) Understanding; "To Get a Grasp of Things," (3) Intrapersonal Functions; "To Feel Better," and (4) Interpersonal Functions; "To Bring Us Together." (Burchard, 2001, p. 24)

He also noted that residential assistants in the study were quite careful in choosing with whom they vented. The most important quality they seemed to look for in an interlocutor were the ability to understand which Burchard (2001) suggests was more likely with interlocutors who were perceived as *close* and as *similar* to the person wanting to share a trouble. Similar to Jefferson's conceptualisation of troubles talk, Burchard stated that venting is talk that "focuses on creating, understanding, and framing" (Burchard, 2001, p. 8) a problem but not on finding a solution, though solution-oriented talk might follow venting.

In a case study of a cross-boundary team in palliative care, Pouthier (2017) reports on the important relational functions of griping and joking in a team that spent little time with each other and had to work across strong hierarchical differences (e.g. doctors and nurses). In the fairly short team meetings that were frequently affected by staffing-changes, both griping and humour rituals were very noticeable due to their dominant key. She concludes that griping-cycles strengthened a sense of *we-ness* in the team and of sharing similar frustrations while at the same time re-enforcing the team's values of what good practices were. Interestingly, the humorous exchanges she reports on still seem to fall within the category of troubles talk. These jocular exchanges about difficult clients and their families, outside colleagues or working conditions, seem to have further aided in the creation of a community but, unlike the griping rituals described before, led to a more positive emotional mood in the team that led to team members describing meetings in which humour occurred as good team meetings. While all the instances cited seem to fall within troubles talk we do not know whether other types of humour occurred and if they had the same effects or whether this was a specific result of *troubles humour*.

None of the three studies report any negative aspects of venting or whingeing in the workplace, in stark contrast to the organisational behavioural and psychological studies which tended to regard this type of communicative activity as entirely negative and the role of research as having to find ways to minimise it (e.g. Heck, 2001).

In a study of workplace teams, complaining, classified as socio-emotionally negative, was seen to result in more complaining, thus leading to negative emotional contagion or in other words negative group mood, which was regarded as negatively impacting the teams' performance (Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009). How team members end troubles talk to revert to more productive talk might therefore be an important aspect of reaping the potential positive benefits of

troubles talk, which makes an exploration of the strategies used to end troubles talk a potentially important contribution.

In a doctoral dissertation on workplace whining, Heck (2001) describes even non-instrumental complaints as "aversive and detrimental" (p.6) in nature and tests whether low self-esteem is a causal antecedent of increased whining in the workplaces. She draws on a number of psychological insights in her study, which I will very briefly outline here.

Psychological research has mostly focused on the antecedents and the outcomes of non-instrumental complaining. Alicke et al. (1992) for example report their participants' reasons for complaining as: a) emotional release from frustration, b) reclaiming a measure of control, c) soliciting sympathy and understanding and d) obtaining value consensus (p. 287) and the goals of non-instrumental complaining as: a) causing direct action (attempt to change attitude, personality or behaviour of another person); b) causing indirect action (seek information, coordinate behaviour); c) emotional (vent frustration, get attention or sympathy); d) avoid blame (shift blame or make excuse) (p. 291).
Kowalski (1996) developed a theory of complaining, which suggests that complaints are uttered when either the perceived discontent is high and/or the utility of complaining is perceived to be high. She also lists functions of complaining as: catharsis, impression management, obtaining social comparison information and calling for accounts, the latter, however, seems mostly relevant to direct complaints. Kowalski (1996) also warns of the unintended side effects of complaining, suggesting that verbalised complaints even about issues not experienced as dissatisfying might be internalised. Complaints are thus seen to be contagious, bringing the mood down or lowering other people's dissatisfaction thresholds, leading them to become more prone to evaluate their surroundings negatively.

It thus seems that while positive effects, especially regarding relationships and dealing with frustrations are reported, problems can nonetheless also arise including negative mood and the likelihood of negative evaluations and increased dissatisfaction.

### 2.5.7 Troubles talk: definitions, topics and types

While I have not specifically focused on the definitions of troubles talk used in research so far, it has likely become clear that troubles talk definitions vary across authors, with some using a more narrowly defined concept, like 'troubles talk as sharing of personal problems' (Bayrakteroğlu, 1991; Riccioni, 2014), while other definitions seemed a lot looser such as: "the expression of dissatisfaction or discontent" (Haugh, 2016, p.729) or emphasised a specific aspect such as the usage of IC's (Boxer, 1993a). In many studies, no explicit definition is given, or it seems rather circular using the term *troubles* to define troubles talk.

The definition of troubles talk that I have proposed is: Engaging in talk about negative issues or experiences that oneself or others have encountered, which are not blamed or attributed to the person/people addressed and can range from very severe issues to only mildly

inconvenient or completely other-focused incidents. This definition clearly builds on the work done in the field, especially Boxer's (1993) contribution regarding the absence of direct complaints and other-orientedness. Despite this definition being fairly broad, I maintain Jefferson's assertion that the focus in troubles talk tends to be on the people involved in the trouble, more than on the trouble itself and a screening of the data suggests that this even holds where troubles talk is done over "others".

Boxer's differentiation of IC's in troubles talk into *self*, *other* and *situational* also seems to provide a frame for different types of troubles talk that interlocutors might discuss. In the same vein, severity of the trouble and the degree to which it affects the people engaged in the troubles talk are likely to impact how the troubles are told and received, which might provide a basis for identifying different types of troubles talk in the data collected here.

Topic-wise, this suggests that troubles talk can include both talk about the weather as well as about the recent diagnosis of cancer. This wide spread has already been indicated repeatedly in the literature. Jefferson's data (1980, 1984a, 1984b, 1988, with Lee, 1981), for example includes conversations about a house burning down over night as well as about problematic toenails and bad roads. How problematic an issue is perceived to be will, however, depend on the perception of the interlocutors and it also seems to be an issue open to negotiation and construction accomplished during the troubles talk.

### 2.5.8 Part 2: Conclusion and research gap

In this literature review, I have aimed at synthesising the findings of what turned out to be a fairly eclectic field of research. Troubles talk researchers do not seem to follow a common agenda or even focus on similar issues. This means, however, that the themes that recurrently appear in the literature – most notably the challenges posed for positioning and alignment of interlocutors and the positive functions of troubles talk for relationships – need to be taken all the more seriously. Troubles talk seems to be often a crucial component of establishing solidarity and building identities and communities, as well as strengthening relationships between interlocutors. This certainly warrants further research, especially in contexts where relating has appeared more challenging, such as in intercultural teams.

In light of this review, the omission of three issues seems particularly striking, which I will outline hereafter in more depth: Firstly, from a contextual point of view little attention has been paid to troubles talk among colleagues or team mates as well as to troubles talk across cultures; secondly, from a structural point of view there seems to be an overwhelming focus on troubles talk between dyads; and thirdly from a methodological point of view there seems to be a lack of longitudinal investigations.

The setting in which troubles talk gets done is often only mentioned in passing and tends not to be explored in depth, although the studies conducted on troubles talk in formal settings are a notable exception (as are Boxer, 1993a; Faircloth, 2001). Systematic explorations of troubles

talk in specific contexts seem particularly lacking. The studies cited regarding troubles talk in workplaces do not draw on the previous work done on troubles talk and thus a more integrated approach might produce more nuanced findings.

Mewburn, whose research focuses on troubles talk amongst PhD students and whose setting seems most related to the setting under study here, notes that troubles talk is "such a routine part of everyday life that it attracts little scholarly attention" (2011, p.321). This might be one of the reasons such studies are absent, in addition to the difficulties one might encounter in collecting such data. Nonetheless, such routine talk seems the bread and butter of our field, which makes further investigations into troubles talk, especially in more professional settings all the more relevant.

The clear focus on troubles talk done between dyads instead of groups is at some level not too surprising, as it mirrors a general focus on dyadic interactions within pragmatics (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004). In fact, only four papers feature troubles talk done in groups (Haugh, 2016; Kyratzis, 2000; Pouthier, 2017; Pritchard, 1993). However, troubles talk seems likely to occur in many settings where more than two interlocutors interact, such as family dinners, meeting of friends or breaks amongst colleagues. This likely changes and complicates the already rather delicate structure of troubles talk (Jefferson, 1988), in addition to the complication it likely adds to positionings, face and relationships.

Finally, no longitudinal study has been undertaken (although Faircloth's, 2001 study features longitudinal observations). Thus, whether positive outcomes of troubles talk are short or long lived or whether a recurrently high amount of troubles talk is necessary to maintain for example a sense of community seems unclear (although there are many indications that this is the case). Troubles talk might also change across time in groups and, for example, become less benign once it is established as a legitimate form of talk. Yet, at this point these are all speculations that cannot be substantiated with research as of now.

## 2.6 Research Questions

This study addressed these gaps by conducting an in-depth longitudinal case study into an intercultural team that frequently engages in troubles talk during their work meetings. The aim of this thesis is thus twofold:

1) To provide a thick description of an everyday talk phenomenon in the particular context of a diverse team of MBA students. In order to address this, the following research questions will be addressed:
    a. What troubles do team members talk about? When do they talk about them?
    b. How is troubles talk conducted? Are there specific speech acts or recurring interactional moves that characterise troubles talk and differentiate it from other types of talk?
    c. What functions does troubles talk fulfil in the team and how is troubles talk managed?
2) The second aim is to better understand how members of a diverse team build relationships around having to work together. My initial analysis suggested that troubles talk plays a crucial role for relationships and rapport management and thus the following questions will be investigated:
    a. How is rapport managed in troubles talk?
    b. Which relational functions does troubles talk fulfil in the team studied here?
    c. Which relational strategies are used in troubles talk? How do they help in creating and nurturing good relationships?

I will now turn to providing details on the study and the methodology used to address these questions.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter I will outline the methodological considerations that have gone into choosing the research design used in this study (a single case), as well as describe the case in more depth and outline data collection procedures. Finally, I will give an account of how the data was processed and analysed.

Throughout the chapter, I will narrate the research design according to the decisions made at specific points in time. Many of these did not include a consideration of my eventual focus on troubles talk but on the idea of focusing on relationships in teams as constructed more broadly in different types of talk. At the same time my research was designed to be exploratory and was open to narrowing down its focus based on the data I would gather. The eventual focus on troubles talk as a topic was thus very much an outcome of the frequency with which it appeared in the initially transcribed and analysed data and the importance it seemed to have for relating. Before providing more insights on the case, however, I will briefly outline the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of this research project.

## 3.1 Theoretical Perspectives

My philosophical stance is a pragmatic one. Pragmatism originates in the writings of the American philosopher Peirce and was later extended by a range of other philosophers (Biesta, 2010). Peirce's ideas began with a clear rejection of the Cartesian thought systems: This included the rejection of the dualism of mind and outer world; doubt, as the starting point in finding truths; and the idea that direct and immediate knowledge of objects can be held without being shaped by systems of languages and signs (Biesta, 2010). While pragmatism includes a very diverse set of assumptions and is by no means a coherent whole, this critique of Cartesian philosophy is common to all major pragmatists (Maxcy, 2003).

Considering the broad scope of pragmatist assumptions, it seems important to identify which specific line of pragmatism one is referring to, which for me are the works and ideas of John Dewey. Dewey rejected an objective reality but assumed that any knowledge is inferred from interactions and experiences, which are then processed by thought and analysis (Biesta, 2010). Knowledge in itself is subjective, nonetheless; being members of groups forces us to develop at least a somewhat shared view on the world. Biesta (2010, p.112) states that "through interaction, cooperation, coordination, and communication, we construct an *intersubjective* world out of our individual, subjective worlds.", and as such achieve a (somewhat) shared reality. Knowing is therefore a "result of our actions" which means that "knowledge can provide us only with information about possible connections between actions and consequences, not with once-and-for-all-truths about a world independent from our lived lives" Biesta (2010, p.96). Humans can come closer to the truth by testing the possible connections they have identified – not by simple trial and error, but by an informed analytic

approach – the term used here in pragmatism is usually that of an inquiry. However, since knowledge is inferred from personal experiences of interactions, people can hold no real objective truths about the world.

While pragmatism is often cited in conjunction with mixed-method research designs (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010), there is nothing inherent in pragmatism requiring such methodological choices. The crucial starting point for any methodological choice within pragmatism is not philosophical but lies within the questions asked. Dewey himself pointed to an informed analytic approach, which is very different from the "anything goes" accusation, that is frequently levelled against pragmatism (Biesta, 2010). What is important is to find the approach best suited to answer the question one is interested in (Creswell, 2014). This permits a breadth of methods: While the rejection of an objective truth and the foregrounding of personal experiences might make a qualitative approach seem the most likely, the emphasis on shared experiences and on a shared reality also allows quantitative research. This does not mean that methods can be used and combined at a whim; on the contrary, they need to be carefully designed to support and extend each other (Morgan, 2014).

The questions that this study seeks to investigate concern the construction and management of relationships around working together over a longer period of time. Since I am interested in how exactly team members manage rapport and relations in interactions a qualitative approach with a focus on recorded naturally occurring speech ideally over a longer period of time seemed to be the best way of investigating the topic. At the same time other supplementary data seemed likely to be important in order to enrich the analysis. These ideally included observations in order to gain a good understanding of the context in which these interactions took place and interviews, in order to elicit interlocutor's narratives about the team meetings held, the relationships constructed and more contextual information such as their attitudes to teamwork, their perceptions of the context more generally

The research method best suited to allow a longitudinal investigation, combines different data sources and also allows for flexibility in approach and analysis is a case study approach. I will outline the reasons for this judgement in more detail in the next section.

## 3.2 Research Design

In order to address my research focus it seemed important to choose a research design that would be able to accommodate several considerations relevant to the research focus. The study design would need to a) allow for a combination of different data sets to generate insights, b) be unfolding and emerging and thus could flexibly be adapted to the data I was collecting (Punch, 2006), c) focus on exploring and explaining new or rarely studied areas of interest (Creswell, 2012), but also (d) "[benefit] from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (Yin, 2014, p.16), e) allow for a longitudinal examination. All these are true for a case study design.

A case study also allows me to address the several shortcomings outlined in the literature review as well as include some of the newer propositions, such as attention to the context and the history and the relational web around the relationships under study. While interpersonal pragmatics has generated a number of theoretical propositions these need to be tested and underpinned with more empirical research, which can be done well as part of a case study. In addition, case study research can not only explore additional variables but also generate new theoretical propositions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gerring, 2007), in case the previously developed theoretical propositions are unable to explain the phenomena found.

With regards to the teamwork literature, hardly any research has been done from a qualitative perspective, focusing on interactional phenomena and investigating these beneath group level constructs, despite this being repeatedly called for by researchers in the field (e.g. Humphrey & Aime, 2014; Leenders et al., 2016), shortcomings which again can well be addressed by a case study design.

Conducting an in-depth longitudinal study of teamwork interactions seemed likely to generate a large data set. I therefore chose to begin my data collection with a single case study to then determine the amount and depth of data this yielded. This was mostly dependent on the amount of access the chosen team would permit me.

In the end, I was able to obtain exactly the type of data I considered ideal for my research design. The team permitted me access across the whole 8 months, including giving me interviews at the beginning and at the end of the teamwork. I therefore chose not to investigate any further cases as I managed to collect a rich set of data within this one case.

While a multiple case study undoubtedly would have added to the robustness of the research, it would have done so at the cost of depth, especially since I wanted to analyse the interactions qualitatively and in-depth. Besides, even a single case can provide good insights into a new phenomenon (Gerrick, 2007). Shulman (1986) asserts: "A case, properly understood, is not simply the report of an event or incident. To call something a case is to make a theoretical claim – to argue that it is a "case of something", or to argue that it is an instance of a larger class" (p. 11). Yet this is not to say that any case can be seen as reproducible or even similar. Blommaert and Jie (2010) adamantly argue for the uniqueness of each case, no matter how similar they appear to be.

Both the claim to uniqueness and being an instance of a larger class seem to be true for the teamwork chosen here. Team members face challenges that are likely to surface in other teams as well – working together with people unfamiliar to themselves, with possibly different working styles and different ideas, different interactional styles, which will entail negotiations that involve face, individual and group goals. An active management of relationships and task achievement thus seem likely to surface in almost all teams. In this sense, it is very much a "case of something" in Shulman's (1986) terms. The nature of the tasks and the individual ways chosen to address and solve these challenges, however, can be unique to groups and

individuals, confirming Blommaert and Jie's (2010) assertion that no two phenomena are exactly alike.

## 3.3 The Case

Locating an adequate case proved to be challenging, as the ideal case would consist of an intercultural team in a workplace that was just about to be assembled and did not know each other previously, so that I would be able to study their relational management from the inception. They would ideally also be working together for a longer period of time and allow me access basically before even meeting for the first time, which seemed difficult to find. Through contacts, however, I was made aware of an MBA programme at a UK university that fitted these requirements perfectly, as teams were actually assembled by course administrators prior to the start of the course and they continuously worked together on different projects until the end of the course. Such a case also had two major advantages beyond the "ideal" team I was picturing: Firstly, I would not only be able to witness the inception of the teamwork and the initial relating but, all things being well, also be able to observe it till its end, thus witness the *entirety* of it which would provide me with a much fuller picture and a richer data set. Secondly, the team was not only going to work on one project for the entire time but was going to complete four separate projects. Being able to observe the same team doing different projects was intriguing as these could be treated as "mini-cases" within a larger case, which raises the robustness of the research design (Eisenhardt, 1989) and was likely to again provide a richer picture, as team dynamics could be traced and compared across projects. In regard to troubles talk, for example, I can now trace that it did indeed occur across all projects and stages within the project and was not due to a specific task being particularly challenging or annoying.

In addition, the overall course included a module on teamwork and leadership which emphasised its importance by providing team building workshops accompanied by a facilitator in the beginning, thus offering an interesting setting for the study. The overall case can thus be depicted as shown in Figure 3.1.

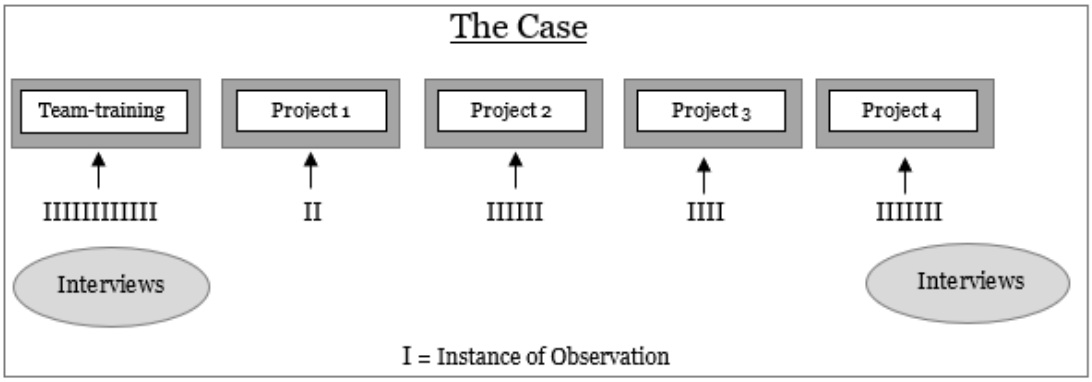


Figure 3.1 Depiction of the case

The team conducted four projects overall in addition to the teambuilding workshops, which were also recorded, leading to five different data sets within the case. Each data set consists of a number of instances that were recorded and also observed as indicated by the "I" in Figure 3.1. In addition, I collected participant interviews, which form yet another data set. While the graphic suggests very clear boundaries between the projects, this was not always the case and while projects tended to be given at different points in time, some overlap occurred between projects two and three. This led to instances where both projects were treated within the same meeting.

The drawback to this case was that team members were not actually located in a workplace but in a university, though it later became clear that teams actually did the majority of projects as consultancy teams for real clients. The team also consisted of mature students with a minimum of 5 years work experience – thus in many ways the team resembles a workplace team more than a student team.

### 3.3.1 Negotiating access

Contact was thus made with the course coordinators and the module convenors of the teamwork module. After several conversations, I was given access to attend the first day the new MBA students were welcomed to the course, which occurred on a Sunday evening. After a joint welcome, students were introduced to their teams and team facilitators and had a joint getting to know each other session. During the joint welcome the module convenors introduced me as a researcher studying teamwork and looking for participants. I was then invited to pitch my project to all teams where all members were present in their get-to-know sessions right after the welcome, where I also answered any questions arising and provided them with participant information sheets (Appendix 2). I outlined the research topic as "interactions in team meetings" but did not go into depths about my interest in relationship management. Before leaving the room, I asked the teams to decide whether they wanted to participate (ideally by anonymous vote to avoid peer-pressure) and to communicate their decision to their facilitators when they were ready. Of the three teams whose members were fully present two teams decided they would like to participate, while one team declined. Since it would be impossible for me to observe and record two teams, I chose the team whose facilitator I knew already and who had been very supportive of my research, as the teams were otherwise of the same composition and background.

I started data collection the next day, the first proper day of class, after the chosen team had another chance to raise questions and to re-think their decision after sleeping on it. Team members signed consent forms to be observed, and audio and video recorded (Appendix 3) and I assured them that they could withdraw from the research at any time and were also free to choose not to have me attend all their meetings. We agreed that I would initially only observe and record the teamwork and training pertaining to their teamwork module and left it open to extending this arrangement to their other projects.

As such, consent was an ongoing negotiation (T. Miller & Bell, 2012) and the participants had the choice to restrict access, which in a sense would have been easier for them this way and would have resulted in less awkward conversations, than for example in case of a later withdrawal. I felt that leaving the choice continuously with them was the best approach as I was very aware that obtaining their MBA degree was a very crucial time for them and I wanted to make sure that my research did not affect their work and learning experiences and the marks they received on the course.

However, as we gradually developed more rapport, team members invited me more and more to their meetings. As they often had spontaneous meetings in between modules, I negotiated with them that I would give my voice recorder to one team member who then recorded these meetings and passed the recordings on to me. This means that eventually I managed to get a good number of recordings of meetings and of observations spanning the entire life-cycle of the team. In addition, team members were willing to participate in interviews at the beginning and at the end of the teamwork. I thus managed to collect exactly the type of data I had wanted within this one case. Given the large data set, it did not seem feasible to collect and also analyse a matching data set as part of the research project, and so the result was the single case study reported on here.

### 3.3.2 The participants

The team was assembled by their course administrators with the explicit objective to represent diversity (in terms of professional backgrounds, age, gender, languages and nationalities). That this was the basis on which the teams were created was quite obvious to the participants who also commented and joked about it. Interculturality was thus salient to the participants from the very beginning and they often joked about perceived and real differences attributed to culture or professional backgrounds. In many ways they also considered themselves an intercultural team, thus the label is not simply assigned by the analyst.

The team consisted of 6 members. Table 3.1 provides an overview of participant names (pseudonyms) and provides some background information.

Table 3.1 Overview of participants

| Name | Age | Gender | Nationality | Professional Background |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Akshya** | 28 | Female | Indian | Team leader in marketing office |
| **Alden** | 29 | Male | Chinese | Accountant, previously head of department in large accountancy firm |
| **Bev** | 25 | Female | Nigerian | Executive manager in oil & gas company |
| **Bruno** | 39 | Male | German/Italian | Sales manager, working from his home office |
| **David** | 27 | Male | Britain | Team leader in large oil and gas company |
| **Jay** | 25 | Male | Indian | Consultant for data solutions in large consultancy firm |

### 3.3.3 The teamwork

As outlined above, the team carried out different projects and team trainings and I will unpack more what is meant by this here. As part of the MBA, team members undertook a number of different modules that required them to do teamwork. For each core module that had a teamwork component, they were required to undertake it in the previously allocated team, which led to them engaging in four projects together across the course. In addition, they had a module specifically focused on teamwork and leadership that consisted of four two- and three-day workshops. These workshops consisted of a range of different activities. The initial workshop consisted mostly of team building, including team building games, reflections, getting-to know each other sessions etc., while later workshops focused more on leadership and communication (i.e. giving feedback or negotiating), though the three first workshops included reflections on the teamwork progress and process, which I was permitted to record. These workshops, including all tasks and reflections, were always accompanied by a facilitator who observed tasks and gave teams points for reflections.

The four projects were done by the team autonomously and thus were not accompanied by a facilitator. Instead teams were urged to organise themselves. This team therefore chose a *taskmaster* (their words) at the beginning of each new project to take responsibility and oversee the progress. Project 1, 2 and 4 were conducted for external clients with whom the team worked and to whom results (usually a presentation and a report) had to be passed on in addition to the requirements of the assessments given to them by the module leader. Teamwork was mostly organised around team meetings, in between which team members worked by themselves or in pairs on specific aspects of the task. Thus while the work-aspect of their teamwork included more than just the team meetings, these were the only part that could feasibly be recorded. In any case, the team meetings are also of more interest as this was where the relational management occurred within the team as a whole.

For these team meetings the team were allocated their own room, featuring a round table with 6 chairs and a computer and a large screen on one wall of the room, with a keyboard and mouse on the table connected to the computer. Team members thus often sat around the table with a free space in front of the screen. In each meeting one team member would sit in front of the keyboard and mouse and be the one to note down things, search for information or enter details on slides/their reports, which were then visible to all on the big screen. Their team room was located close to the MBA common room. The common room featured a free to use coffee machine, and fruit and muffins were delivered to it in the morning and in the afternoon. Especially longer team meetings were thus regularly interrupted to get more coffee and/or food, which sometimes led to breaks in which the team would eat together before continuing to work, providing them with opportunities for off-topic talk. Team members did not have fixed seats and sat in different locations in different meetings and also moved around and moved the chairs as needed. Figure 3.2 thus just gives a broad overview of the room arrangement in which almost all of the data was recorded.

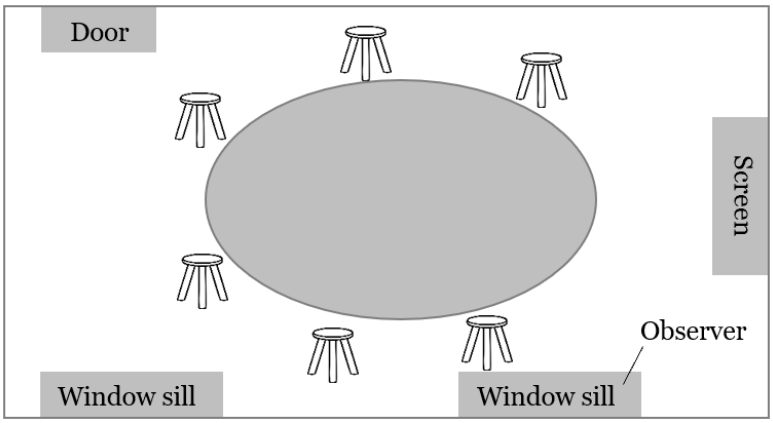


Figure 3.2 Team room

Team members also used their room in between classes to sit and work, as it was mostly kept free for them, thus interactions outside of team meetings regularly took place, usually with not all team members present. Team members also of course regularly saw each other as they attended all core modules together. How much time they chose to spend with each other in these settings outside team meetings depends however on the specific relationships they had built.

## 3.4 Data Collection

In this section I will explain my data collection process and the ethical concerns that accompanied it. In this I will also address my role as researcher especially in regards to being an interviewer and being an observer.

Approval for this study was obtained with the University's ethics committee. As already stated, access was negotiated gradually to ensure that my presence would not disrupt participants' education. This did not in fact seem to be the case from what I could observe and no concerns were ever raised by participants. Their facilitator commented to me that he thought "they were forgetting about my presence in a really good way when working". I tried my best to also reciprocate, instead of just taking the data and leaving. This included giving feedback on their individual communication in the team after the teamwork was over, feedback on their presentations during various presentation practices, baking cakes for their meeting breaks and some support with written English for the less proficient team members.

I will discuss more ethical issues and my role as researcher in the next sections where I will outline the data collection procedures for the interviews and recordings in greater depth.

### 3.4.1 Interviews

I collected two rounds of interviews. The first round occurred three weeks into the teamwork, while the second round occurred roughly three weeks after the end. In both rounds the interviews occurred within 10 days of each other. The interviews were semi-structured,

following a topic guide (Copland & Creese, 2014) and the timings were set so that I could discuss with team members their initial expectations and impressions as well as their assessments after the work and the collaboration was completed. The interviews were both a data collection tool for me, but also a way of getting to know my participants better and offer them the chance to raise concerns or questions about my research one-on-one as otherwise I saw them mostly in the team.

In terms of the data collection and my treatment of the interviews, I understand interviews to give insights into participant perspectives that an analyst otherwise might not have access to. At the same time they do not provide ultimate explanations for the phenomena under investigation (Silverman, 2006). Considering the philosophical assumptions underpinning my research outlined in section 3.1 several implications for the treatment of interviews arise. Within pragmatism an individuals' accounts and insights are always treated as subjectively derived from experiences, which nonetheless can potentially represent an objective reality to that person, especially when it is validated by others expressing similar views (Biesta, 2010). This places a pragmatic view on interviews in close proximity to the constructivist paradigm (Silverman, 2006). Interviews are thus treated as co-constructed (Mann, 2011) and subjective, but they are nonetheless seen to shed some light into participants' subjective realities that go beyond the immediate context of the interview. Constructivist approaches to interviewing emphasise that what is being told by interviewees cannot be separated from how it is told and that these two issues have to be analysed together (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). Interviews thus do not necessarily shed light on facts but constitute "displays of perspectives and moral forms which draw upon available cultural resources" (Silverman, 2014, p.197). In these, interviewees "use cultural stories as resources to tell the stories they want to tell" (Silverman, 2014 p.191). With regards to the study here interviews can thus be used to understand how team members position themselves vis-à-vis the team and their fellow members and towards teamwork more broadly and how they narrate and create sense and identities for themselves and others with regards to particular incidents.

At the same time these stories are narrated with and towards a particular interviewer (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). While Mann (2011) emphasises that interviewees salient identity categories should be clarified, I believe this is at least as important for the interviewer: The setting and the initial introductions of the interviewer as a "teamwork analyst and researcher" inevitably positioned the interviewer as the expert whom team members assumed to have more knowledge of teamwork or as observing things team members themselves might not be noticing. The interviews thus contain a lot of identity work in which interviewees positioned themselves as good team members while at the same time also as aware of issues and problems regarding the interactional and relational dynamics in the team.

#### 3.4.1.1 Conducting the interviews

I tried to counteract this inevitable power imbalance (Copland & Creese, 2015) as much as possible by creating a relaxed environment in the interviews by positioning myself as learning

from the participants. Due to time constraints on the participants' side as well as spatial constraints, the interviews had to be conducted at different sites – however in all of them I strived for a relaxed and casual atmosphere. The sites included a cafe, the team's own syndicate room and individual study rooms on their campus. I invited participants for a coffee to contribute to the more relaxed atmosphere. I also emphasised that it was an opportunity to chat so that I could understand their experience better but also for them to raise questions about my research. The first interview aimed at getting to know the participants and their backgrounds as well as their attitudes and feelings about the time ahead and the experiences they have previously had with teamwork, which seemed relevant when taking a view of historicity in interactions and the interview thus followed a previously developed topic guide (see Appendix 4) (Copland & Creese, 2015). The topic guide allowed for the interviews to be slightly less structured than a traditional semi-structured interview and it provided more flexibility in the interaction than asking pre-formulated questions would have allowed (Copland & Creese, 2015).

For the second interview a similar guide was developed (see Appendix 5); however, topics and questions tailored to each participant were added based on observations or comments made by the interviewee previously. The topics shared across all interviews centred around a review of the teamwork as a whole and the different projects they had done and around specific strategies they had used to deal with the issues they had previously raised as problematic. In both interviews, I started by asking grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) that were then followed up on and gradually zoomed in to more specific issues. The interviews lasted for around an hour, with the shortest one lasting 45 minutes and the longest one lasting 1:45h. After the final interview, feedback was given to the participants on their interactions throughout the teamwork, which I had prepared in advance.

Since one reason for doing the interviews was to get to know my participants better and to give them the chance to raise concerns or ask questions about my research it was important that I conducted the interviews myself. This however meant that the interviews could not be conducted in the first language of all team members, which may well have affected the interviews. Interviews were thus in all cases conducted in English. While one of the team members is German/Italian and we could have conducted the interview in German, Bruno opted for English, suggesting that German was also not really his first language either, although he was more fluent in German than in English. Nonetheless, during the interview we occasionally switched to German for some parts. Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004) emphasise the need to "align language considerations with contextual conditions". Since it seemed that participants took pride in their English skills and had purposefully decided to relocate to the UK and to undertake an English programme, using English in the interviews seemed like the most natural option. In addition, while only Bev and David were English L1 speakers, Jay and Akshya both called English their "native language" in addition to their first language Kannada and thus would have chosen English for the interview. This would have left the two least fluent participants Bruno and Alden to undertake the interview in their first

language and this would have likely been perceived as a face threat and threatened our rapport, which I believe is also one of the reasons why Bruno opted for an interview in English. It should be noted that (differences in) language proficiency overall were a salient and sometimes contentious issue in the team, as we have shown elsewhere (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, under review).

Throughout the interviews and in fact the whole process of collecting data, I aimed to establish rapport and give participants enough space to voice their thoughts (Silvermann, 2006). While rapport was important in all aspects of my research and in large parts allowed me to conduct it in the first place, I am aware that this is not without its criticisms especially from an ethical viewpoint (Duncombe & Jessop, 2012), which is something I grappled with throughout the research.

One ethical concern that arose for me after the first round of interviews was to what extent the fact that I engaged the team members in sense-making activities while the teamwork was ongoing impacted on their perceptions and behaviours. This was particularly pertinent as participants seemed to much more readily identify and discuss problems or difficult situations than positive issues, which I interpret as the interview data having a potential negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Since I ascribe to the assumption that talk creates social reality, this became an ethical concern for me. I questioned whether the fact that I "forced" participants to talk about their – as it turned out – often negatively evaluated experiences that were often in surprising contrast to my observations, this may have foregrounded these negative issues in their minds more than they were before the interviews. Interestingly, throughout the interviews and conversations in and around team meetings it became evident that all of them engaged on a very very frequent basis in sense-making activities about the team with outsiders (i.e. non-team members). These outsiders were often their spouse, flatmate or other course mates. My "forcing" them to engage in this activity, might therefore not have stood out to them in particular, which is not to say that all these sense-making activities were of no consequence overall. Interestingly, though, it seems that there is something about teamwork that seems to make people want to talk about it. Team members reported a similar behaviour from the rest of their cohort, with which they also frequently discussed team work and team behaviours.

For this particular study I have used the interviews mostly as auxiliary data that supports and enriches my observations and the interaction analysis in order to understand participant perspectives and experiences in the team better. In parts this is to do with the interactional data itself being very rich, but also with the research focus on troubles talk which was not an explicit topic in the interviews since at the time I had not identified that focus. Thus, while the interviews touch on a range of relational issues more broadly that are of interest to the study, they do not touch on troubles talk specifically.

### 3.4.2 Observations and recordings

As outlined above, in addition to the interviews, I have observed a large number of team interactions and recorded them with an audio recorder (and initially also with a videorecorder). Some team meetings were also recorded by the participants themselves and were not observed by me. The audio recordings form the most important part of my data.

My research design required my observations to be as non-participatory as possible, as I wanted to disrupt team dynamics as little as possible. As hinted at before, this was not always possible for ethical reasons. Participants also sometimes asked for my opinion. In addition, it was important for me to establish rapport with my participants and give something back to them – which inevitably means that I changed the field with my presence and behaviour. Even if I had only been "a fly on the wall" the fact that interactions were observed is likely to have had an impact on those interactions. Nonetheless, after a while participants seemed to treat me as part of their team in the breaks, while during the meetings I had the impression that they regularly forgot I was present. One reason for that might have been my location in the room: during the observations I usually chose not to sit at the table with the team but on the window sill, which was a little bit below the level of the chairs. This means that while I was able to see everything, I was also at least partially hidden from view (see Figure 3.2). Similarly, the recording device(s) seemed forgotten on a regular basis. The small audio recorder that I placed in the middle of the table at the beginning of the meeting was propelled several times onto the floor without anybody noticing due to a frenzy of activity in games during the team workshops and in normal team meetings it was regularly covered with paper or pushed to the side, without participants noticing. Other team meeting researchers reported similar occurrences (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012). While this affected some of the recording quality, I also had a second recorder with me (as opposed to on the table) that was able to capture most of the interactions. However, especially during the workshops team tasks often included very fast-paced activities and a lot of movement, so recordings here are not always clear. In this study I mostly draw on the later project-team meetings for which this was less of a problem.

Turning back to the why of observations, it was important for me to observe the interactions in their immediate, naturally occurring context and unfiltered by, for example, recording devices – even if my analysis in the end would strongly depend on the recorded and transcribed data. Thus, I took notes throughout my observations. Knowing that I also had audio recordings, however, influenced the taking of these observation notes, as it would have been impossible to observe everything (Copland & Creese, 2015; Yin, 2011). I thus focused my observations on the ongoings that would likely get lost in the recordings, especially the set-up of the room (Yin, 2011), the use of space and movements around it (or in and out), gestures and expressions of emotions that might be lost otherwise. Yin (2011) suggests that feelings are also an important aspect of qualitative data collection and ought to be recorded, albeit with great care. Similarly, Bailey (1996) identifies the need to collect sensory data. Notes on

feelings/sensory data included subjective experiences of the space such as whether it was warm/cold or whether people appeared comfortable in the environment, but also assumptions about relationships in the room and behaviour that might have harmed or enhanced them. It seemed furthermore important to write the observation notes in a way that reflected my own journey in the field (Blommaert & Jie, 2010), which should allow me to be more reflective in the analysis. However, these observational notes were always intended to be used in conjunction with the audio recordings and thus are not being analysed in their own right in this study.

Nonetheless, my observations, although exploratory in many ways, were guided by some theoretical assumptions that I brought to the field. An example of such an assumption and how it guided my observations would be in rapport management. Based on previous research, I assumed that team members were likely to hold differing rapport orientations at different points in time. I was interested in how these would be manifested and how others would respond (emotionally) to such orientations.

During my observation, one ethical concern occasionally arose for me, which was whether and when to interfere in the proceedings of the team. In one of their first weeks in a facilitated reflection round, the team confronted one of its members for not participating enough in the discussions and noticing that he was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the situation, I added to the conversation and explained differences in turn-taking behaviour, which in my eyes seemed to be one of the underlying issues. This was at a time when their facilitator was also present, so the team was used to being stopped and receiving comments, which means the interference on my part was hopefully minimal. During their project work I avoided such interruptions, though on rare occasions they again seemed necessary. This included one or two interventions after several hours of (late night) meetings when misunderstandings occurred due to lagging attention and motivation, in which I pointed out where the misunderstanding lay, in the cases where they were severe enough to be harmful to the team. In addition, the team sometimes asked my opinion on issues, in which case I answered to the best of my knowledge. These occurrences have likely contributed to the team's perception of me as an "expert". Team members thus sometimes approached me after meetings to discuss specific incidents, which often subconsciously seemed to have been targeted at getting me on their side. In these cases I tried to be as neutral as possible while also showing empathy to their challenges and emphasising that these were a normal part of every teamwork, so they would not feel their identities threatened by my observations.

I will now turn to the recordings I obtained. Knowing that I was also audio recording specific instances did not only change the way in which I took notes but also allowed me to approach data collection overall with a broader focus, since I would be able to always revisit the interactions and explore them in different ways. While I began by recording team interactions both with video and with audio recordings, the video recordings turned out to be very impractical after a while. Participants usually sat around an oval table, which meant a single

video camera never captured everybody equally; however, using two or three cameras would have been too obtrusive and also impossible to analyse in depth given the amount of data collected. The camera equipment also seemed to have a bigger impact on the interactions than the audio recording: While some participants still forgot its presence, others would occasionally remind them not to stand in front of the camera or occasionally look at it as if they were remembering its presence, which is why I decided to only use audio recordings for the team meetings after the second month. I continued to video record the team trainings though, as they tended to feature more movements and activities. In addition, they were in any case always observed by the facilitator and less self-organised which is why the cameras seemed to be less obtrusive there. Table 3.2 and Table 3.3 provide an overview of the data I recorded and with which tools. The colours mark the different projects the team completed.

Table 3.2 Overview of recorded data

| | Month | Approximate Time | Module | Datasource and Lengths |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Month 1 | 5pm-9pm | Team training | Notes (taken during and after the event) |
| **1** | Month 1 | 9am-5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 4:10h<br>Video recording: 3h, Observation Notes |
| **2** | Month 1 | 9am -5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 7:30h<br>Video recording: 4:30h, Observation Notes |
| | Month 2 | - | First Round of Interviews | Audio recording |
| **3** | Month 2 | 9am-6pm | Team training | Audio recording: 5:15h<br>Video recording: 3:30h, Observation Notes |
| **4** | Month 2 | 6pm-9pm | Project 1 3rd Meeting | Audio recording: 3h, Observation Notes |
| **5** | Month 2 | 9am-5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 4:30h<br>Video recording: 3:30h, Observation Notes |
| **6** | Month 2 | 12pm-3pm | Project 1: 7th Meeting | Audio recording: 2:40h, Observation Notes |
| **7** | Month 3 | 12pm-1pm | Project 2: 1st Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 1h |
| **8** | Month 3 | 6pm-7pm | Project 2: 2nd Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 52min |
| **9** | Month 3 | 9pm-5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 1h<br>Video recording: 1h, Observation Notes |
| **10** | Month 3 | 5:30pm-9pm | Project 2: 3rd Meeting &<br>Project 3: 1st Meeting | Audio recording: 3:20h<br>Video recording: 3:10h, Observation Notes |
| **12** | Month 3 | 12pm-1pm | Project 3: 2nd Meeting<br>& Project 2: 4th Meeting | Audio recording: 42 min<br>Observation Notes |
| **13** | Month 3 | 1pm-2pm | Team training | Audio recording: 1h<br>Video recording: video stopped, only brief moments at the beginning and end were recorded, Observation Notes |
| | Month 3 | 7pm-10pm | Project 2/Social (location: pub) | Observation Notes (taken after the evening) |
| **14** | Month 3 | 6pm-9pm | Project 2: 5th Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 2:50h |
| **15** | Month 3 | 6pm-9.30pm | Project 2: 6th Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 3:30h |
| | Month 3 | 1pm-2pm | Social (Cake-Break) | Observation Notes (taken after the event) |
| **16** | Month 4 | 10:30am-1:45pm,<br>2:20pm-4pm,<br>4:30pm-6:50pm | Project 3: 3rd Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 7:15h |
| **17** | Month 4 | 1pm-2pm | Project 3: 4th Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 53min |
| **18** | Month 5 | 9am-5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 5h<br>Video recording: 4:30h, Observation Notes |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **19** | Month 5 | 9am-5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 2h<br>Video recording: 1:30h, Observation Notes |
| **20** | Month 5 | 9am-5pm | Team training | Audio recording: 6h<br>Video recording: 3h, Observation Notes |
| **21** | Month 5 | 6:45pm-7:40pm | Project 4: 1st Meeting | Audio recording (by Jay): 54mins |
| **22** | Month 5 | 5:45pm-7:50pm | Project 4: 2nd Meeting | Audio recording: 2:05h, Observation Notes |
| **23** | Month 6 | 10am-2pm | Project 4: 3rd Meeting | Audio recording: 3:45h, Observation Notes |
| **24** | Month 7 | 10:30am-1pm | Project 4: 4th Meeting | Audio recording: 2:22h, Observation Notes |
| **25** | Month 7 | 2:30pm-5pm | Project 4: 5th Meeting | Audio recording: 2:05, Observation Notes |
| **26** | Month 7 | 11am-3pm,<br>4pm-7pm | Project 4: 6th Meeting | Audio recording: 7h, Observation Notes |
| **27** | Month 8 | 1:30pm-6:30pm | Project 4 7th Meeting | Audio recording: 6h, Observation Notes |
| **28** | Month 8 | 9:40am-10:10 | Project 4 8th Meeting | Audio recording: 1h, Observation Notes |
| **29** | Month 8 | 1:30-2:30 | Lunch break<br>Informal review round between Akshya, Jay, Bruno and Bev | Audio recording: 1h, Observation Notes |
| | Month 8 | - | Final Round of Interviews | Audio recording |

Table 3.3 Total amount of data recorded

| Data-Set | Audio recording-time/length |
|---|---|
| **Team Training** | Ca. 36h |
| **Project 1** | Ca. 5:40h |
| **Project 2** | Ca. 10:30h |
| **Project 3** | Ca. 10h |
| **Project 4** | Ca. 26h |
| **Interviews** | Ca. 14h |
| **Total:** | Ca. 102h<br>(Ca. 88h Team Interactions) |

As can be seen, projects took different amounts of time to be completed. It should be noted that some meetings could not be recorded, as in the beginning full access had only been negotiated for the team training, while access to the other projects was subject to ongoing negotiation. In addition, the team had some meetings with clients where permission to record could not be obtained. Participants on occasion also chose not to invite me and did not record the meetings themselves. To my knowledge this has never occurred based on the content that was to be discussed, but usually tended to occur as a result of unclear team communication (i.e. team members thought that somebody else had already informed me) or when meetings were either very spontaneous or because they were not attributed the status of a team meeting and worthy of recording, for example in the case of a 30-minute update-report meeting in between two other classes.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

### 3.5.1 Transcriptions

In addition to the 14 hours of interview data, my data set thus consisted of 88 hours of team interactions. Since I wanted to analyse the team meeting data in some depth and qualitatively mostly from transcripts, it seemed unfeasible to transcribe and analyse the whole data set, forcing me to make choices as to which parts of the data I would transcribe and analyse.

I thus first listened through all 88 hours of data recordings and took extensive notes as I was listening regarding the topics they discussed, team dynamics, conflicts, decisions and relational work. After I had obtained a good overview of my complete data set, I decided to start with transcribing one project in its entirety, so I would be able to analyse all stages of the one project. This was in line with Silverman's (2014) suggestion to start qualitative analyses with a smaller data set that can actually be analysed intensively. I chose Project 2 for this initial more intensive analysis, as it was an almost complete data set (just one meeting was not recorded), but several of the meetings had been self-recorded by the participants, so I felt

slightly less familiar with them than the ones I had observed, and I wanted to immerse myself more in that data.

For the transcription I used Jefferson's transcription conventions but, given the volume of even 10 hours of data (roughly the size of project 2), I chose to transcribe the interactions verbatim and only include laughter, pauses, backchannelling, interruptions and overlaps initially and to possibly refine the transcriptions later, after I had decided on the aspects of the data I was going to analyse in depth. In this I saw transcription as "an open ended-process in which the transcript changes as the researchers' insights into the talk are redefined through ongoing analysis" (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 26). Table 3.4 provides an overview of the transcription notations used.

Table 3.4 Transcription notation (adapted from Liddicoat, 2011)

| **Symbol** | **Meaning** |
|---|---|
| / | Intonation unit boundary |
| . | Falling intonation |
| ? | Rising intonation |
| : | Lengthened sound |
| (.) | Short pause, below one second |
| (2.0) | Pause, number in brackets indicates lengths |
| = | Unit of pause follows another with no discernible interval |
| CAPS | Louder voice |
| _____ | Word emphasised |
| ↑ | Rise in pitch |
| ♫ | Singing |
| "word" | Direct quote |
| ((laughter)) | Several/all team members jointly laugh |
| hh | Individual laughter |
| £ | Laughing voice |
| Word | Continuous laughter throughout the utterances |
| (xxx)<br>(word) | Utterance/words not understood<br>Best guess at word |
| >> << | Notably faster talk than surrounding talk |
| (( )) | Description of occurring sounds or movements |
| [door goes] | Context information |
| {project2} | Anonymised word |
| ⟶ | Utterance of interest to the analyst |

The decision to use simple transcriptions initially was also made based on the tools I was using for transcribing and analysing. My analysis software, MAXQDA, allows the use of timestamps. Thus, throughout my transcription, for which I used the software "F4", I set timestamps throughout the transcripts. After uploading the transcripts and corresponding audio files into MAXQDA I was thus able to immediately replay the sequences and utterances I was coding and analysing, which allowed for a much richer engagement with the data than the transcript

itself would have allowed. The same procedure was also used for transcribing and analysing the interviews.

Transcribing Project 2 was always only meant as a way into the data and to allow me to do some initial analysis. Because of the size of the data set, it seemed clear that I needed to focus my analysis on one specific activity type or phenomenon and then go back over the data and select more meetings for transcription to analyse across time. Eventually I was able to get a transcription agency to do this second round of transcriptions (of around 15 hours of team meetings). Their transcription was verbatim and I repeatedly listened through the recordings and went over the transcripts to correct them and to add more details. While at this point I already knew that I was going to focus on troubles talk (see section 3.5.2), I nonetheless decided to have whole meetings transcribed, or where they were very long, at least large chunks of meetings and not just single sequences as I wanted to be able to see the troubles talk embedded in the meetings.

For this second round of transcription, I thus listened through all the data again, that had not yet been transcribed (ca. 78 hours). My main reason for this was to select the meetings for transcription, but it ended up being a very useful exercise as it reminded me of many nuances and incidents I had observed but had pushed aside, while focusing on the analysis of one project for several months.

In selecting the meetings, I tried to choose meetings so that they would span the entire team life. I selected meetings in which all team members were present and where they were doing tasks together as a self-organised team. This excluded most of the team trainings. Meetings where team members were mostly practising their presentation were also excluded, or those parts were cut out. Some of the team meetings went on for a very long time (>5h) and in these cases I only had a part of the meeting (usually the first hour and the end) transcribed, as in the middle team members would often do more pair work or be more focused on researching things on their laptops with minimal conversations amongst them. Table 3.4 provides an overview of the transcribed team meetings.

As part of the transcription process, I also anonymised the data as much as possible. The use of pseudonyms had been discussed and agreed upon with the team members from the start. Observation notes were taken with pseudonyms instead of participant names, these pseudonyms were also used in the transcriptions. In addition, departmental or university names, client identities and so forth were replaced in the transcripts. This was not always a straightforward process and Saunders, Kitzinger and Kitzinger (2015) stress that anonymisation is a continuum more than a yes/no status.

Table 3.5 Overview of transcribed team meetings

| Project | Months | Length | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Team training** | 1st Month | 20 mins | specific task |
| **Team training** | 1st Month | 8 mins | specific task |
| **Team training** | 2nd Month | 21 mins | specific task |
| **Team training** | 2nd Month | 30 mins | specific task |
| **Project 1 – 7th Meeting** | 3rd Month | 33 mins | Parts in between presentation practice |
| **Project 2 – 1st Meeting** | 3rd Month | 61 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 2 – 2nd Meeting** | 3rd Month | 54mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 2 – 3rd Meeting** | 3rd Month | 92 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 2 – 4th Meeting** | 3rd Month | 7 mins | complete meeting (brief discussion at the end of a P 3 meeting) |
| **Project 2 – 5th Meeting** | 3rd Month | 170 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 2 – 5th Meeting** | 3rd Month | 211 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 3 – 1st Meeting** | 3rd Month | 109 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 3 – 2nd Meeting** | 3rd Month | 37 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 3 – 3rd Meeting** | 4th Month | 132 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 4 – 1st Meeting** | 5th Month | 54 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 4 - 2nd Meeting** | 5th Month | 125 mins | complete meeting |
| **Project 4 - 3rd Meeting** | 6th Month | 145 mins | beginning and end |
| **Project 4 - 4th Meeting** | 7th Month | 24 mins | only beginning |
| **Project 4 - 6th Meeting** | 7th Month | 127 mins | beginning and end |
| **Project 4 – 7th Meeting** | 8th Month | 22 mins | only end |
| **Total Transcribed:** | | 1482min (24.7h) | |

## 3.5.2 Analytical steps

As can already be gleaned from section 3.5.1, my analytical process was thus somewhat circular, moving from surveying all data, to transcribing, to coding and back to surveying all data again, to transcribing again, to coding again. Figure 3.3 provides an overview of the different analytical steps.

### 3.5.2.1 Initial coding: Stage 1

After the initial transcription of Project 2, I conducted initial intensive rounds of coding (Silverman, 2014) in order to identify a suitable focus for my study, since *relational management* is quite broad and would have not been a feasible focus in a longitudinal study focused on studying interactions in-depths. To identify this focus I used coding-techniques as "a procedure for organizing the text of the transcripts, and discovering patterns within that

organizational structure" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 35) that otherwise would not have been visible in the large data set.

In identifying these patterns I used different types of coding including *emotion-coding*, in which openly communicated emotions are coded and later structured and *versus-coding,* in which any antagonisms constructed in talk are highlighted, such as 'quality versus speed', or 'the team versus time pressure' (Saldaña, 2016). These were chosen as they seemed likely to generate relevant insights for relationships, but I also openly coded what seemed to be of interest (i.e. meta comments on relating, mentioning's of relationships). However, my main focus at this stage was on *structural coding* (Saldaña, 2016) in order to break down the data and uncover patterns. This would enable me to explore and compare activities across meetings and create indexes of these that would allow me to find and revisit the incidents among the large data set.

I employed structural coding in different ways targeting three levels of analysis. The first one targeted identifying patterns by looking at micro occurrences in the data, this included coding specific utterances according to the speech acts they constituted. The second form of structural coding focused on the mezzo-level. I coded what type of talk was locally achieved and assigned codes included categories such as "brain-storming", "clarifying the brief", "joking", "decision-making". There are of course overlaps between these two levels, however my aim at this point was not to generate a complex theory but to gain a better understanding of the data collected and what it was the team was actually doing in team meetings. Finally, the third structural coding procedure targeted the macro-level and I tried to identify in the broadest terms what participants were talking about and doing in the team meetings. It turned out that all talk could be grouped within three categories at this level: 1) On-topic talk (talk directly involved with the achievement of the task); 2) Process-talk (talk involving planning future meetings, delegating tasks and agreeing on how to approach the task) and; 3) Off-topic talk (talk that was focused on non-work related topics, often phatic or small talk). This was also an interesting exercise from the perspective of the organisational behaviour literature I had studied, as this includes actually very little information on what teams actually do. While definitions of teams are abundant, team*work* and what it entails is hardly theorised and some of these categories might be surprising to an organisational behaviour researcher. This initial analysis showed that there were relatively clearly bounded interactional activities occurring in the team meeting (though they were of course fuzzy around the edges), and that specific sets of speech acts tended to appear more frequently in some activities than in others.

Interestingly, several talk activities cut across the boundaries of the larger categories, for example, decision making features in on-, off- and process talk, as does humour. So, while there are some clear patterns in the data as outlined, this is not to suggest that we always have clear boundaries and that the data is not also messy.

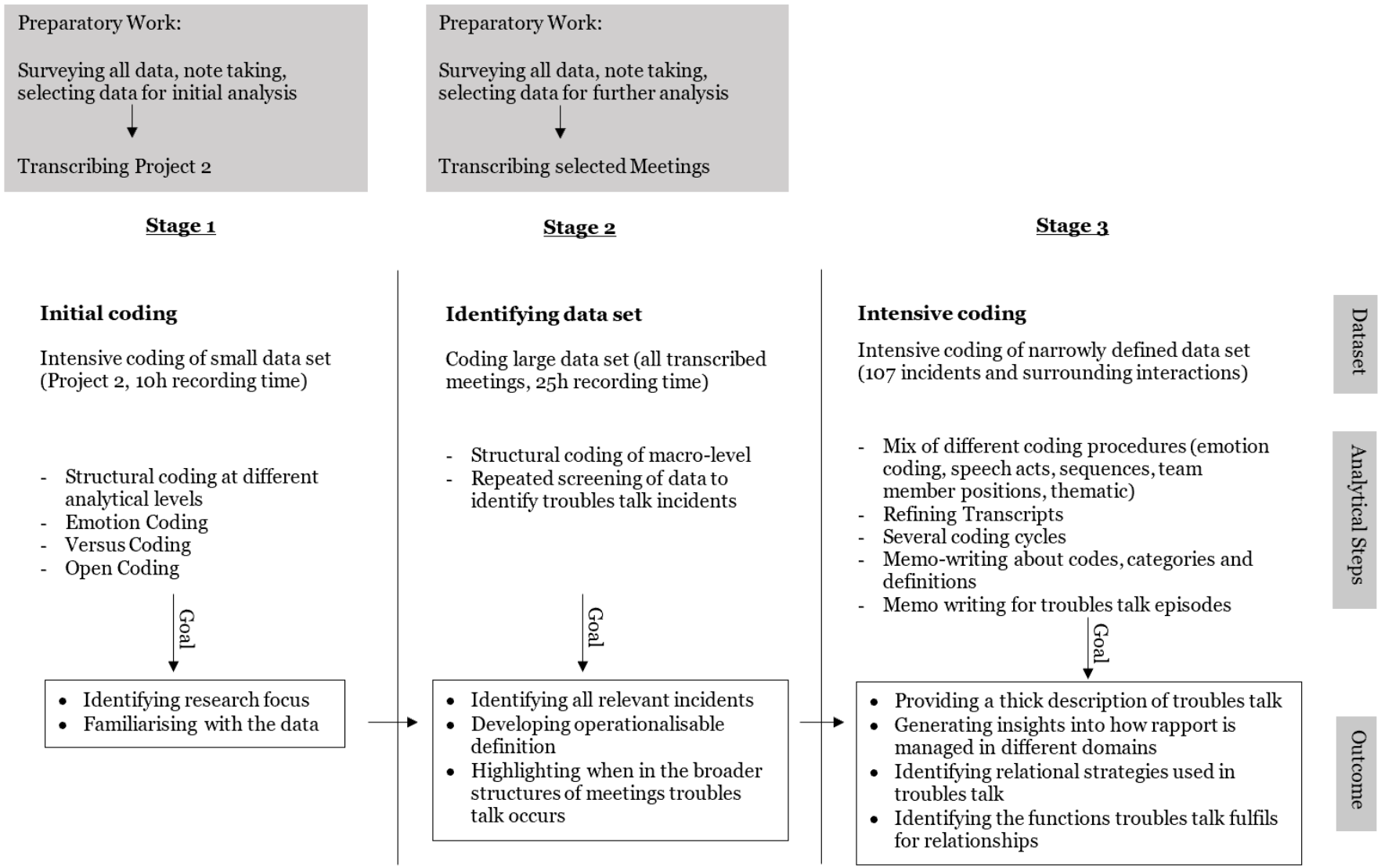


Figure 3.3 Overview of analytical process

After these initial coding rounds, I started to look through the larger activities I had coded and started to look into the relational work that was being done. While the off-topic talk was in general much more relationally inclined, small and phatic talk have already received considerable research attention. Other talk was more task-focused and team members' rapport orientation seemed to be aimed more towards maintenance or neglect, and while this certainly would have led to interesting insights, as outlined I was more interested in the relational work done to nurture good relationships. After several rounds of coding it became clear that one talk activity in particular stood out in this regard: Troubles talk. Interestingly troubles talk was not limited to off-topic talk but featured in all three broader categories (See Figures 5.1 & 5.2 for an overview), while it also featured quite strongly in the emotion and versus-coding, I had deemed relevant for relationships.

I thus started to inductively code the troubles talk incidents, especially regarding their structure but also the topics that were featured, and it became clearer and clearer that I was focusing indeed on a distinct type of talk that seemed relevant for relationships. I then went back to the literature to read more about previous research on troubles talk, as I had not come across it as part of interpersonal pragmatics, nor the teamwork literature, and finally decided that this would make an interesting and very relevant focus for this thesis.

The interviews in contrast were mostly coded regarding the positions team members allocated to themselves and others regards to the team, the teamwork, each other and the occurring team interactions and dynamics. Team members positioning was often quite explicit in the interviews and they discussed their relationships and relational conflicts quite openly. I report on some of the insights in Chapter 4.

#### 3.5.2.2 Identifying data set: Stage 2

The second stage of analysis was relatively short compared to the time I spent on stage 1 and 3 as I was mainly concerned with identifying all incidents in the newly transcribed data that constituted troubles talk episodes. For this, I started to gradually build a definition of troubles talk that derived from the literature review I had undertaken, but that also mirrored the incidents in my own data and tried to capture the essence of how they were related. Based on this evolving definition I surveyed all transcripts repeatedly to identify all the incidents of troubles talk present and thus identify a data set for further analysis. I ended up with 107 incidents of troubles talk across 20 meetings transcribed. Five instances, however, are one-liners where a team member seemingly tried to establish a troubles talk sequence, which was not, however, picked up. Appendix 6 provides an overview of these incidents. In order to identify the troubles talk incidents I repeatedly listened and read through the transcripts. As part of this process I also coded larger segments of the transcripts into on-topic, off-topic and process talk to identify larger patterns in the data and to locate the occurrence of troubles talk in the meetings in relation to these categories.

After identifying the incidents, I have labelled them according to the Project (P), Meeting (M) and Episode in the meeting (E) they occur in. Thus, the second episode of the third meeting of Project 4 is labelled P4_M3_E2. This helped me keep track of the troubles talk sequences across meetings and is also used as a labelling system throughout the thesis. This allows the reader to refer each incident back to the overview provided (Appendix 6) and to broadly position the episode in the wider teamwork (i.e. P4 occurs towards the end and P2 and P3 in the middle stages).

#### 3.5.2.3 Intensive coding of troubles talk segments: Stage 3

I then began another intensive round of coding. For this I erased all previous codes assigned beyond the broad categorisations and started from scratch focusing only on troubles talk and its surrounding talk. I used inductive coding, with the goal to uncover as many facets and aspects of troubles talk possible. I thus used a number of different coding techniques, including thematic coding, emotion coding, versus coding. I coded for speech acts, for initiating utterances, for responses to these initiators (aligning or non-aligning), whether team members tended to fulfil specific roles in the sequences, stylistics devices such as exclamations, swearing laughing, participation in the episodes, positioning practices regarding the trouble but also whether specific attitudes about teamwork or communication were made explicit during any troubles talk episodes. MAXQDA allowed me to continuously replay the incidents so I could maintain a good sense of how the transcripts I was studying had originally sounded. For all these categories I went over and over the different coded segments repeatedly to compare all incidents, determine they did in fact belong to the same class and to continuously develop tight definitions of codes that allowed me to discriminate between segments. From grounded theory, I adopted the emphasis of memo writing as a part of the analytical process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and thus I kept memos on the different codes I was developing, but more importantly memos allowed me to look at my data in context. While coding helped me identify patterns across episodes, it seemed important to not only look at the data after it had been thus 'broken apart', but to work from the exact opposite perspective simultaneously and to develop narratives and commentary on the troubles talk incidents in more general terms. For this I kept memos with thoughts and analytical comments on the episodes in context. This approach allowed me to analyse the data from different angles. Coding thus helped me to deconstruct troubles talk into its components and to compare these across episodes, while analysing each episode discursively allowed me to better understand the functions, and the complex ways rapport was managed in each episode. Both approaches are thus reflected in my presentation of the data and analysis in Chapter 5.

While my coding was inductive, almost inevitably it was nonetheless informed by the in-depth review of the literature I had undertaken before. I thus had certain ideas of what could be interesting to study and with that some coding categories that I expected to surface. Some of these turned out to be completely unhelpful for coding my data (e.g. "giving advice", which had come out as a major theme in the literature review, but was basically absent in my own

data), while others were more interesting, such as “ending troubles talk”. Gradually, some specific foci became clearer that seemed particularly interesting, such as the structure of troubles talk, that seemed to share commonalities across the sequences, recurring stylistic features, the way troubles talk was initiated and so forth.

Figure 3.4 gives an example of what these codes look like in MAXQDA, with regards to the codes applied to structure of troubles talk, while Figure 3.5 shows a screenshot of the MAXQDA project page as a whole.

| | |
|---|---|
| Structural Aspects | 0 |
| Innitiator | 108 |
| making troubles explicit | 108 |
| explicit negative evaluation | 124 |
| Complaint | 24 |
| exploring troubles | 72 |
| adding to/escalating the troubles | 113 |
| narrating troubles | 94 |
| Validating Troubles Talk | 17 |
| providing information | 33 |
| providing interpretation | 35 |
| Solution oriented | 77 |
| Topic shift | 22 |
| guiding topic away | 34 |
| Statement of 'fact' | 16 |
| making fun of somebody | 18 |
| Commiserating | 14 |
| Summary statement as fact | 10 |
| competing storyline | 8 |
| struggle over Deutungshoheit | 6 |
| claiming deutungshoheit | 2 |
| interrupted utterance | 9 |
| competitiveness | 5 |
| correcting | 4 |
| getting defensive | 3 |
| Not validating troubles | 3 |

Figure 3.4 Some codes capturing the structure of troubles talk

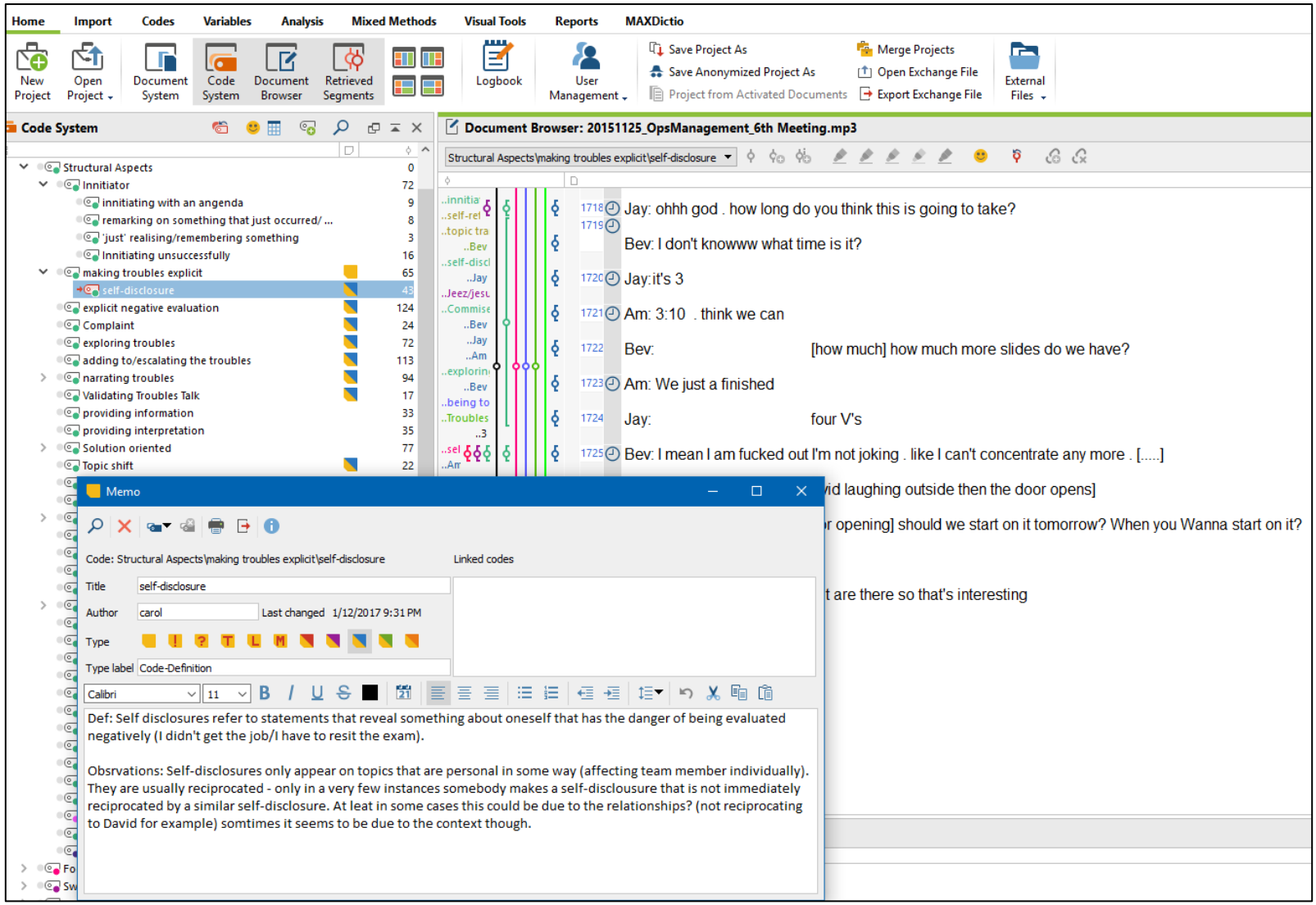


Figure 3.5 Screenshot of MAXQDA

## 3.6 Analytical Framework

I have already outlined my analytical framework: Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2005, 2008) rapport management framework in the literature review (see section 2.1.3). I will here thus only briefly describe how I have applied it to the analysis of my data. Spencer-Oatey outlines different bases of rapport (face, sociality rights and obligations, and interpersonal goals) and different domains in which rapport needs to be managed (the discursive, participatory, stylistic, non-verbal and illocutionary domain). I decided to focus on the different domains in my coding in the first instance, instead of focusing on, for example how goals were handled, as this allowed me a more exploratory approach to the data and allowed me to potentially gather new insights and new variables, while also providing me with some structure regarding the domains. This was unfortunately not possible for the non-verbal domain as I had only obtained audio recordings for much of the team meetings, thus it has not been explored.

The domains also guided my coding as I tried to gauge the way each of them was managed, so as part of the discursive domain, for example, I coded the topics team members talked about in troubles talk and whether they were put forward or pushed by specific team members. The participatory and illocutionary domain features heavily in my analysis of the structure of troubles talk. With regards to the stylistic domain it became clear that two stylistic devices were omnipresent in troubles talk: Swearing and humour. This did not guide my coding from the beginning, instead it was an iterative process of trying out which codes gave good insights, re-coding, testing out whether the framework chosen can usefully explore the data and the codes and back again. The domains thus in many ways also naturally emerged from my data while the analytical framework helped me clarify them and investigate them further.

Spencer-Oatey (2008, first published 2000) also considers several contextual variables that influence the interactions, including participant relationships, message type and content and pragmatic principles and conventions. I will discuss these here as they relate to the data collected.

In line with a number of other researchers (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983), Spencer-Oatey considers power and distance as the two crucial markers of a relationship that influence language use. In this regard the team studied here consists of individuals who are institutionally positioned as equals. This means no one holds reward power, coercive power or legitimate power over another person. There might be differences between them regarding expert power and referent power, but these are not formally established and are likely to change depending on the situation (for example the nature of the project) and as time passes.

Distance between participants is rather large at the beginning as they do not know each other prior to the teamwork but they become more and more familiar across time. However, while familiarity as such increases, the same is not necessarily true for affinity and some team members develop closer relationships with some team members than with others.

Spencer-Oatey further identifies the message content, the activity type and number of participants (who can overhear a face-threat) as crucial. In regard to the message content the data offers such a variety that it will need to be discussed as part of the analysis. Regarding activity type, though, with troubles talk a particular activity type was selected, so again this will remain constant. Finally, the number of interlocutors also remained constant over time. In the overwhelming majority of meetings, the same six team members and the author as observer are present.

Finally, Spencer-Oatey (2008) points to the importance of social interactional roles that often specify specific rights and obligations in an interaction. In the case of the data under study, the most important social interactional role allocated is that of a team member in an equal team. This means that by default team members should all have the same rights and obligations. While specific roles are nonetheless ascribed they always need to be enacted against this background of being a part of an equal team. Nonetheless, there are several special roles allocated. The largest allocation of obligations and rights is given to whoever performs the role of "taskmaster" in a given project, who has the obligation to oversee progress and ensure that the project gets done in time and therefore has the right to delegate work and schedule meetings. The next two more long-term role allocations in the team are more fixedly allocated to two members: Jay is the dedicated "slidemaster" who creates the final presentation, while David, as the designated native speaker, has the responsibility to check and collate the final report.

I will now turn to the analysis, which will illustrate many of the more abstract details discussed in this chapter in more practical terms and provide insights into the team life. I will begin the analysis with a very broad overview of the relationships constructed in the team across time before turning in more depth towards troubles talk.

# Chapter 4: Team Relationships

In this section I will provide a very broad overview of team relationships for the duration of the teamwork, in order to provide details about the relational setting in which troubles talk occurs and which it helps shape. This is based on both interviews and on observations. Since the analysis following this chapter is the focus of the study, this overview is necessarily more superficial and broader and only aims to provide some background information and to explain more clearly why the topic of troubles talk was chosen for this study.

Team members do not need to manage rapport with just one interlocutor but with five other individuals at any given point in the teamwork and since this is the case for all team members we are essentially observing the management of 15 dyadic relationships in addition to the relationship to the team overall which seems to prompt its own strategies for rapport management.

Team members do not know each other at the beginning of the teamwork and relationships develop gradually throughout the 8 months of teamwork. For the most part relationships seem good and team members regularly display relationship enhancing orientations. However, at the same time these relationships are fraught with tensions and annoyances that need to be mitigated and managed and these do not abate across time.

Working in a team puts team members through a number of relational challenges and opportunities. They jointly need to deal with external demands and need to find ways of managing those. In this, team members do not always agree and there is a regular tension between the priorities of different team members. The most pronounced tensions exist around the themes: "doing things well versus doing things quickly" and "maximising high marks versus maximising learning". With these priorities come different approaches and different ideas about how and how much one should work and how one should approach a project. These differences are not superficial but are core to some team member's beliefs and values and they behave accordingly which can spark relational problems. Thus, task discussions often become heated and are often quite competitive in terms of participation and floor management and illocutionary force of utterances.

These tensions are normally not discussed openly but instead team members try to establish their points of view with regards to specific projects or approaches. Debates thus tend to stay on-topic and there are hardly any open conflicts at the team level. Some team members, however, suggested in the final interviews that this was not the right way to handle the conflicts that lay beneath many of the task discussions, suggesting instead that one should have discussed these more openly. Jay, for example suggested that not discussing disagreements openly led to a large amount of passive aggressiveness, which was a burden to the team, while Bev stated "I wish we had argued more/ maybe we would be in a better place now/ maybe this team would be in a better place."

Nonetheless, relationships are far from consistently negative in the team. Of course, team members do not hold uniform relationships across all team members. Some team members spend extensive amounts of time together outside of team meetings with certain other team members and not with others. Naturally these are also subject to change over time. I will very briefly outline the more stable relationships here to provide more details of the setting in which troubles talk takes place.

Broadly speaking, the team had two very different relational configurations during their teamwork. Figure 4.1 presents the initial team network, while Figure 4.2 shows the configuration by the end of the teamwork. The large circle indicates what appeared to be the 'core' team. In the time that passed in between the first and final project, interlocutors gradually shift out of configuration 1 and into configuration 2.

It should be noted, that these figures are static representations of a dynamic multi-layered phenomenon and were derived out of a large number of observations and interviews. As such, they are only meant to be indicative for the relationships that developed in the team.

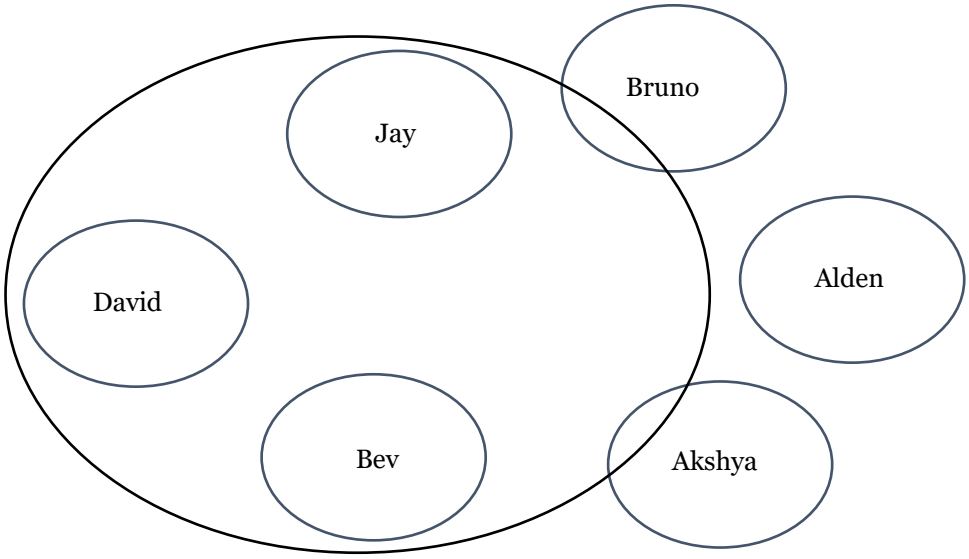


Figure 4.1 Relationships during the first project

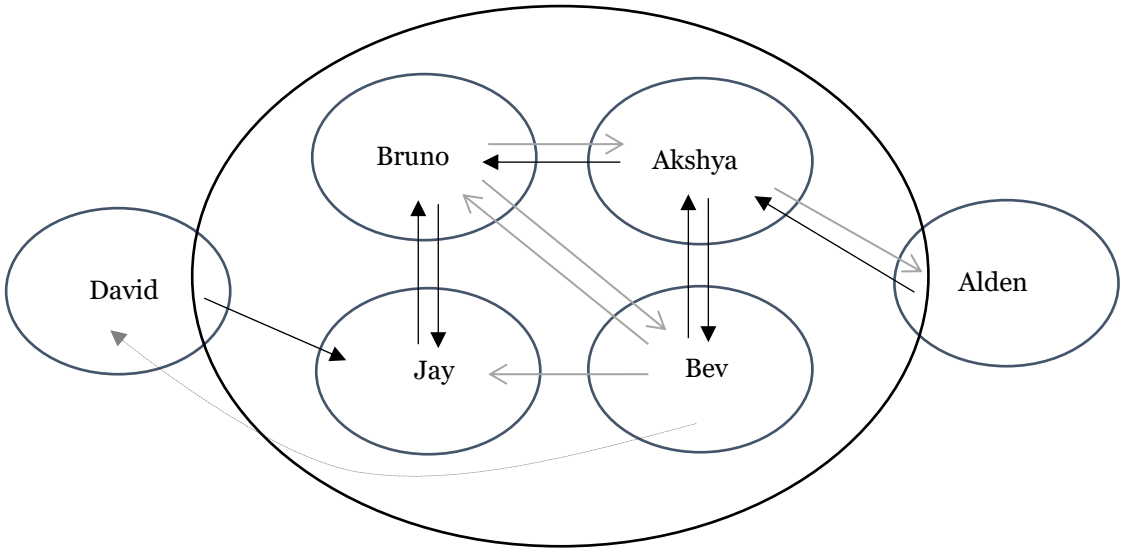


Figure 4.2 Relationships during the final project (Arrows indicate who team members stated they would like to work with again after the project is over)

Relationships initially were mostly formed around doing the task. Jay, Bev and David formed the team's core during the first project, while the other three were somehow left behind. Team members commented freely on this in the interviews. Akshya suggested that she was somewhat lost during project 1, while Alden and Bruno were struggling with language proficiency issues and could not participate that much, but also saw this as a co-constructed relational problem.

Considering that these were almost the first impressions team members formed of each other, it is no wonder that they impacted also on social interactions and the way team members related to each other more generally. The joint struggle with the language for example led to a lot of companionship between Bruno and Alden. Thus, despite not smoking himself Alden spend most of his breaks with Bruno in the smoking area. This abates slightly later in the teamwork as Bruno moves into the team's core (indicated by the large black circle) and becomes close friends with Jay, though Alden and Bruno do continue to have a good relationship. With regards to Akshya, Bev states that she initially really did not like her, however they end up becoming close friends.

The most dramatic change in the team, however, occurs in regards to David. While he was well integrated and well liked initially, the relationships with him gradually deteriorated across the 8 months until by the end the others speak of actual dislike. This seems mostly to have to do with different expectations of appropriate (communicative) behaviour. David's management of the illocutionary domain, but also the participatory and discursive one frequently seems to harm his teammates equity and association rights, as well as their face and goals. Bev, for example, states in the final interview "I don't think David respects us very much" an impression that arose due to his sometimes too forcefully phrased suggestions or dismissals of other people's ideas and the impatience the others perceived in his demeanour towards

Alden or initially Bruno when the two were struggling linguistically, to just name a few examples.

Thus, while David gradually moved out of the core group, a 'new' core group consisting of Jay, Bruno, Bev and Akshya arose. These new work relationships also coincide with the more social relationships that are being formed simultaneously. All of the four have good relationships with each other, though Akshya and Bev become close friends, as do Jay and Bruno. Both pairs spend considerable time outside of class studying with each other or just hanging out with each other.

The only person where this overlap of good working relationships and more social relationships does not match up is with Alden. All team members report that they find it difficult to work with him and when asked in the final interview who they would like to work with again, only Akshya includes him on her list. Socially, however, Alden seems to get on well with the core group and several people state in the interview that Alden is a part of their social circle while David is not.

Finally, we also have each team member's relationship to the team overall. It is difficult to summarise these as team members' attitudes and affective states towards individuals and to the team as a group change over time. These changes also seem more spurious than the ones indicated for their dyadic relationships (though those of course also have ups and downs). This indicates that these are in fact two different phenomena.

In the initial interview round, three weeks into the teamwork, all team members voiced that they had been looking forward to the teamwork but were disappointed with how it was going. This disappointment largely had to do with problems around language proficiency that hindered some people's participation and the uncompromising pace with which some team members pursued the task that proved to be excluding to anybody who needed more time. These problems, however, improved for the majority of the team over the course of the teamwork – with the exception of Alden who continued to struggle with the language proficiency and David who continuously struggled with any pace different to his own. However, overall, for the four members in the core group attitudes towards the teamwork itself improved. This is probably related also to their improvements in relationships. The only factor that regularly affected those broader relationships and attitudes to the team was occasionally David's behaviour that seemed to somewhat sour the overall relationship to the team. Attitudes tended to become more negative if face threatening or rights threatening behaviour occurred and with the attitudes also decreased the willingness to cooperate while the desire for the teamwork to be over increased.

As for Alden, as he was not successfully integrated into the task discussions throughout, each team meeting consisted of a series of face threats that impacted on his willingness to be a part of the team. Nonetheless he maintained the individual relationships with four out of his five

team mates until well after their final team project, despite the fact that he eventually withdrew more and more from the team.

While this has been only a very brief summary of team relationships and one could go into much more depths in describing these, a few things can nonetheless be gleaned: Social and work relationships seem to mostly coincide, and it seems that we tend to like people we find it easy to work with, while we dislike people we cannot easily work with. However, while this might be a general tendency we have also proof in the case of Alden that this does not have to be true for all relationships.

We can also see that from very early on, at any given point in time team members interacted in a team with vastly different dyadic relationships. This is likely to complicate recipient design, as well as topic management – especially outside of work talk. What became also clear during the observations was that it was fairly straightforward in most cases to identify the communicative breakdowns that led to more negative relationships, whose causes seem to map up nicely against Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework. However, what seemed much more difficult and much less straightforward to understand was what exactly led to relationships becoming more positive or what exactly helped prevent team relationships from deteriorating further. I have therefore chosen to analyse one specific talk activity that occurred in the team across the whole of the teamwork and that seems to have been particularly beneficial for enhancing relationships: Troubles talk. I will analyse the troubles talk done in the team in depth in the next chapter to explore whether it did in fact enhance rapport and relationships, and if so how exactly they were enhanced in interactions, at least with regards to one apparently frequent interactional activity.

# Chapter 5: Doing Troubles Talk in Team Meetings

Over the course of the observations and initial analysis it became evident that troubles talk plays an important role in the team studied. Troubles talk features in all team meetings and seems to play a crucial role for enhancing rapport between team members. While the team generally behaves in an agreeable fashion with each other and open conflict tends to be avoided, troubles talk nonetheless stands out in the extent to which team members seem to continuously display a rapport enhancing orientation. Over the following chapter I will therefore analyse different aspects of troubles talk and examine how it contributes to maintaining or enhancing rapport in the team.

As discussed before, I define doing troubles talk as "engaging in talk about negative issues or experiences that oneself or others have encountered, which are not blamed or attributed to the person(s) addressed and can range from very severe issues to only mildly inconvenient or completely other-focused issues." This definition was derived inductively after studying a number of seemingly similar interactional events in the data and analysing their common denominators. Troubles talk is an activity type that like other activity types such as decision-making, brain-storming or gossiping tends to consist of specific interactional features and shows a preference for specific speech acts and styles over others. While an activity type is not restricted to these features they nonetheless help identify the activity type (just as voicing a number of different suggestions is a sign of a brainstorming session).

However, troubles talk has been much less explored than other activity types, despite the fact that it seems an almost daily occurrence for people all over the world. In this chapter, I will therefore attempt to firstly identify the most common features of troubles talk and explore them to provide a thick description of the troubles talk occurring in the team. Secondly, I will analyse how rapport is managed during troubles talk episodes and thirdly, I will discuss the specific (relational) functions troubles talk seems to fulfil for the interlocutors in the specific context of a team, thus highlighting the importance and impact of troubles talk in team interactions.

107 incidents of troubles talk were identified in the 20 meetings transcribed. While 107 might not sound like a lot of instances, this means an average of 5 instances per meeting. Troubles talk episodes comprise in total 15.749 tokens (out of 286.475 in total). This means that around 5.5% of all talk recorded within the meetings consists of troubles talk – which seems to be a significant amount of time considering this concerns only one very specific interactional activity type and troubles talk tends to be not solution- or task-focused.

The average troubles talk episode consists of circa 14 turns (median 10 turns), with the longest one consisting of 102 turns, while the shortest ones only consist of one or two turns, usually in cases where the troubles talk is not fully taken up. Appendix 6 gives an overview of troubles episodes as well as their length, topic and the meeting they occurred in.

In the following chapter I will examine different features of troubles talk and draw on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport framework to better understand how rapport is being enhanced (or not) within troubles talk in general and the specific episodes under scrutiny in particular. I will start by analysing some broader and more general themes in the beginning and then gradually zoom in on the structural and relational aspects of the talk. The chapter will thus begin with an analysis of the topic choice in troubles talk (section 5.1) and the occurrences of troubles talk in meetings more broadly (sections 5.2 and 5.3), which also functions to give a broader overview of the data. Afterwards I will focus on rapport management and relational strategies more explicitly (sections 5.4-5.6) before considering the specific (relational) functions of troubles talk (section 5.7).

## 5.1 Troubles Talk Topics

I will start by introducing the topics which are covered in troubles talk to give an initial broad perspective, before turning to the more intricate structural features later. Topic choice belongs to the discursive domain. Spencer-Oatey (2008) suggests that topics that are deemed too sensitive as well as abrupt topic shifts might be harmful to rapport. I will discuss aspects pertaining to the sequencing of talk later (see section 5.3 and 5.6.2) and will focus only on topic choice here. To some extent troubles talk is always focused on sensitive issues as a trouble reveals something personal about the speaker and thus has the potential to be face threatening. Nonetheless, team members chose to engage in troubles talk regularly. While the following section will show again and again how sensitive issues are approached and mitigated, topic choice seems nonetheless a very crucial aspect of enhancing or harming rapport. Whether a topic is considered too sensitive, however, will depend on the norms present in a community of practice.

Topics in troubles talk episodes were thus coded thematically, a process that went through many iterations until larger categories emerged. Table 5.1 gives an overview of these categories and their subcategories:

Table 5.1 Troubles talk topics

| Topic - Category | Topic - Subcategories |
|---|---|
| **Being an MBA student (74)** | Time & workload (29);<br>Professors (15);<br>Difficult exam/assignment (11);<br>Technical problems (8);<br>Being tired (3);<br>Time (3);<br>Not getting a job (2);<br>Coping with a difficult fellow student (1);<br>Speaking English (1);<br>Having to do more teamwork (1) |
| **Task (20)** | Client (12)<br>Problems with executions (5)<br>Nature of task (3) |
| **Life on campus/in the UK (8)** | Provisions on campus (3);<br>Accommodation (2);<br>UK (2);<br>Weather (1) |
| **Third Party (3)** | Other teams (2);<br>Colleague's house burning (1) |
| **Personal Issues (3)** | Physical wellbeing (2);<br>Girlfriend moving away (1) |
| **Undefined (6)** | Interrupted/Topic changed before trouble became clear |

What becomes evident from table 5.1 is that most episodes of troubles talk seem to be focused on shared experiences instead of individual troubles. By far the most episodes of troubles talk fit into the category "being an MBA student", which includes topics that are directly related to experiences made as "new" MBA students and the work and lifestyle associated with this role. Closely associated is the category "life on campus/UK" which reflects similar but slightly more general topics not unique to the MBA experience. Talk that belongs to the category "task" is directly dealing with their current team task. Here talk about their clients features most prominently, but difficulties or annoyances with progress or the nature of the task are also discussed.

At the same time, there is a surprisingly small amount of talk about other people ("third party") within the meetings. In all three cases recorded, it was done about people known to all team members and in two of them about other teams and their teamwork. A few more instances of this type of talk were observed but not recorded as they occurred outside of the organised team meetings and not with all team members present. This suggests that "bitching" or "gossiping" were activities that were not generally endorsed by the team (within a team meeting), and team members seem to adhere to this.

Finally, only three instances were recorded in which team members discussed more personal issues including health or wellbeing and private matters. All three episodes were brought on

by somebody else inquiring after the issues discussed ("How is Annie?") instead of the teller volunteering the content unprompted. We have no indication that these questions were deemed inappropriate or in fact harmed rapport in the actual examples, instead it seems team members were happy to provide detailed responses.

There is also a small number of incidents in the data where team members make initiator statements for troubles talk (i.e. "oh go:::d", "oh dear, [name of classmate]...") but do not garner any response leaving the topic unexplored and thus impossible to categorise appropriately, a phenomenon I will discuss in the next section.

When looking at the table and comparing it to a list of topics that one may have expected to appear in a group of people seeing each other almost daily for 8-months, some areas seem completely or almost completely absent. As already mentioned, this includes the sharing of serious private troubles and gossip about other people who could be constructed as a trouble. In addition, troubles talk about issues such as politics or society, (mental) health, as well as failures in previous jobs or previous studies are never mentioned within the team meetings.

Instead, when looking at the topics discussed, we find that the majority of talk is done on issues that are relevant to all team members and thus have at least the potential to be of interest to the whole team and on which all of them are likely able to participate and comment on: They are as such inclusive and relatable. This seems a very important aspect of rapport enhancement as they recognise interlocutors' association and equity rights, while emphasising a sharedness of context that might lead interactional goals to coalesce. At the same time there seems to be some respect for individuals' face needs and their disassociation rights, by the avoidance of a number of topics that might infringe them.

I will now turn to the temporal location of troubles talk in team meetings but will re-visit the troubles talk topics in section 5.7 where I will discuss the functions troubles talk fulfil in more depth.

## 5.2 When does Troubles Talk Occur?

### 5.2.1 Troubles talk episode locations in meetings

In this section I will discuss the specific location in meetings in which troubles talk occurs, providing again a broad overview. Afterwards I will turn to the analysis of how troubles talk episodes actually unfold.

During team meetings team members engage in different types of talk. As outlined in 3.5.2.1 this talk can be divided into: On-topic talk, process talk, or off-topic talk. Troubles talk occurs within all these types of talk, however most incidents occur during off-topic talk. The team regularly branches off the 'normal' work talk and discusses other issues or engages in small talk. This usually occurs towards the beginning or end of the meeting and during breaks or where the 'normal' workflow gets interrupted by an outside noise, a technical problem or a

person actually interrupting the meeting. In some cases, team members go off-topic for a while, which is usually sparked by some topical shifts in the discussion. MAXQDA provides functions to visualise the distribution of codes and Figure 5.1 shows the distribution of off-topic, on-topic and process-talk in the meetings, while Figure 5.2 shows the distribution of troubles talk across meetings.

The figures only provide a very broad overview. Each line constitutes one meeting whose lengths has been levelled and only full meetings or meetings where only middle parts were missing are included. Bright green indicates troubles talk during off-topic talk, purple during process talk, while dark-green represents on-topic talk.

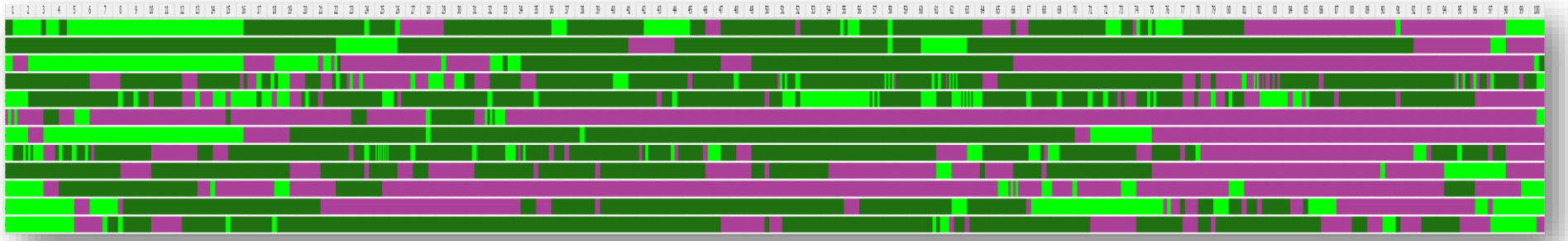

Figure 5.1 On-topic (dark green), off-topic (bright green) and process (purple) talk distribution during team meetings

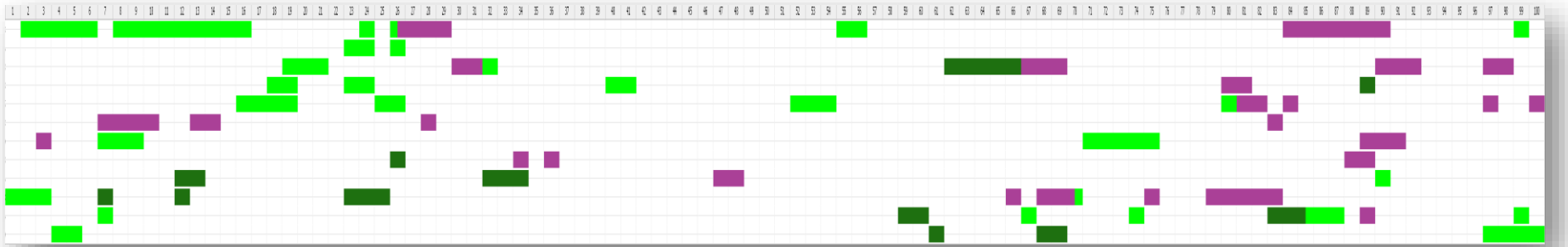

Figure 5.2 Troubles talk divided into on-topic (dark green), off-topic (bright green) and process (purple) talk during team meetings

As can be seen from the chart, process talk occurs mostly at the end of team meetings when the team turns more towards planning, while off-topic talk tends to occur more at the beginning as the team settles into their meeting, or during breaks. These are the two most common contexts in which troubles talk occurs and as such it is no surprise that troubles talk also occurs most frequently towards the beginning or the end of a team meeting (see Figure 5.2). At the same time, the fact that interlocutors fulfil certain interactional activities at the beginning and at the end of an encounter to establish and re-affirm built relationships, as is the case with greetings and closings, has been described repeatedly in the literature (Laver, 1975). While unlike greetings and closings troubles talk is not necessarily the first and last talk in every meeting, the fact that it seems to almost always appear in the first and in the last quarter of the meeting might nonetheless suggest that it is relevant in creating the setting for the meeting and also in re-affirming the relationships towards the end.

On-topic troubles talk on the contrary is much rarer and usually branches off more directly from an on-topic discussion, which is why there is no principal location in the meeting for it to occur. It can be noted though that on-topic troubles talk becomes more frequent in the final project and it seems likely that complaints about the client are replacing much of the process-troubles talk, as in this project it is the client who sets the task and not the course coordinators so instead of discussing inappropriately set tasks or task-requirements the problems of the client become the focus of the troubles talk. This, however, seems to suggest that the activity of *doing* troubles talk might be more crucial than the actual topic discussed, as troubles topics that become superfluous seem to be replaced by other topics rather than leading to a decrease in the amount of troubles talk conducted.

### 5.2.2 Pre-conditions for realising troubles talk episodes

I will analyse in section 5.3 how exactly troubles talk episodes are initiated but will focus here on some of the circumstances under which they are initiated, as there seems to be a certain pattern. Troubles talk frequently occurs at points where a topic transition seems necessary. This means that one topic is slowly coming to an end and a move to another topic is necessary. While this in itself seems very obvious and is to be expected, in a number of cases this means that troubles talk is prefaced by long silences (i.e. a silence of a minimum of 4 seconds). The most common initiators after a silence consist of a self-disclosure, and, interestingly, an exclamation of something just realised. This at least raises the question as to whether troubles talk – at least on occasions – fulfils the role of filler or of phatic talk, in the case that no other talk is currently ongoing. Phatic talk tends to be conducted for its rapport enhancing properties and it seems possible that troubles talk was awarded this position within the team as the go-to type of talk, if nothing else is currently discussed.

Of course, silences or other fairly obvious turn-transitioning points, are not the only moments when troubles talk gets initiated. Troubles talk is also frequently initiated on the topic that is currently being discussed. This is particularly often the case during process talk, where time

and workload issues are regularly brought up as part of a more focused discussion of scheduling. In these cases, the boundary between planning-talk and troubles talk can become blurry. Troubles talk is also sometimes initiated as a clear interruption to something else that is being discussed, but then it is always framed as something the initiator has just realised and urgently needs to share with their team members.

Finally, troubles talk is sometimes initiated with the suggestion that a specific trouble might be relevant to the team's decision making. This leads us to an interesting phenomenon. While troubles talk often seems to be relational talk and done with the goals of sharing problems and experiences, on occasion people introduce troubles talk with what appears to be a particular goal in mind. I will discuss this phenomenon further in section 5.7.8.

I will now turn to the actual initiation of troubles talk. As we shall see, this might be a more complex activity locally than this overview may have initially suggested.

## 5.3 Initiating Troubles Talk: Gaining Compliance for Diverging from Business as Usual

As mentioned above troubles talk necessarily deals with potentially problematic information and the sharing of a trouble. Its introduction thus needs to be handled appropriately to ensure rapport is not harmed. Jefferson (1980) points out that troubles talk is a divergence from business as usual, thus troubles talk itself might infringe on other people's interpersonal goals, which might be task-focused or focused on finishing the meeting, and a delay brought on by discussing what could be seen as non-essential topics might be unwelcome. In this section I will therefore discuss the onset of troubles talk, more specifically how and under what circumstances troubles talk gets initiated within a group of people that has specifically gathered to discuss and complete tasks together.

I take *initiating* to be an utterance which – often in intentionally ambiguous terms – foreshadows the mention of some trouble. Troubles are often only made explicit later, and it is often only that process which allows us to conclude that a sometimes seemingly innocent question such as "The 7th (.) is this Monday or Tuesday?" is in fact used to index a trouble. In this example the conversation continues with:

5.3-1 P3_M3_E4: The team is discussing upcoming deadlines.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2408 | Bruno: | The 7th (.) is this Monday or Tuesday? |
| 2409 | David: | Oh is it? Shit! |
| 2410 | Bruno: | Because today is the 3rd |
| 2411 | David: | What the fuck (.) Christ! |

Line 2410 indicates that Bruno was at least somewhat aware of the answer to the question he raised and has thus probably used it to index a perceived trouble. These initial turns shown

here are then followed by a joint problematisation of the tight schedules and the unfortunate distribution of deadlines that the team has no control over.

As mentioned in 5.1 not all attempts at initiating troubles talk are successful and get taken up. Divergence from "business as usual" seems to require interactional work both for introducing and ending it and interlocutors tend not to 'just start' with a new topic. Instead, at least two team members (and often more) need to actively collaborate in diverging the topic from "business as usual" while the others – at least for a while – need to allow this to happen.

The significance of this becomes more evident when looking at the most discussed topic in troubles talk itself: "time & workload". One narrative that runs through the entire life of the team is that they face an extremely high workload and thus constantly lack time to do things properly, to apply for jobs or to spend time with their families. The resulting talk regularly leads to considerations how the team can streamline its work and become more efficient. Time is seen as an important and very limited resource while teamwork and team meetings are sometimes framed as a potential time-waster, by at least some team members. Considering this narrative, the space that is made for (non-solution focused) troubles talk and off-topic talk overall might seem surprising, but only adds to highlighting the potentially important functions it fulfils. It also raises the question whether off-topic talk might carry more weight in terms of rapport management than it would for example at a dinner party, as for team members this always constitutes a deviation from the routine that is also associated with a process loss.

While the majority of troubles initiators that could be identified seem to be successfully taken up, there are nonetheless also a number of unsuccessful attempts in the data. As such it seems that gaining interactional space, being listened to and influencing topic choice cannot be taken for granted. Not having a topic that one suggests picked up by the team can be seen, however, as a threat to all bases of rapport – this can get in the way of interpersonal goals, threaten equity and association rights and threaten face. In addition, suggesting that something constitutes a trouble is a risky endeavour as it might lead to team members to disassociate from such a framing. Team members, therefore seem to take great care when diverging the topic "from business as usual" towards troubles talk. As Table 5.3 indicates, team members use a small number of strategies to initiate a troubles talk in team meetings. These strategies differ significantly in how explicitly they index the trouble. In general, it seems that the more explicitly a trouble is indexed the harder is it to disaffiliate or avoid a troubles episode altogether, while implicit strategies are more liable to non-uptake but also pose less of a threat to the speaker's face. This is also interesting as Jefferson (1980) had discussed troubles initiators almost solely as personal inquiries ("How are you?") and responses to inquiries. These inquiries happen very rarely in team meetings and only on two occasions initiate a troubles talk episode.

Table 5.3: Overview of troubles initiation strategies

| Tendency of indexing trouble | Initiator |
|---|---|
| **Implicitly** | Questions (30) |
| **Implicitly** | Factual statements with critical intonation/register (6) |
| **Explicitly** | Narratives (22) |
| **Explicitly** | Self-disclosures (21) |
| **Explicitly** | Exclamations (15) |
| **Both** | Humour/laughter (11) |

### 5.3.1 Implicit initiations

Asking a question is the most frequent way a troubles talk episode gets initiated (see Table 5.3). A small number of episodes is initiated by personal questions, which seem to be genuine questions that could either spark good/bad or no news. Most questions, however, seem to be of a different type.

As we could see from Example 5.3-1, it frequently only becomes clear later that information seeking was not the goal of the question and it was in fact rather referring – even if implicitly – to a trouble. Here are a number of examples of these types of questions:

5.3-2 P2_M1_E4: While discussing a mandatory event

121 Bev: Do we all HAVE to go?

5.3-3 P3_M2_E1:

26 Akshya: So we're going to be sitting here 'til then?

5.3-4 P3_M2_E3:

409 David: We should get the results soon as well shouldn't we?

5.3-5 P2_M1_E11:

812 Alden: Bruno, did you/ did you got your business card?

Asking a question to gain compliance in starting a new topic is a common interactional practice and is thus not surprising in this context. Leaving a question unanswered is a potentially bigger face threat than 'missing' somebody's comment and is therefore a good tool to gain team members' collaboration with the new topic one wishes to introduce. A question also makes it easy to maintain the *interactional ambiguity* Jefferson (1988) mentions, leaving it up to the listeners to accept the implied trouble as a real trouble or not. To return to the Example 5.3-1 above: If David had simply answered "It's a Monday" instead of "Oh is it? Shit!" scheduling in this instance would not have been confirmed as a trouble and would not have resulted in a troubles talk episode. Initiator questions thus often seem to index a trouble, but

leave it up to the listeners to actually turn the following episode into a troubles talk. This serves to save the speaker's face, but also does not infringe on the other interlocutor's rights of (dis)association in case a trouble is of no interest to that person.

This becomes more evident if we look at the examples above: In Example 5.3-2 and 5.3-3, dissatisfaction with a certain issue is implied, but the phrasing as a question allows the speaker to retract this, should the others not agree with their negative stance. In the first example Bev's question is not seeking an informational response, she knows that the event they are discussing is mandatory but is rather implying her own position of not wanting to attend, which sparks a discussion about scheduling issues and mandatory events that are perceived to be unnecessary. A similar scenario is true for Akshya's question "So we're going to be sitting here 'til then?" indicating her disapproval. In the final utterance, Example 5.3-5 we see the only time Alden introduces a troubles talk sequence in the data, focusing on the practices of the printshop who keeps delaying or forgetting Alden's order of business cards. As he tends to have particular difficulties in accessing the floor and influencing the topic choice he seems to make especially sure that this topic introduction cannot be ignored by addressing Bruno by name and then asking a question that only he can answer and that draws on some previous interaction the two of them must have had (i.e. Alden knows that Bruno has also ordered business cards), thus he employs a number of strategies to ensure his interactional goal at this point (being heard) and of saving his own face (being taken up by Bruno/the team).

In addition to questions as fairly implicit introductions to a trouble, there are also a number of seemingly factual utterances in which only the intonation pattern or an annoyed register alludes to the trouble (for example: "but they're not just an EPC (.) they also sell the modules" or "it must not exceed 5 pages of A4") again leaving the others in the group to decide whether this should be problematised further. While questions allowed participants to maximise chances of response and engagement, these latter statements seem to forego this in favour of minimising the face-threat in case of non-uptake, as the indexing of the trouble is so subtle that it can easily be ignored by the team.

Since in both these cases the answers helped in identifying the troubles initiator, it seems likely that there are more instances in the data that have been glossed over, thus making it difficult as an outsider and analyst to identify them without running the risk of speculation. As such, it seems likely that more such initiators are hidden in the data but could not be detected.

### 5.3.2 Explicit initiators

In addition to these more implicit indexing of troubles, there are also several initiators explicitly mentioning troubles. Like the initiators discussed above, specific strategies seem to be followed in order to maximise topic-uptake and minimise the face-threat of non-uptake. In the data collected these more explicit troubles initiators tend to come in the form of: 1) narratives, 2) self-disclosures and 3) 'spontaneous' exclamations. I will discuss all three briefly

in the following sections. It should be noted that this is not a claim to an exhaustive list – in other groups and contexts it seems likely that other strategies might be used.

#### 5.3.2.1 Narrative statements

As I will discuss in more depth in section 5.4, full narratives are actually very rare and talk rarely follows the troubles talk outlined in the literature review with one troubles teller providing a narrative and a troubles recipient reacting to it. What I have labelled a narrative statement here are statements that introduce a new thought or observation to the team. They tend to be slightly longer turns than the initiators we have seen before, and they tend to offer some contextual information or interpretation on a subject that is treated as a trouble by the initiator:

5.3-6 P1_M1_E1:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 105 | Jay: | But I think last time/ it was/ I don't know/ they were not fair/ u::h in the fifteen-minute mark because I think some of the groups kind of exceeded that |

5.3-7 P2_M5_E2:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 672 | David: | ♫Tesc:::::os♫ (.) do you think they will be talking about Tesco's? because all the lecturers are always like Tesco's this/ Tesco's that/ I think they all got together and went like/ let's talk about Tesco's a lot |

5.3-8 P4_M1_E2:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 288 | Bruno: | Actually (.) it's quite embarrassing that they have no idea all these kids /What they are doing right now/ I mean especially those kids who really pursued the stuff that we/ |

The longer turns make it potentially difficult for the other team members to miss or ignore the utterances, making it more face threatening to all parties involved to not react to them. They also often provide some rationale or evidence for a trouble, making it harder to disagree or disaffiliate. Topic pick-up is thus again very high.

#### 5.3.2.2 Self-disclosures

In a number of cases, team members introduce troubles by making a very explicit statement about themselves. I will discuss this practice in greater depth in section 5.4.4 as a more general relational strategy, therefore I will only briefly discuss the use of self-disclosures as initiators here. From a perspective of face, self-disclosing problematic information seems risky as – often without any direct topic continuation – team members are made aware of an issue that is potentially face-threatening to its speaker and also threatens their rights of non-association. At the same time, there is no incident in the data where this fails to spark topic-uptake and in fact often prompts other team members to disclose similar facts about themselves. From a relational perspective it seems that the face risk accepted by the initiator has a very positive impact on the rapport in the group as it often leads to very open conversations that suggest

high levels of trust and solidarity. While this is most evident in the immediate vicinity of this type of talk it seems nonetheless to be positively impacting team relationships long-term. Teams return to topics frequently after they have once been established as sources of troubles and show a lot of goodwill and empathy towards each other, which might at least in part be enabled due to the troubles talk.

Here are a few examples of troubles talk initiating self-disclosures:

5.3-9 P2_M1_E7:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 188 | Bruno: | [I was] saying to Jay yesterday (.) my/ my purpose to get a distinction (.) Right now/ I don't remember anything just give me this MBA |

5.3-10 P2_M1_E14:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1410 | David: | That was a shitty exam! |

5.3-11 P3_M1_E5:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 333 | David: | Do you know we have to get over 50% in our core modules/ in order to/ for the rest/ if we get less than 50% we have to re-sit/ So, I'm definitely going to have to re-sit |

5.3-12 P4_M7_E4:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 473 | Bev: | I miss the sun/ 30-something degrees |

5.3.13 P4_M7_E8:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 594 | Bev: | It's so shocking/ the difference in myself/ uhm before and after I ate/ I thought I was going to kill somebody before I ate |

While not all these statements are equally face-threatening to their speaker, they nonetheless reveal something that might be construed as a fault or reveal some form of vulnerability. It seems, however, that precisely because of the risk speakers accept for themselves the response rate is 100%, in a team that is generally inclined towards collaboration and goodwill. In almost all cases these statements spark similar revelations and alignments of positions between all or most members of the team. What is noticeable however is that not all team members use this particular strategy to introduce troubles talk. In fact, only Bev, David and Bruno make more face-threatening self-disclosures, while Akshya seems to choose safer statements, and Alden and Jay never initiate a troubles talk episode with a self-disclosing statement in the meetings recorded (though Jay makes them after troubles are ratified at later points in the episodes).

#### 5.3.2.3 Exclamations

Finally, another frequent way that initiates troubles talk is the 'spontaneous' reaction to something that occurs or that the speaker frames as just having realised. The exclamations

often allow for the injection of emotional reactions to something, but also offer a certain amount of immediacy which grant them more legitimacy as a 'new' topic deserving attention.

5.3-14 P2_M1_E12: Upon reading the brief for a new project

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1183 | Bev: | So we have to have a report and PowerPoint presentation shit! (.) shit! |

5.3-15 P2_M5_E5:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2502 | Bruno: | [loud sigh] This is a really fucking project to be honest |

5.3-16 P2_M6_E7:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1704 | Jay: | Fuck we have the session tomorrow, right? |

5.3-17 P4_M6_E2: Upon opening his essay corrections

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 117 | Bruno: | It's a disaster! |

As can be seen from the examples, swearing is a frequent component emphasising the importance and magnitude of the trouble, but also suggesting a level of emotional involvement that is often not made explicit at other points in time in the team. Thus, troubles are framed as important and more immediate since they have 'just' been realised. Like with the other more explicit strategies it seems that a higher risk of face threat is taken, increasing the likelihood for the topic to be taken up, while the more implicit strategies are less risky in terms of face but also increase the risk of non-uptake. As I have stated initially, often two people are involved in initiating a troubles talk and different strategies for initiation can be combined, thus we have also seen an exclamation previously in Example 5.3.1 by David in reaction to Bruno's seemingly neutral question to get the troubles talk started.

#### 5.3.2.4 Humour and laughter

Humour and sometimes only laughter are also used to initiate troubles talk. As I will discuss in more detail in section 5.4.6 humour plays a very important role in the troubles talk of the team and thus it seems unsurprising that it is used even in the onset of troubles talk. Humorous initiators notably tend to draw on the teams' potential previous failures as sources of troubles.

5.3-18 P4_M1_E4: Ironic mentioning of their worst performance so far:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 894 | Bruno: | Yeah, we did a good job in {project 2} so |

5.3-19 P2_M1_E9: PEST analysis is something they had difficulties with on another project

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 373 | David: | Nothing to do with PEST analysis, don't worry hhh |

5.3-20 P4_M6_E4: Bruno teases his team members with the suggestion that their work on a previous project was unworthy of being done by MBA students

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1071 | Bruno: | We changed the smiley hh |

This makes it unique among the other initiators as self-critique is rarely practised and unless initiated humorously does not get picked up by the team. It seems, however, that self-critique in troubles talk in the form of humour is deemed more acceptable. In some cases, laughter itself without any verbal support is used to introduce troubles talk (see Example 5.3-22), though frequently these are supplemented by visual cues.

### 5.3.3 Unsuccessful troubles statements

Finally, I will briefly consider the statements that appear to index a trouble and have the potential to initiate a troubles talk episode, but for some reason fail to do so. One reason that might affect uptake is the timing of the utterance and the location in a meeting. For example, Akshya seems to discover something she finds worthy to share about another student on her phone while the others are engaged in a discussion of task-requirements. She injects "Oh G::od [name of fellow student]" but garners no reaction. This is likely due to the fact that the others are engaged in a different topic that they have not yet finished discussing, but also to the fact that bitching about classmates is something that is rarely done and usually needs some stronger prompting than a fairly unspecific exclamation that does not indicate any personal immediacy.

Troubles that are too close to criticising the team itself are also often ignored:

5.3-21 P3_M1_E7: The team keeps debating how to best approach their new project, it's already late, and the discussion seems to go in circles. Bev injects the following utterance into a short pause in the discussion

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1333 | Bev: | Information overload for me, I can't believe this? |

Bev is commenting here on the way the meeting is run and while the utterance comes out loud and clear on the audio recording it is completely ignored by the team. An utterance like the one above might threaten the group's face (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and thus ignoring it (and the face threat) seems to be deemed the best response by all other team members.

In addition, utterances that seem to be indicating a too unspecific trouble are also ignored, sometimes repeatedly as we can see in the next extract:

5.3-22: P2_M1_E2: Beginning of team meeting, all team members present

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 48 | Jay: | OKAY what are we doing? |
| | 49 | David: | Get/ [get the ahm (.) the thing (.) first/ first to |
| → | 50 | Akshya: | [♫I'm so fucked I'm so fucked♫ |
| | 51 | Bev: | I thought you were singing "I'm so fucked. I'm so FUCKED" |
| | 52 | Akshya: | I am (.) I am |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 53 | Bev: | Yeah we all are. |
| | 54 | David: | yeah we all are/ its all right |
| → | 55 | Akshya: | I wear the wrong boots today hh (.) and for this weather (.) |
| → | | | hhh I have [been having a bad morning |
| | 56 | Jay: | [oh Go:d it's happening again (.) just give me a second to sort this stuff out |
| | 57 | | (5.0) [sounds of somebody banging equipment -presumably Jay "sorting it out"] |
| | 58 | David: | hhhhh |
| | 59 | Akshya: | what happened? hhh |
| | 60 | Jay: | David's crying |
| | 61 | David: | I want to shake him (.) I want to find him and shake him hh |

This episode is interesting as we have a number of attempts by Akshya to initiate a troubles talk episode. In fact this starts a number of turns earlier as she states “Oh go:::d” in line 24 (not part of the extract), which does not seem to respond to anything being said at the time and garners no reaction. The extract above then starts with her not very subtle chanting in line 50 of “I’m so fucked (.) I’m so fucked”, with which she overlaps Jay’s and David’s attempts to focus on the work. While Bev asks her about it in line 51, she does not invite any further debate, similar to Bev’s and David’s responses in line 53 and 54 where they confirm Akshya’s statement “yeah we all are it’s alright” but again not in a way that invites further exploration.

This exchange, however, suggests that they know exactly what Akshya is talking about even though to observers this is not clear at this point. Akshya makes another attempt at initiating troubles talk in line 55 stating “I wear the wrong boots today hh” and after a brief pause in which nobody reacts, adds “and in this weather” but again team members seem unwilling to discuss either her clothing choice nor the weather leading to Akshya adding after another brief pause “hhh I have been having a bad morning”, again without any success. At the same time, it seems that this is an introduction of a different trouble than the one before as the topics offered being “clothing choice” and “weather” neither of which seems severe enough to prompt the statement “I am so fucked”. This, however, suggests that what Akshya is trying to introduce here is the activity of doing troubles talk rather than talking about a specific trouble.

This activity is eventually nonetheless realised. During the delay in starting the work process prompted by some equipment failure it gets actually initiated by David who starts laughing in a manner that suggests physical pain (line 58) and prompts the question “what happened” (line 59) and an explanation by Jay “David’s crying” (line 60). Only after this a troubles talk episode really begins and we learn that all team members have just sat an exam that was considerably more difficult than expected and has them all worried about marks and failing the course. The ensuing episode is fairly long, continuing for another 35 lines and is accompanied by lots of laughter and has almost everybody involved (with the exception of Alden, who makes no verbal contribution but can be heard laughing along).

It seems that several reasons can be found for the non-uptake of Akshya's troubles initiators. For one, Akshya's initial attempts may have been too unspecific to actually pin-point the trouble. This can also be found in other parts of the data where an unspecified "Oh god" is ignored. In addition, they seem to be problematically positioned as they are voiced overlapping others who are clearly still engaged in a task-related activity. On the other hand, the continuous non-uptake might also point to her position in the team. Kyratzis (2000) suggests that non-uptake of troubles talk might index low group status. While Akshya is not unpopular in the team, in terms of authority and obvious leadership role she does not occupy the most prominent place and often gets mocked for either talking too much or regularly coming up with too many ideas which serves to undermine her position in the team further. As such, the fact that specifically her troubles initiators are not picked up seems at least in part also a relational issue, not just a structural one. It might also be the reason she frequently chooses the 'safer' more implicit strategies to introduce a trouble as the danger of producing a long explicit narrative and then being ignored might weigh more heavily on her. Under these considerations it also seems more obvious why Alden only introduces one troubles topic in all the meetings recorded. As we have shown elsewhere (Debray and Spencer-Oatey, under review) non-uptake is an even bigger problem for Alden than for Akshya. All this forms part of the participatory domain of rapport management, and as we could see participants seem aware of the challenges, which they face to possibly different degrees, and to actively manage and mitigate the threats involved.

Overall it seems that all team members aim to minimise the risk of non-uptake of a proposed trouble. On the one hand this might be due to the potential face threat and equity-violation involved, but it might also be a consideration of rapport. Troubles-topics are often 'offered' but it is left up to the others whether they want to pursue them further. Where topics are more forcefully introduced they tend to be framed as "important to me" (e.g. via self-disclosures) or as urgent and the fact that these strategies tend to be so successful seems to suggest a general rapport enhancing orientation, which flourishes in situations like these, where it almost seems team members are passing each other balls.

I will now turn to the realisation of troubles talk episodes in the next sections. We shall see that the collaborative nature of troubles talk that was already hinted at here becomes more striking as the troubles talk unfolds.

## 5.4 Troubles Co-Construction as Collaborative Practice

### 5.4.1 Constructing and validating troubles

As indicated in the previous section, initiating an episode of troubles talk is only possible with the cooperation and co-construction of several team members. Team members can reject or ignore a topic or can refuse to construct something as a trouble even if one team member treats a topic as such. Thus, in order for a troubles talk episode to begin, at least some members of

the team need to agree that indeed there is a trouble deserving of attention and interactional space. The next extract provides a good example on how this can be done in a team.

5.4-1 P2_M6_E11: Three hours into the team meeting

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2972 | Jay: | Okay (.) Any more points for volume? |
| 2973 | | (5.0) |
| 2974 | David: | I'm gonna be honest with you (.) |
| | | I'm losing= |
| 2975 | Bruno: | =losing [it |
| 2976 | David: | [losing interest in this |
| 2977 | Akshya: | yeah |
| 2978 | Jay: | yeah |
| 2979 | Bev: | hhhh [laughing and crying at the same time] |

The troubles talk episode is initiated by David (line 2974) with a self-disclosure after a prolonged silence, indicating his loss of interest. Bruno immediately agrees by trying to complete David's sentence adding "losing it" while David continues with "losing interest", but nonetheless clearly aligns himself with the sentiment David is expressing. Akshya and Jay also are quick to add their agreement in line 2977 and 2978 while Bev reinforces the trouble with some rather desperate sounding laughter in line 2979 that seems to suggest that she has been at this point for a while, but also injects some humour into the situation. For all accounts and purposes, we have a quick and basically flawless introduction of a trouble that gets immediately accepted and validated not only as a legitimate trouble but even as a shared trouble that affects every member of the team (Alden stays silent here, but adds to the episode later on). From a rapport management perspective, we have a number of domains managed effectively: Discursively the topic is immediately taken up, in regards to participation a number of speakers take turns and seem to be heard in addition to Bruno's attempt to complete David's utterance; stylistically we have plenty of alignment with the mirrored "losing" and "yeah", in addition to some humour. From an illocutionary perspective we see a self-disclosure by David that gets introduced with "I'm gonna be honest" thus positioning him in a positive light despite the potential face-loss by mentioning his losing interest, which gets mitigated with Bruno's alignment in line 2975 anyways. Thus, rapport seems not only to not have been harmed but was probably enhanced not only by the way the talk played out but also by the discovery of common ground ("we are all tired") and by the initiation of a discussion to jointly adjust their goals for this meeting.

It should be noted that there are not many examples of troubles talk in the data where the validation of a trouble runs as smoothly as here; in most cases more negotiation takes place to settle on a trouble and on the severity attributed to it. I will deal with this later in section 5.5.1.

For now, I will turn to some of the features common in troubles construction and validation and the joint narration of a troubles talk that follows as soon as a trouble is sufficiently validated.

Validation can comprise a number of different features. In the last example explicit agreement was prominent through agreement tokens and vicarious utterance completion, while Bev's laughter added to the severity of the trouble, thus validating it further. The following example provides a very different validation of a topic as a trouble. We have seen the initiation of this troubles episode above in section 5.3.3 where Akshya repeatedly fails to gain uptake, but a troubles talk episode gets established after David starts laughing desperately. However, after initiating the episode, instead of David developing a narrative on the trouble or a justification for treating it as a trouble, this becomes jointly constructed by the team. Fascinatingly, despite the absence of a single person developing a full narrative, over the course of the interaction enough contextual information is provided to understand the nature of the trouble as an outsider. Thus, bit by bit a shared narrative is composed by all interactants that they all seem to accept as true.

5.4-2 P2_M1_E3: Bruno and Alden have just stepped outside to get coffees, so only Jay, Akshya, David and Bev are present

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 56 | Jay: | oh God it's happening again (.) just give me a second to sort this stuff out |
| 57 | | (5.0) [sounds of somebody banging equipment - presumably Jay "sorting it out"] |
| 58 | David: | hhhhh |
| 59 | Akshya: | what happened? hhh |
| 60 | Jay: | David's crying |
| 61 | David: | I want to shake him (.) I want to find him (.) and shake him |
| 62 | | ((laughter)) |
| 63 | Bev: | Shake his (xxx) |
| 64 | David: | WHY? |
| 65 | Bev: | hhhh |
| 66 | Akshya: | we actually HAD a session to solve those (.) question papers |
| 67 | David: | what's what's the point? |
| 68 | Akshya: | I mean like (.) EXACTLY! |
| 69 | David: | what is the point? |
| 70 | Akshya: | He could have at least told during the session "guys this is all fine/ but the test is gonna be different/ and it's gonna be harder" |
| 71 | Bev: | Hhh |
| 72 | David: | yeah it's gonna be a lot [harder |
| 73 | Jay: | [No that that's what I was telling him/ I think he did more bad than good by sharing previous years' papers because we were all like really confident |
| 74 | Akshya: | YEAH (.) [and then |
| 75 | David: | [last year (.) They must have all gotten really good marks last year |
| 76 | Bev: | I know |
| 77 | Jay: | yeah |
| 78 | Akshya: | yeah |
| 79 | David: | and then they must have been like "oh we can't have this" hhhh |
| 80 | | ((laughter)) |
| 81 | Akshya: | oh God (.) This is bad |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 82 | Bev: | no it isn't [so long as we... |
| 83 | David: | [AT no point did he say it's gonna be a lot more difficult |
| 84 | Jay: | a lot is an understatement |
| 85 | David: | Jesus! (.) FUCKING tittie a::h |
| 86 | Jay: | you're gonna punch someone aren't you? hh |
| 87 | Bev: | hhh you need a punching bag |

This fairly long extract provides a good example of the joint construction of a narrative. The laughter in line 62 coming from all members of the team in response to David's "I want to shake him I want to find him and shake him" functions as a validation that this is an acceptable topic to pursue and also indicates an affiliation with the trouble. Interestingly, no explanation as to who David is referring to is given although this topic has not come up in the 50 turns that occurred since team members have entered the room. Enfield (2009) suggests that such elliptic utterances are important in minimising interactional distance as they indicate how much ground is shared between interlocutors. As an analyst the initial utterances might seem rather obscure but gradually the story then gets revealed by different speakers adding different points to the story.

Instead of a re-telling of the story by one participant the team members compose a narrative together of having written an exam (which never gets made explicit), for which the professor even bothered to have a special preparation class (line 66) in which he showed last year's exam paper (line 73) that was so easy that students underestimated the difficulty of the actual exam (line 70-72 & line 83) and have likely now performed a lot worse than they otherwise would have (line 73) for which they assign blame to the professor (line 61). David spins the narrative even further by introducing a fictitious story of what happened last year after the exams (line 75 & 79). What seems striking is that despite them referring to a context they perceive to be shared, so many details are nonetheless made explicit. Team members are not exchanging new information here though, instead they are presenting their own interpretation and checking whether others' interpretations align. With this they are not only creating a shared understanding and common ground but also a sense of solidarity after jointly having experienced something they perceive as unfair.

Troubles thus get progressively more defined and explicit over the course of the interaction. The trouble could be constructed to be "the exam" or one's own performance but led by David the team constructs the professor's "misleading" behaviour as the "real" trouble, thus creating a shared understanding of the situation that has not necessarily existed before. We have only one disagreement on the assessment of the trouble at the end. Akshya states in line 81 "oh God (.) this is bad", a fairly unspecific but quite negative assessment. Such an assessment (especially when it is fairly general) tends to be contested across the data set and indeed, Bev disagrees by saying: "no it isn't so long as we" (line 82). With this she makes a move towards closing the troubles sequence and focusing away from the trouble towards a more solution-oriented approach. This could be problematic from a rapport management perspective as Bev

is disaffiliating from the team with this move. At the same time, one could argue that Akshya's negativity might negatively affect group mood and thus could threaten rapport. Jefferson discusses this behaviour in terms of the convergence of troubles talk and a service encounter (Jefferson & Lee, 1981), highlighting that these moves towards advice giving or towards a solution tend to index a move towards a closure of the episode and are thus often ignored if they come too early in a troubles sequence. And in fact, in line 81 we see that Bev gets interrupted half way through by David who seems not done discussing the topic. At the same time, Bev's statement foreshadows the nearing end of the episode and initiates a negotiation of the troubles assessment in terms of the severity of the troubles.

The entire episode has up to this point been characterised by lots of laughter. This seems surprising as the trouble they are discussing could be considered very serious and with a direct impact on team members' marks. Nonetheless, utterances are frequently accompanied by the producers' laughter and in line 58 and line 79 are received by loud laughter from all team members present. The moment somebody, in this case Akshya in line 81, produces a non-humorous negative assessment, however, it gets immediately rejected by another team member.

While Bev seems unwilling to allow a too negative framing of the troubles and thus disagrees in line 82, David is not yet done with the elaboration of the troubles, making a more explicit complaint about the professor in line 83. Jay agrees first (line 84) but in line 85 David changes his tone, which had started out quite humorous and produces a very negative assessment with some very strong language that is not accompanied by laughter. David now sounds actually angry and there is an immediate move by both Jay and Bev to distance themselves from David and his more severe and angry assessment of the troubles by stating: "you're gonna punch someone aren't you? hh" (line 86) and "hhh you need a punching bag" (line 87). While the first part of the troubles episode firmly established team members as jointly sharing a trouble, pronoun use now establishes David as the only one who could punch somebody or who needs a punching bag.

Before this relationally possibly more problematic end, we can see however how the collaborative style with which the participation-domain is handled plays an important part in enhancing solidarity and is crucial in establishing a shared story and the accompanying sense of solidarity. If the floor had not been shared here, and instead one person had told the story alone it seems unlikely that the same degree of humour could have been achieved or that there would have been the same amount of convergence in people's perspectives. The shared floor with mostly short turns and quick speaker changes allows for the joint construction of the story in the first place. In a sense the degree with which the floor is shared and the story is constructed jointly by the group seems to affect the more general sense of togetherness and sharedness as indicated by the frequent laughter and overall happy seeming team mates.

When this changes in line 85 with David's apparent anger we see that team members politely and humorously, but also quickly, disaffiliate. This is probably in order to avoid being put in

a position where an association with David's anger might cause them to lose face, but also may be because the rapport enhancing orientation they have displayed does not match with the negative emotions David displays. Like Bev's disaffiliation from Akshya in line 82 this is another example of a disaffiliation from a team member's utterance that could threaten some of the rapport achieved in the interaction.

While one could read this as a rapport harming move when looking at the disaffiliation itself, when looking at its context it becomes, to the contrary, a rapport maintaining move, as rapport maintenance at the group level is prioritised over the relationship between the dyad. It should be noted though that both Bev and Jay also work on saving David's face by injecting humour into their disaffiliative responses.

I will now turn to another collaborative form of dealing with troubles talk, that seems to complement shared story-telling or replace it where shared story-telling is not possible.

### 5.4.2 Exploring troubles

Exploring troubles is a move present in almost all troubles talk episodes. Team members try to pin-point the trouble and then inquire and elaborate on its different facets or aspects. Team members ask for clarification or elaboration or prompt further explanations with their own contributions. With this they give their team members the space to expand on the trouble and aid in constructing it. The following example illustrates the forms this exploration takes and the importance it has for troubles narration:

5.4-3 P3_M2_E4: The team is discussing an exam they have written recently

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 437 | Bruno: | I/ I answered all three questions by the way |
| 438 | Bev: | ↑WHY?↑ |
| 439 | Bruno: | Because I'm/ because I didn't read through the |
| 440 | Jay: | Yeah/ he answered all three hhhh |
| 441 | Bev: | Oh my::. |
| 442 | Bruno: | All three questions |
| 443 | Alden: | hhhh |
| 444 | Akshya: | You had time for that? |
| 445 | Bev: | Yeah? |
| 446 | | ((laughter)) |
| 447 | David: | hhh no one had time for that. |
| 448 | Bruno: | Not at all/ that's why I answered each question just writing s:o much |
| 449 | Alden: | You know last time/ I asked Bruno "which question you answer"/ Bruno shocked |
| 450 | Bruno: | I was shocked exactly/ When he a:sked me "which question did you answer?" I thought/ "what the hell? What he's asking me?" |
| 451 | | ((laughter)) |
| 452 | Bruno: | And he said "yeah, you have to answer just one question"/ I said "n::::o" |
| 453 | | ((laughter)) |

This extract is part of a longer troubles talk episode. At the beginning of the episode most team members agree that they have failed at least one exam. This paves the way for Bruno to tell his team about his personal trouble with the exam which will probably result in him actually having to re-take it (unlike the others). He starts with a short self-disclosure only stating "I answered all three questions by the way" (line 437), which is followed by a brief pause. While Bev answers with a surprised "WHY?" (line 438) fairly quickly, she is not interrupting Bruno in his explanations. It seems Bruno is actually done with his utterance and is not attempting to elaborate further. Since personal troubles are rarely shared, it seems that he is leaving it up to the team to pursue this topic further, thus respecting their association rights. Bev's answer, however, signals interest in the story and asks for more information, prompting Bruno to explain that he did not read the brief properly (line 439), which seems to be a crucial part of the story in order to understand what happened. However, it seems that we maybe would not have learnt this had Bev not prompted Bruno to continue. During the next few turns team members alternatingly provide their take on the situation and inquire further. Jay confirms and repeats the story but laughs at the end, suggesting they treat the incident with humour, something Bruno could have contested but does not, which permits a humorous treatment of the incident for the others. Bev at the same time (line 441) states "oh my::." suggesting that she attributes a certain amount of gravity to the situation and commiserates with Bruno. While neither Jay nor Bev at this point produces a question, their utterances nonetheless explore different facets of the trouble and probe which take on it is deemed appropriate. Humorous and serious treatment both belong to the stylistic domain. While Bev's utterance provides a recognition of the gravity and is thus affiliative, it is Jay's more humorous utterance that is adopted by the team. Here it seems to function mostly in mitigating the threat this incident poses for Bruno's face. Making it a laughing matter essentially establishes it as "not too bad" and "something that could have happened to any of them".

Next Akshya adds "you had time for that?" (line 444) directly inquiring for a continuation of the story. Her question initially only prompts loud laughter in the group, with which its slightly ludicrous nature seems to be emphasised and ultimately David responds "no one had time for that" (line 447). Bruno then explains "Not at all. That's why I answered each question just writing s:o much" (line 448). This ultimately prompts Alden to share his take on the situation as Bruno only realised his mistake in a conversation with Alden, which the two then narrate together.

Overall the questions in this example seem less focused on eliciting a specific piece of information but seem more targeted at helping to elicit the story by signalling interest and by directly allocating turns and with that interactional space to Bruno. The same is true for the other utterances which highlight specific aspects or nuances or add individual takes on the situation. While this is one of the few instances where somebody is sharing a personal trouble, nonetheless that person is not developing a full narrative but still co-constructs it with the team that knows enough of the context to be able to add specific cues to it, constructing it at the same time as a grave but hilarious mistake and with that as completely forgivable. In this

example we can see again a shared use of the floor by all team members. This time team members purposefully create space for Bruno's troubles which suggests again a rapport enhancing management of the participatory domain. In this case the turn taking is less fast-paced than in the previous example, generating a more harmonious and attentive mood. Team members jointly commiserate but also laugh at the troubles after this seems to be established as an appropriate response.

### 5.4.3 Escalation in troubles narratives

Another frequent feature in the construction and narration of a troubles talk episode is an escalation of the episode. This in part has to do with the often ambiguous initiation and troubles often being made explicit only gradually, but also with the way the floor is shared, as each team member taking a turn needs to contribute something "new" and cannot just repeat what has been said before. In this team members thus slowly stretch and test the limits of the troubles construction in terms of its interpretation, the culpability of people involved and its severity. In Example 5.4-2, for example, Akshya suggests that the test was "harder" than the preparation exam paper suggested (line 70), an assessment that David upgrades in line 72 to "a lot harder". Equally, nuances in content are added, for example by David suggesting that this was done on purpose as students last year performed very well – suggesting almost malicious intent in making students perform worse, a suggestion that was not there from the beginning or at least not explicitly.

We find an escalation of this sort in almost all troubles episodes, although it is particularly pronounced in the more humorous ones. In the instance below, the troubles talk starts over what are seen as absurd criteria for the submission of an assignment. With that topic coming to an end the team continues to read the instructions. Akshya re-kindles the troubles talk by repeating a part of the sentence she has just read in a disbelieving voice in line 1233. As an outsider it seems difficult to understand why this should be so outrageous, a question that holds for much of the episode, but it seems to be a product of the previously established troubles talk mode and the joint construction of this assignment brief as a trouble which the team continues to stick to in this renewed episode:

5.4-4 P2_M1_E12: The team is reading the brief of their new assignment

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1233 | Akshya: | ((reads)) "the summary should not be more than 250 words" (.) THE SUMMARY h |
| 1234 | Bev: | hhhhh |
| 1235 | David: | no not the whole report that's like a text message hh |
| 1236 | | ((laughter)) |
| 1237 | Akshya: | yeah |
| 1238 | Bruno: | we can send it via what's app |
| 1239 | David: | A what's app hhh |
| 1240 | | ((laughter)) |
| 1241 | David: | OH >>1500 words?<< ((exaggerated voice)) |
| 1242 | | ((laughter)) |
| 1243 | David: | that's ten text messages hh |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1244 | | ((laughter)) |
| 1245 | Akshya: | including hundred (xxx) hhhhhhh |
| 1246 | David: | are you shitting me? (.) maybe we should choose a company that got a short like/ |
| 1247 | Bev: | excluding cover page hhh |
| 1248 | David: | 1500 words let's just not use vowels or or write "[name of company] operation good" |

During the episode we see a further escalation in assessments and the construction of the trouble and the (fake) solutions offered. The entire episode is accompanied by loud laughter that gets re-enforced with every utterance. Akshya's initiation and indication that there is some trouble around the length of the summary gets first corrected by David who states: "no not the whole report" (line 1235) but who then joins in the humour by saying "that's like a text message" sparking roaring laughter in the room. This is an obvious exaggeration as a traditional text messages features 160 characters, not 250 words but this seems unimportant to the team at this point in time. Bruno escalates this further by suggesting that they actually hand it in via WhatsApp, adding to the sense that the task given is ridiculous and fundamentally a trouble. This continues even when David reads out from the brief again that the report is actually meant to be 1500 words long. His intonation again makes this sound like a preposterous demand (line 1241) that gets exaggerated further by the suggestions to choose a company with a short name as a client (line 1246 – note that the word "name" never gets said, but seems to be what he is referring to) or to not use vowels throughout the report (line 1248). These escalating exaggerations seem needed to maintain the interpretation of this as a trouble in itself but also to maintain the level of humour in the team, that they all seem to enjoy together. In line 1247 Bev produces an utterance that seems to directly contradict the trouble constructed by emphasising that this 'low' wordcount actually excludes the cover page (thus giving the team a few more words to spend on the report itself, as opposed to less). Her intonation, however, remains the same as before when more 'outrageous' task guidelines were read out and as such the logical contradiction never gets made explicit. In many episodes at some point the escalation within troubles talk is contested or given boundaries, but it seems that here this is sacrificed in favour of continuing to laugh together over a shared trouble even when this has reached a point that seems detached from the reality of the trouble.

The joint construction of the task as outrageous and the humorous scenarios the team jointly envisions to deal with it lead to a further establishment of common ground within the team. The construction of the narrative and the escalating nature turn this troubles talk episode almost in an episode of fantasy humour (Hay, 2001). As this genre or activity change is brought on collaboratively by the team, this seems to only enhance rapport further as it emphasises how much on the same page they are regarding the brief they have been given. As before we can see how styles in terms of humour converge, while the floor is collaboratively shared and each utterance is received by loud laughter, enhancing the previous speaker's face.

While this analysis is limited to troubles talk, it seems at least a possibility that this escalation is a feature of shared narratives in general. A jointly constructed narrative, as frequently done in troubles talk, lives through different people adding different nuances, interpretations and information to a story; however, to keep up the tension and interest it seems likely that escalation becomes a recurring feature in joint accounts. While Example 5.4-4 indicates an increasingly escalating episode that eventually only comes to an end when the team is done reading the brief, Example 5.4-3 shows how once escalation has reached its peak and further negative assessments are signalled to be inappropriate, a troubles talk episode comes to an end and team members revert back to "business as usual" or attempt to introduce another troubles topic to start a new troubles episode. I will take a closer look at troubles endings in section 5.6.2 but first will discuss some other features that appear recurrently in troubles talk and constitute collaborative practices.

### 5.4.4 Alignment in troubles: The case of self-disclosures

As indicated before, self-disclosures are a common occurrence in the troubles talk data collected. Interactionally, self-disclosures seem particularly risky but also have the potential of connecting their speaker more closely to others, by minimising distance, increasing understanding, empathy and potentially even gaining support in one's troubles. While the data overall rarely features personal talk, troubles talk tends to feature frequent disclosures about the self or states of mind, worries about the future or negative assessments about one's own performance. Thus, in regard to the discursive domain, troubles talk seems to allow team members to discuss topics they otherwise cannot talk about in the team.

As shown earlier these self-disclosures are sometimes used to initiate troubles talk and there is not a single incident in the data where a topic introduced via a self-disclosure was not taken up and given attention by the team. We have seen one example of an initiating self-disclosure before in Example 5.4-1 which was initiated by David stating "I'm gonna be honest with you I'm losing interest in this" and while this is not a very grave or personal information to disclose, nonetheless there is at least the risk of it negatively affecting perceptions and assessments by other team members, something David orients to by opening the disclosure with "I'm gonna be honest with you". As honesty tends to be constructed as a virtue, this makes it more difficult to negatively evaluate David's self-disclosure. In addition, he shows awareness of the norms that are in place in a team meeting, in that one should always be interested, positioning him as a good team member who must have some strong incentive to lose interest at this precise moment. It seems unsurprising therefore, that – as we have seen – the team is quick to emphasise that they were feeling the same as David, which led to a discussion about how and when to continue and seems to have had no negative repercussions for the perception of David nor for the relationships in the team. Similar instances can be found again and again in the data as can be seen in the following examples:

5.4-5 P4_M6_E1: The team meeting pauses to get coffees. David has just stepped outside.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 83 | | (4.0) |
| → | 84 | Bruno: | Oh yeah/ Nice (.) My girlfriend/ she sent me back my assignment (.) [and o:h g::od |
| | 85 | | [((laughter)) |
| | 86 | I: | Is she proofreading all of yours? |
| | 87 | Bruno: | Yeah |
| → | 88 | Bev: | My husband is turning mine into a red minefield |
| | 89 | | ((laughter)) |

5.4-6 P3_M2_E3: During a break David brings up a new topic by mentioning an assignment

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 409 | David: | We should get the results soon as well shouldn't we? |
| 410 | Bev: | hhh I feel nervous about not/ I don't want to get that |
| 411 | Jay: | I don't want to get it |
| 412 | Bev: | I feel like I failed all my tests. So, what's the point of getting all the results? |
| 413 | Akshya: | I have no idea |
| 414 | Bruno: | Yeah, me too hh |
| 415 | Bev: | yeah hh |
| 416 | Akshya: | I screwed up even marketing |
| 417 | Bev: | I failed all |
| 418 | Bruno: | Me too. After Christmas it's fine |
| 419 | Bev: | Yeah/ I don't want to see it because it will ruin my Christmas |
| 420 | Bruno: | Yeah me too. I was so upset. I was so upset |

In the first example Bruno initiates talk about his written assignments and the proofreading involved by telling the others in a fairly desperate voice that his girlfriend had sent his assignment back. This is not the first time they have talked about proofreading and through the previous conversation and Bruno's intonation the others predict the negative turn his utterance takes and start laughing even before he sighs and says "oh god". Bruno speaks English as his third language and has frequently and openly commented about the additional difficulties he faces when having to write in English. While Bruno adds more details about the number of errors his girlfriend found and his frustration about this later on, in this exchange Bev immediately jumps to emphasise that this is a shared struggle and a shared experience by reciprocating the self-disclosure with stating "My husband is turning mine into a red minefield" in line 88. While this might be true, for Bev English is nonetheless her first language and she has noticeably less problems with reading, writing or speaking than Bruno. As such, the utterance seems to function mainly to maintain or re-establish interactional equilibrium, but also to re-assure Bruno that this does not mean that he is less intelligent, or that his assignments are worse written. In addition, Bruno's utterance is received by a fair bit of laughter, which in the recording does not sound mean-spirited, but seems to imply understanding of Bruno's experience and that it is not in fact a 'serious' trouble that could reflect negatively on Bruno. The exaggerated wording and metaphor in Bev's reciprocal self-disclosure also seems to function as continuing with the humorous treatment of this issue by the team and sparks another round of laughter.

In Example 5.4-6 a troubles talk episode about potentially bad results is introduced by David's reminder that results should be coming in soon. This sparks a series of self-disclosures about how badly each of them thinks they have done in the exams. These self-disclosures are likely more pre-emptive face-saving strategies or an expression of worry than a very serious assessment of one's performance. However, we can see again how team members are keen to establish an equal status amongst themselves and are willing to emphasise their own poor performance in order to maintain this. One outcome of this episode is that it prompts Bruno in line 420 to point towards a more serious self-disclosure regarding the exams, which he foreshadows by stating "I was so upset". While there is a brief interruption first, Bev inquires a few lines later what Bruno was upset about and he reports on the actually more serious mistake over misreading the exam questions we have already seen above (Example 5.4-3). However, given the other team members' admissions about their worries regarding their own performance, mentioning it is now less face threatening for Bruno.

While self-disclosures sometimes seem more focused on mitigating and pre-empting face threats and maintaining interactional equilibrium (e.g. Examples 5.4-5 & 5.4-6), there are also incidents in the data where participants respond almost with relief at somebody finally admitting to a problem (e.g. Example 5.4-1). In all cases these utterances tend to spark often overlapping agreements and relationship enhancing practices including joint laughter, further inquiries and a reciprocation of self-disclosures.

Interestingly, it seems that exactly the willingness to risk a threat to one's own face is what contributes significantly to enhancing rapport. It signals trust and opens up a floor that tends to be honest, open and focused on maintaining equality. This is not always present in the team, especially during task-focused discussion where team members are sometimes focused on defending their own opinion and interpersonal goals which sometimes leads to one-upmanship. Yet this is completely absent here, as we can see from the vehemence with which others reciprocate the admission of likely having failed too. Troubles talk thus seems to open up a particular type of floor, that might not always be available to team members in other types of talk.

### 5.4.5 Explicit negative evaluations vs complaints

With self-disclosures, I have considered in the last section a speech act that at least in the data collected here seems to be an important aspect of troubles talk. Within the troubles talk literature, however, another speech act is considered more important in signalling troubles talk. I will discuss this only briefly in order not to omit a potentially important facet of troubles talk; however, since it seems less important for relating than some of the other features I am discussing, I will keep it relatively short.

Considering that indirect complaints sometimes are taken as the main feature of troubles talk (Boxer, 1993a) I initially applied this code fairly frequently to my data. Over the course of time it seemed, though, that the statements I had considered to be complaints covered very

different features that perhaps got obscured by my adoption of the concept of indirect complaints (i.e. complaints that are not directed at a person who is seen to be at fault). Haugh (2016) in fact makes a distinction between troubles talk and complaining and suggests that indirect complaints feature an attribution of blame, while troubles talk does not. He further suggests that complaints lead to disalignment, while troubles talk leads to alignment.

There was no evidence of this phenomenon in the data here. This strict differentiation seems not applicable to the data collected, because complaints and troubles talk (used according to Haugh's definition) often seem to co-exist within the same episode of talk. In addition, no consistent evidence of disaligning with complaints was found. His differentiation, however, led me to re-categorise many of the codes I had previously assigned under the label "indirect complaint". Looking through them again it seemed that many instances that I had considered to be "a complaint" could equally well be described as an "explicit negative evaluation or assessment" that was however missing any direct or explicit attribution of blame. In fact, only a fifth of the instances previously collected under "complaint" featured any attribution of blame at all – although many of course could be considered to do so implicitly. Nonetheless, the small number of complaints that featured attributions of blame seemed surprising (in total 24 incidents in 107 episodes). It seems that in general in the team negative assessments of people either by gossip or by assigning blame is not practised particularly often. There are a few instances outside of troubles talk where this happens and is sanctioned quite strongly by the team (interestingly not during troubles talk episodes though) so it seems that as a rule team members avoid this behaviour. It is likely that this protects one's own face in the team, but also the rapport amongst team members who avoid potential conflict.

Where complaints were voiced they tended to be made about professors, clients or administration people – therefore only people who can be considered as somehow in charge. Both negative assessments but also complaints were used in a similar fashion in the troubles talk episodes: for validating troubles but also to escalate the talk further or provide interpretations on different aspects.

While disaffiliation was not always associated with a complaint, there is nonetheless a pattern in the data that seems to indicate disaffiliation rather than assigning of blame: Team members disaffiliate whenever a person indicated actual anger both while producing a complaint or an explicit negative evaluation, as we have already seen in several extracts.

After discussing the discursive and participatory domain at the beginning of the chapter, and the illocutionary domain in this section, I will now turn to some stylistic features that seem omnipresent in troubles talk: Laughing and swearing.

### 5.4.6 Laughing and swearing

Some readers may have already noticed both these features in the extracts provided above as they are so ubiquitous. Both features are present in the majority of troubles talk episodes.

While they might seem initially as stylistic opposites (we tend to think of laughter as happy and swearing as angry), they serve both to release tension and also to make emotions more tangible or explicit in an exchange. Thus, while their frequency initially seemed surprising (the team does not generally tend to swear a lot and laughter might seem misplaced when dealing with more serious troubles), when considering it more carefully, finding ways to express and release tension but also indicate that one does not treat a trouble in a very serious way does seem like a logical feature in a troubles episode. I will first discuss swearing before then turning to laughter.

#### 5.4.6.1 Swearing

Swearing seems to occur fairly frequently during troubles talk, but hardly ever in other types of talk in the data. During troubles talk a swear word is used approximately once in 198 words, while in all other types of talk (minus troubles talk) a swear word appears only once in 1508 words.

I understand swearing to mean the usage of taboo words that are traditionally understood to constitute complaints or tension relief (i.e. "shit" or "damn") in contexts where these words are used figuratively rather than literally and are accompanied by intonation patterns that suggest a negative assessment or a release of frustration. While this might seem as a rudimentary definition it was quite adequate for dealing with the data at hand as there were hardly any incidents of particularly creative swearing.

By far the most frequent word is "fuck" or "fucking" (29 times) followed by "shit", "shitty", "crap" (26 times) or some variation of "Jeez", "Jesus", "Christ" or "God" (19 times) out of a total of 79 instances (the other words were "damn" and "bollocks"). While the last group of words is religiously connotated it should be noted that both Christians and non-Christians in the team used it and no indication of taking offense was ever given while I was present nor was it mentioned in the interviews.

Swearing is not distributed equally among speakers though: Out of 79 incidents of swearing, in 36 cases David is the speaker, while the other 43 cases were distributed fairly equally among the others, with the exception of Alden who only once states: "Oh go::d".

In the data sample swearing was generally not used as a sign of aggression or an insult to people present. There is no instance where another team member is addressed or referred to by a swear word (within and outside of troubles talk), instead they seem reserved for the assessment of troubles or situations in more general terms and are usually used to express emotions such as anger or frustration (Jay, 2009) and for emphasis (Stapleton, 2010).

The literature on swearing tends to highlight its positive functions if not used aggressively and it tends to be seen as providing a relief from frustration, and as enhancing relationships and social cohesion (Baruch, Prouska, Ollier-Malaterre, & Bunk, 2017). This seems dependent on the fact that swearing is indeed endorsed by all interlocutors and in an intercultural team

swearing seems a case where sociopragmatic principles may well diverge. In the team under study here it seems however, that this was mostly unproblematic as the following examples show.

5.4-7 P2_M1_E12: The team is reading the brief for their new project

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1205 | David: | wow wow wow we have to do a report? |
| 1206 | Bev: | YEAH |
| 1207 | David: | for fucks sake |
| 1208 | Alden: | Hhhh |

David exclaims “for fucks sake” in line 1207. Alden reacts to this with a brief laugh. On the recording the laugh sounds both surprised and amused but not hostile. It seems that while there is a sociopragmatic principle in place (“don’t swear”) to whose breaching Alden is reacting, the joint breaking of this rule might in fact enhance rapport rather than threaten it. I don’t want to suggest by any means that this is a general rule, it seems reserved to swearing in a context where interlocutors have already established some relationship and the breech in sociopragmatic principle is not hostile but actually emphasises a shared fate.

In a similar vein, we can find team members swearing together at jointly perceived troubles.

5.4-8 P3_M2_E5: The team has just voted on which aspect of a company portfolio to focus on. The vote decided that they are going to focus on end-to-end solutions

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 577 | Bev: | Solution | |
| 578 | Bruno: | Oh shit | |
| 579 | Jay: | Solutio::::ns | |
| 580 | Bev: | Shi:::::t | |
| 581 | Bruno: | Shit! It's more complicated solu[tions | |
| 582 | Bev: | shit | [Solutions is so complicated |

Bev announces the outcome of the vote in line 577. Bruno immediately indicates a negative reaction to this decision by stating “oh shit” in line 578. Jay more excitedly repeats “solutio::::ns” in line 579, while Bev moves to mirror Bruno’s sentiment by also stating “shit”, with the same prolonged emphasis in the middle of the word as Jay used for solution. Both Bruno and Bev repeat the word twice again, and it seems almost like a game of ping-pong. Their management of the stylistic domain here suggests that they are completely in sync and share the same outlook on the new project. With this they seem to develop a sense of a shared common ground in this episode that might make them allies in at least some aspect of this project.

Swearing is also used to index solidarity and support and thus, even more explicitly than above, as a rapport enhancement strategy:

5.4-9 P4_M4_E5: Bruno has told his team that he might not be able to attend their joint presentation as he might have to go to a job interview that day and is assured that this is fine he then moves to add the following

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 141 | Bruno: | Yeah, and, on the 23rd, I have also to re-sit operations |
| | 142 | David: | What, really? 21st, 22nd, on the 23rd? |
| | 143 | Bruno: | On the 23rd, yes |
| → | 144 | David: | Fuck |
| | 145 | Bruno: | yes yes |
| → | 146 | David: | [Jesus man, it's a week for you, isn't it? Hhh |
| | 147 | Bruno: | [it's gonna be Yeah, exactly (.) It's going to be fun |
| → | 148 | David: | Right (.) Christ |

This exchange is markedly only held between two team members. This is somewhat surprising as the team often engages in joint troubles talk on scheduling issues and it seems likely that the others would also express solidarity with Bruno. Yet, this episode plays out differently.

David is the task master for this project and tends to be vocal about team members arriving late or otherwise not pulling their weight. David seems to quickly adopt the role of main addressee here, and his double-checking of the date in line 142 might suggest a more work-related interest than pure concern for a team member. However, after this he quickly adopts the role of concerned team member, by repeatedly expressing how unfortunate the timing is for Bruno by first stating "fuck" which could be seen as more ambiguously referring to the team (for losing a member albeit briefly), however he then specifies in his next turn (line 146) by stating "Jesus man/ it's a week for you, isn't it?". Swearing here is as such used to signal understanding and empathy with a team member and as a recognition of the troubles they are facing. At the same time David's slightly ambiguous role change from "task manager, who makes sure the work gets done" to "concerned team member" seems to require the strongly empathetic language swear words provide him with.

There is only one incident in the data where a team member starts swearing in a fairly angry manner repeatedly. However, as with most signs of actual anger in troubles talk, team members disaffiliate pretty quickly, leading to the episode playing out quite differently to the one just shown. While the others do engage in the troubles talk, which focuses on the discovery that several big projects are being due at the same time, there is a marked absence of swearing. Team members state "Oh no" repeatedly but steer away from any indication of real anger that might affiliate them with David who keeps repeating "what the fuck is wrong with them?". Unlike the ping-ponging of "shit" above, in this incident the others seem to avoid any such expression, suggesting distancing and potential disalignment. While I have touched on this topic repeatedly, it seems important to re-iterate that emotional outbursts seem only permitted for a really short amount of time. While this is generally true it seems particularly true for swearing. David and Bev, the only ones who seem to have moments where they show 'actual' and prolonged anger at something, do not receive support for their actual anger. It seems that negative emotions are only permitted (and approved) in passing, but are otherwise

disavowed by the team at least with distancing, but sometimes with more explicit criticisms. Swear words seem as such a very useful way of releasing and signalling those emotions as they can be quickly injected into an interaction, but can be used in a way that does not allow the negative emotions to take centre-stage, while potentially having relationship-enhancing functions.

Swearing thus seems both to help release frustration at troubles but also to signal common ground and understanding amongst team members against outside troubles. Joint swearing as a potential norm violation or violation of sociopragmatic principles further seems to enhance the rapport in the team. As with self-disclosures, troubles talk seems to provide a frame in which a potentially rapport enhancing activity seems to take place that otherwise is almost absent from the data.

Before turning to laughter in the next section, there is one further interesting thing to note with regard to swearing: It does not increase over time in this data set. Thus, growing familiarity does not seem to lead team members to swear more often. As I stated earlier, team members tend to not swear overly much (though comparative data is hard to find, which makes this a purely personal judgement by the analyst) and in many ways tend to treat each other and their workplace with respect. However, this only emphasises the expressiveness of swearwords when they do occur.

#### 5.4.5.2 Laughter

Laughter is ubiquitous in troubles talk in this data set. While there are a great number of individuals laughing during troubles talk, performing different functions, we also have a great number of "group laughs", during which for several seconds the whole team seems to join in and laugh together at a trouble. Jefferson (1984b) stated that with laughing during troubles talk the interlocutors position themselves as managing and as coping. Laughing in the face of a trouble therefore fulfils important face and identity work. In this data set they seem to do something fundamental and important with laughter, in addition to signalling resistance: Signalling that "this is play" (Bateson, 1972). As we have seen in some of the extracts earlier and will see again and again in this chapter, team members disaffiliate where there seem to be actual negative emotions beyond a very momentary outburst. To some extent there is no space for actual anger and actual frustration to be voiced in this team during troubles talk, it can only be voiced as play. Laughing makes it evident that "this is play" and therefore can be pursued as a topic in the team. I will discuss why this might be the case later in section 5.6, and will now turn again to the more psychological functions of laughter as coping and how exactly it is injected into troubles talk episodes.

Research from psychology suggests that by laughing, somebody with troubles is actually coping (Lefcourt, 2001); thus troubles talk and the laughter within it might be an important way of actually dealing with the situations team members are experiencing. In addition, troubles often threaten interpersonal goals and sociality rights and obligations with regards

to both individual and team goals and team rights. The team explicitly comments on some practices as not fair, marking violations of equity rights and emphasise how much the full schedules and especially the deadline clashes impact their goals of finding jobs or spending time with their families. Often there is nothing that the team or the individuals can do to prevent this or to fight back. The only option for them is to jointly laugh at these threats in order to mitigate their impact.

In the team this is even made explicit in a brief side conversation occurring just after a troubles talk episode:

5.4-10 P2_M1_E10: Aside conversation between Bruno and Jay in the middle of a troubles talk

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 391 | Bruno: | At least we can laugh (.) that's important |
| 392 | Jay: | Yeah hh |

By stating "we can laugh", Bruno explicitly comments on the positive functions of laughing at their troubles and emphasises the joint nature of the laughter at the same time. He initiates this by saying "at least" which suggests that a number of less constructive responses would also be possible, which also functions to enhance group face. In this process of coping and mitigating, the troubles themselves are constructed as laughable, but not the individuals who have to deal with them.

5.4-11 P2_M1_E10: The team is reading and reacting to their assignment brief and the deadline set for this new project

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 386 | David: | s:o bear in mind that we have got {module name} to do at the same time |
| 387 | Bev: | hhhhh |
| 388 | David: | £and will also have a group project in {course name} due at some point as well£ hhh |
| 389 | Akshya: | £which hasn't been even (xxx)£ |

In line 386 David points to a potential problem with the deadline, the fact that they all have an individual assignment in another class due on the same date. The recording is fairly ambiguous as to whether there is already a hint at laughter in his voice, or if he introduces this trouble in a more serious tone. Bev, who tends to be the one most worried about tight schedules, reacts with a desperate sounding laugh, that helps to construct the scheduling as a trouble in the first place, but also emphasises that it is so ludicrous to have these deadlines that one can only laugh at them. At the same time it seems to be used as a mechanism to express her emotions in the team, without doing so explicitly. As with swearing, this laughter might also help to release some of the actual desperation she might be feeling, but also allows her to give this a more positive twist by doing it with a traditionally positively connotated interactional strategy: laughter that signals troubles resistance.

The turns following hers are all uttered in a laughing voice with some laughter particles at the end of the utterance which suggests an alignment with Bev's construction of the troubles as ridiculous and laughable. At the same time the laughter functions to establish the troubles nonetheless as grave. They are taken lightly by the team, but their importance or gravity is not glossed over or talked down. Laughing together at troubles as such seems not only to enhance individuals' face but also group face.

While looking at self-disclosures and laughter, it became evident that the team's way of doing laughter during troubles talk differs from previous findings in the literature. Jefferson (1984b) found that while a troubles teller tends to laugh during a troubles telling episode, the recipient would not join in the laughter. While there are very few instances of a clear role allocation of teller and recipient in the data set, laughing patterns deviate from the one Jefferson found in telephone interactions, as the next extract shows.

5.4-12 P2_M6_E6: Breaktime, Bev and David have gone to get coffee. Akshya, Alden, Jay and Bruno were discussing the research they needed to do for another project

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1666 | Bruno: | yeah I mean for me it would be much much easier / You know I could read all the stuff in German (.) You know yesterday I started reading a document in German/ you know/ it was such a pleasure to read through a document in two minutes and to exactly know what it was telling me |
| 1667 | Jay: | Hhh |
| 1668 | Bruno: | every time that I have to read this shit in English/ I have to read the sentence three times before I know "okay now I know what now I got the point" and it sometimes so frustra::ting (1.0) isn't it Alden? |

In this excerpt Bruno makes a potentially problematic revelation of struggling with reading and understanding in English. His tone is quite matter-of fact, without using a laughing voice or indicating this is a laughing matter by producing breathiness. Nonetheless, Jay responds by laughing. Bruno, however, continues without recognising this suggestion at a more humorous tone and continues to narrate his troubles. Jay's laugh here might constitute a face-enhancement to Bruno as it seems to imply some disbelief that Bruno could be struggling.

While this extract might seem a bit puzzling this pattern can be found repeatedly in the data: Self-disclosures tend to be either reciprocated with another self-disclosure or their content (not the speaker) is treated as laughable. Self-disclosures are thus often treated as self-deprecating jokes and at least in the extract above, as an analyst I struggle to find any indication in prosody, tone and response to identify an attempt at humour by Bruno. This might reflect a norm established in the team to treat troubles by default as laughable, even if there is no suggestion in the immediate context to do so.

In this section, I have focused on the treatment of troubles as laughable and the function this might fulfil for the team. Laughter is of course used in functions other than the ones outlined, including mitigating face-threats, indexing solidarity and affiliation, indicating non-

threatening behaviour and so forth. However, these are not specific to troubles talk and have been discussed in depth elsewhere, which is why I will not discuss them in greater depth here. Instead I will turn to the issue of humour in troubles talk. Humour and laughter are of course closely intertwined; however readers may have noticed that the above extracts all contained laughter but no obvious attempts at humour. Humour is nonetheless also a frequent and important feature of troubles talk, which is why I will turn to it in the next section.

### 5.4.7 Troubles humour

Identifying humour in interaction is not a straightforward process and to some extent is always a judgement made by the analyst. In making these decisions, I have followed Holmes' approach to identifying humour:

> Instances of humour included in the analysis are utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants. (Holmes, 2000, p. 163)

Out of the 107 troubles talk episodes 48 incidents show little or no humour. The rest feature incidents from subtle momentary humour to uproarious joking and laughing throughout the entire episode. Interestingly, the humorous troubles talk episodes tend to be longer (17 turns on average) than the non-humorous ones (9 turns on average).

There are three main ways in which humour is used in these episodes: Firstly, to construct and aggravate the troubles; Secondly, to mitigate the threat to individual and group face that the troubles talk could pose by showing troubles resistance; And thirdly to maintain a positive group mood in the face of difficulties. These three main functions are all very interrelated as we will see and often a single humorous utterance can fulfil more than one or even all of them. Finally, we also have a few instances in which irony is used to reflect on the team's mistakes. I will discuss each of these functions in turn and provide examples.

We have already seen one example of the construction and aggravation of troubles through use of humour (Example 5.4-4). While in that particular incident humour was used to escalate a perceived trouble more and more until it seemed no longer grounded in reality, humorous troubles constructions need not always lead to such escalation. There are several examples in the data set in which humour is used to reference a trouble in passing or as a way of constructing something as a trouble in the first place.

5.4-13 P2_M1_E8: David is instructing Bev, who is in charge of the computer, where to click during the search for some information

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 351 | David: | No not all the way to the top (.) Down (.) £No! that's the midterm£ hh |
| 352 | Jay: | Hhh |
| 353 | Bruno: | Yeah that's me after the exam |
| 354 | | ((laughter)) |

Bev scrolls past the guidelines for their upcoming midterm exam in her search for the information needed. David frames the midterm exam as a trouble by mentioning it explicitly, while exclaiming “no” in line 351. Considering his usage of a laughing voice it seems a deliberate attempt at humour by mentioning the trouble they are steering towards. Jay responds by laughing, while Bruno makes a self-deprecating joke in line 362 “yeah that’s me after the exam”. Unfortunately, we have no video recording of this incident, so we do not know what “that” refers to (it could be something that appears on the screen or a non-verbal move by Bruno or somebody else). However, Bruno’s intonation makes it clear that this is not a favourable assessment of himself after the exam and by extension it is a further negative assessment of the exam and a framing of the exam as trouble, more explicitly and more severe than initially hinted at by David.

This humorous introduction and aggravation of a trouble is closely related (and often coincides) with the second function humour seems to fulfil in troubles talk: Showing troubles resistance and mitigating the potential face threats of troubles talk. One could argue that this is precisely what Bruno does in the excerpt above. Despite making a self-deprecating joke he nonetheless shows that he is coping and can actually laugh at the troubles he foresees. It seems plausible that mitigating the potential threats to face that can arise in troubles talk makes it easier to reap its positive (relational) functions, while avoiding any negative feelings towards self and the group.

The next extract provides another example of how troubles resistance is shown by taking a humorous stance towards a trouble:

5.4-14 P4_M2_E12: End of a troubles talk episode in which the number of events they have to attend is treated as a trouble

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1287 | David: | I know why do they make it so fucking hard to find time to apply for jobs? |
| 1288 | Bev: | hhhhhh (.) I know (.) I mean when are you going to go for an inter[view? |
| 1289 | David: | [It's ridiculous |
| 1290 | Bruno: | You have to sleep faster in order to be able/ you have to make sure to sleep faster |
| 1291 | | ((laughter)) |

Although Bev is laughing in line 1288, the exchange is not really humorous until the last turn by Bruno. While David’s utterance could be interpreted as being sarcastic, it does sound relatively bitter and non-jocular. Bev’s laugh also indicates more desperation in a way that suggests that one can only laugh at this. Both she and David seem to get gradually more upset over the interaction until Bruno makes a more light-hearted joke at the end that they need to “sleep faster”. On the one hand he is contributing to a positive group mood with this; as I will discuss next, however, he is also mitigating the potential face threat that can arise from the sense of not being able to cope with the busy schedule and of not being able to actually find a job. Bruno’s suggestion to “sleep faster” is clearly out of the realm of the possible, but he is

also suggesting that there is no other way of achieving what they have been given, thus shifting the blame from those affected to those in charge.

5.4-15 P4_M3_E1: Early on in the meeting David impersonates a professor

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 185 | David: | We need some energy/ I want everyone to stand up/ we're gonna do some fireworks things hhh (.) You all |
| 186 | | [overtalking] |
| 187 | David: | (xxx) I know you didn't |
| 188 | | [overtalking] |
| 189 | David: | (xxx) did you? hhhh |
| 190 | Bev: | That day was embarrassing/ that was/ |
| 191 | David: | It was atrocious! hhhh being treated like a five-year-old hhhh |
| 192 | Bev: | Yeah, two-year-old, more like hh |
| 193 | Akshya: | What was worse was somebody was doing that sound, shhhh, shhh along the ground |
| 194 | David: | Oh yes... |
| 195 | Jay: | Oh shit/ Was this yesterday? |
| 196 | David: | Oh, they were so condescending, oh, it was attro/ the whole day was a waste of time hh |

David in line 185 is impersonating a professor and an incident that occurred the day before. It seems both he and Bev felt their equity rights, in this case the right to be treated like adults, were threatened by an energizer-activity perceived to be particularly childish. David reminds them of the episode by pretending to do the same thing with them in the meeting. The others respond with a lot of laughter and verbal utterances that cannot be made out on the recording anymore as there is so much overlap. After this a number of team members agree that this was inappropriate and by joking and laughing about it they establish their right to be treated like an adult and thus manage to jointly claim back that right. In the episode it seems that emotionally the humour trumps the embarrassment that they have felt, and through the use of humour they manage to jointly re-frame the incident.

This of course also influences the group mood. Some troubles talk threatens to drag group mood down and team members seem to inject jokes in order for this not to happen. In addition, as I have already shown team members tend to avoid showing real anger and where this is done they tend to disaffiliate. Using humour is a great way of disaffiliating from an emotion without causing offense, so it is no surprise that we see this again and again in the data. Humour thus seems to contain the negative sentiments and experiences and stop them from swapping over into other types of talk and from taking a more prominent place in the team. Since we have already seen this phenomenon in some of the extracts above I will only provide one more example of this:

5.4-16 P3_M1_E2: The team is reading and commenting on the brief they were given

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 237 | Akshya: | Oh go::d/ this guy has too many rules |
| 238 | Jay: | Yeah go:d |
| 239 | Akshya: | I mean he took half a [lecture telling us what he expects in our paper |
| 240 | Bev: | [illustrations, diagrams, tables and charts could you scroll up a bit? |
| 241 | Bruno: | He should/ yeah/ he should come to organisational behaviour/ there are no rules |
| 242 | | ((laughter)) |

In line 237 Akshya complains about the professor having "too many rules". Jay agrees in line 238. There is no hint at laughter in their voices and while they do not sound angry there is a hint of annoyance. Bruno in line 241 injects a joke about another professor who is the exact opposite, thus garnering a lot of laughter from the group. This seems to dispel the negative tensions in the group. As in Example 5.4-12, the humour injected after a non-humorous troubles-telling seems to actually end the troubles talk episode (note that this does not happen, when a trouble is constructed as humorous in the first place, here the talk tends to escalate further). After a joke has been made that seems targeted at maintaining group mood and dispelling negative feelings it seems difficult to return to the expression of negative thoughts or sentiments without losing face and being seen as too fixated on a trouble.

Finally, in a small number of cases humour is used to bring up troubles that are actually a result of the team's own doing. These incidents always come with some interactional trouble and thus are not very common, but it seems that humour allows team members to air views (and warn against a repeat) that they might feel they cannot say non-humorously.

5.4-17 P4_M1_E4: The team is discussing the next steps that need to be done for their project, when Bruno sarcastically mentions their worst performance so far

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 893 | David: | I mean, the report is the least of our worries. Don't worry about that |
| → | 894 | Bruno: | Yeah, we did a good job in {project 2} so:: |
| | 895 | Bev: | hhhhhh |
| | 896 | Bruno: | (xxx) |
| | 897 | Jay: | [{project 2} was |
| | 898 | Bev: | [hhhhh You're not fair/ [You're mean/Also |
| | 899 | Jay: | [yeah |
| | 900 | Akshya: | [is it his German sense of humour?= |
| | 901 | Bev: | [hhh mean:: =I know (.) yeah David |
| | 902 | Bruno: | It was obviously/ it was a stupid thing [(xxx) |
| | 903 | David: | [It it will be fine (.) we got a good understanding of what we're doing/ And there is a problem that we are trying to address and the report is not/ {project 2} was just a bit like ah:::w:::: |
| | 904 | Bruno: | Yeah something like that/ hhh something like that |
| | 905 | Akshya: | The only thing you have to learn from {project 2} is (.) let's not cut down our ideas hhh/ let's just put everything there h |

Bruno contests David's claim that they do not need to worry about the report in line 894, by sarcastically mentioning Project 2, the project they got the lowest mark for, which is an ongoing sore spot in the team – although they have never explicitly discussed what the problem was. Bruno manages to make this very briefly the topic here by putting his finger straight on the trouble with his ironic mention of the project. While Bev and Akshya in line 898 and 900 turn on Bruno to mitigate group face, the conversation becomes more productive after this, though David reacts somewhat defensively highlighting that their new project is different and somewhat dismissing the relevance of Bruno's comment.

A similar incident occurs a few meetings later:

5.4-18 P4_M6_E4: The team is discussing the presentation about the project they have to give soon and are brainstorming which points to include on the slides.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1073 | Bev: | What did you say? hh |
| 1074 | Bruno: | We changed the smiley |
| 1075 | Bev: | hhh yeah/ we changed the smiley (.) can you imagine (.) that's what we were doing in an MBA course |
| 1076 | Bruno: | Yeah |
| 1077 | Jay: | That's what we were discussing |
| 1078 | Bev: | The changing smiley/ I felt= |
| 1079 | Bruno: | =That's what I was doing hh |
| 1080 | Bev:. | I felt wasted my doing that/ why change smiley? put colours on something just seems really odd |
| 1081 | Jay: | Ah: you didn't like the smiley idea/ come on |
| 1082 | Bev: | Oh go:d/ we're adding a smiley (.) on an MBA course/ then= |

Bruno ironically injects that they could mention that their contribution was to add a smiley to a questionnaire to make it more kid-friendly, making the ridiculousness of this as their main contribution obvious. Again, this is to some extent also a criticism of the team's decision on how to approach this task. Bev, who was responsible for the questionnaires immediately jumps on the criticism and aligns with it (line 1075). While Bruno is making an ironic joke, Bev and Jay then discuss this in more serious terms as a problematic experience and thus as an actual trouble that threatened their face as competent MBA students, their equity rights of being given tasks that correspond with this, and their interpersonal goals of demonstrating their competence but also at learning by doing useful tasks. While they treat the trouble as something external to their realm of agency here, it should be noted that there was an active decision by the team (arguably under some pressure from David) to focus on these areas in the project instead of some bigger or more business-focused areas. This criticism seems to go down better with the team than the one in Example 5.4-17, however it should be noted that a number of team members also withhold comment. Having said that, in the interviews conducted a few weeks later a number of team members revisited this particular trouble, as several members felt that David pressured the group into particular tasks that they ended up not liking, thus their on-task criticisms might also mask more personal disagreements.

One last thing that should be noted is that in both the above examples it is Bruno who initiates a troubles talk by making an ironic team-critical statement. This is not a coincidence as there are no instances in the data where another team member uses ironic remarks to introduce self-critique. Given the often not entirely positive uptake, this might be because they prioritise not exposing themselves to this face threat, while Bruno has enough status in the group to accept such a momentary threat to his face for the sake of injecting his opinion and pointing to troubles he perceives to be important to discuss.

In this section I have shown how humour is used in troubles talk. As we have seen, it is an essential component in order to garner the positive effects troubles talk has on rapport and on mitigating and averting its negative effects, a point I will revisit in section 5.6. In the last part of this section I have indicated that humour can also be used to contest and criticise within a troubles talk episode and while this whole section has shown the overwhelming rapport-enhancing potential of troubles talk, there are of course also more competitive practices that need attention. I will turn to these in the next section, but will first summarise and revisit the collaborative practices explored here.

### 5.4.8 Conclusion: Troubles talk as collaborative practice

In this section I have investigated the management of a number of domains within troubles talk and have queried how these contribute to rapport management and enhancement.

We have seen that troubles, and with that face-threats, goals, and rights and obligations tend to be constructed as shared, leading to a less severe threat to the individual but also to a greater sense of common ground and shared fate amongst the team members. This is reflected in the interactional strategies employed in managing the different domains. With all of them it seems that during troubles talk team members are highly in-sync and adhere to a set of interactional 'rules'. This fits well with the findings discussed in section 5.1-5.3 on the discursive domain that showed that topics tend to reflect shared experiences and are relevant and immediate to all team members and that topic introduction is collaborative in the sense that team members do not forcefully introduce topics but wait for others in the team to signal interest, or alternatively the speaker signals the importance the topic has for themselves in some way. We can further see the rapport enhancing orientation generally present in the team in troubles talk by the fact that these receive a 100% uptake.

In this section, I have discussed the construction, validation, exploration and escalation of the troubles and emphasised the way the participatory domain was managed. Further I have outlined other features of troubles talk including self-disclosures and explicit negative evaluations (illocutionary domain), laughter, and humour and swearing (stylistic domain).

Within the participatory domain we have seen how the floor is shared amongst participants which leads to a level of equality in how troubles are constructed and defined. Troubles tend to be told as shared narratives (see section 5.4.1-5.4.3), which may also heighten the sense of

sharedness in the team and might help to actively construct them as such. In addition, I have shown that troubles tend to be constructed to be escalating and sometimes even grossly exaggerating the topic they deal with, which again needs interlocutors' agreement and collaboration in partially suspending rational judgement and instead to enjoy an episode of talk that emphasises togetherness in the face of a troubles, a shared outlook and lots and lots of laughter. With this, team members heighten their alignment as well as the sense of both equity and association in the team.

Within the illocutionary domain I have looked at two speech acts that were found to be particularly characteristic of the data set under study: Self-disclosures and complaints/negative assessments. The activity of troubles talk seems to have allowed team members to breach topics they otherwise are not able to bring up including personal topics. Self-disclosures carry a large potential face threat and as we have seen this was mitigated by team members reciprocating these self-disclosures. In doing so they not only mitigate a face threat but also repeatedly emphasise equal status amongst team members.

With regards to complaints we find again that team members synchronise their speech, in this case mostly by avoiding the attribution of blame. In addition, they seem to maintain the rapport enhancing function of troubles talk by disaffiliating from signs of actual anger and strongly worded or unspecific negative assessments.

Finally, within the stylistic domain we found a large amount of swearing to occur in troubles talk, as well as a lot of joint laughter and a humorous treatment of many of the troubles. Both swearing and laughter are used to release and share emotions with the team. Surprisingly, both tend to be adapted by the team, i.e. team members tend to join into both the laughter as well as the swearing. Swearing seems to constitute the (benign) breach of a sociopragmatic principle that team members subscribe to, which is not to swear in a workplace, but it seems that exactly the breaching of this principle is what enhances rapport in the team, as it decreases distance and increases intimacy. In addition, it functions as a solidarity marker with regards to other people's troubles. Joint laughing enhances rapport; in addition, it mitigates threats to face, goals and rights and obligations and in this shows similarity to humour. Both also function to maintain a positive group mood and overall to hold troubles talk within a positive and to some extent also productive interactional activity. It should be noted that many of these features are not present to the same extent in other types of talk in the team. While there is a general sense of goodwill towards each other, the level of collaboration we have seen in the last sections is not always present.

So far we have mainly looked at how troubles talk is used to enhance rapport. While these collaborative aspects mostly outweigh the more competitive ones and troubles talk fundamentally seems to be a rapport enhancing interactional activity, there are nonetheless features of competitiveness and of more strained relationships that are negotiated during troubles talk. I will turn to these more competitive features in the following section.

## 5.5 Troubles Co-Construction as Competitive Practice

### 5.5.1 Contesting troubles

Section 5.4.1 gave an example of a very smooth and uncontested suggestion and adoption of a trouble amongst all team members. However, not every troubles talk within the discourse domain is handled with such a high rapport enhancement orientation; instead, problems around how a trouble should be treated interactionally do arise.

Team members regularly have different opinions on what constitutes a trouble and thus what needs attention and what does not, leading to negotiations and potential disagreements. Often this does not seem necessarily due to the position team members hold on the troubles themselves but seems due to the relationships they have with each other. The following extract provides an example of this.

5.5-1 P4_M1_E1: David was summarizing the outcome of a meeting they had with a client that Bruno could not attend

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 91 | Bruno: | Sorry, say again? They collect all this information and then there's someone who manually enters all this rubbish into= |
| | 92 | David: | =Yeah |
| | 93 | Bruno: | Oh, geez! |
| | 94 | David: | £Yeah£ |
| → | 95 | Akshya: | <u>I'm</u> not surprised |
| | 96 | David: | £And then, with this fantastic information they've gathered, they make the world's most boring charts£ |
| | 97 | Jay: | Yeah |

In this extract, Bruno confirms his understanding of what David told him, but at the same time injects some criticism and frames the information collected as a potential trouble. David confirms his question and when Bruno makes an even more explicit reference to their practice as trouble by stating “Oh geez”, David confirms this stance again, this time with a hint of laughter in his voice, indicating his agreement with Bruno’s negative assessment of the practice.

In line 95, however, Akshya does not dispute the facts behind their troubles assessment but contests the legitimacy of their troubles-framing by suggesting that this is not extraordinary, or at least it is ordinary enough for her not to be surprised. Considering Jefferson’s (1980) suggestion that troubles are a deviation from “business as usual” Akshya’s utterance can be understood as “this” being business as usual and therefore does not constitute a trouble. David, however, seems to completely ignore her injection by joking ironically about their “fantastic information” and their “boring charts”. After Jay’s agreement with David, Akshya stays silent for a few turns and later agrees again with the charts being boring, thus allowing a troubles-construction of their client information gathering and chart making activities to

stand. Beyond that she does not actively participate in the episode, which is relatively rare for her and suggests that she was indeed contesting the trouble.

The next example shows a similar occurrence, Bev who is often the one most concerned about scheduling issues tries to establish the deadline of their current project as a trouble, but in the process receives very little support from her team for this:

5.5-2 P2_M3_E6: The team is discussing their approach to the project. Bev sort of interrupts this by changing the topic to scheduling

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 654 | Bev: | can (.) okay/ okay/ I have a point to make |
| | | [next week Monday (.) is the 27 November= |
| 655 | Jay: | [yeah =yeah |
| 656 | Bev: | that gives us seven days to make slides/ do things/ |
| | | [do a report and submit |
| 657 | Jay: | [if we can meet |
| 658 | Akshya | [and then do the audio |
| 659 | David | [can you get the guidelines up |
| 660 | Bev: | yeah and do the audio and submit |
| 661 | Jay: | I/ I don't know when is the deadline? |
| 662 | Bev: | 14 days (.) {project 2} |
| 663 | Jay: | can you click on it David? |
| 664 | Bruno: | submit |
| 665 | Jay: | 6th december |
| 666 | Bev: | 6th december at 1.30/ she's changed the time from 5.30 to 1.30 in the afternoon |
| 667 | Jay: | oh yeah |
| 668 | Akshya: | But then she clearly said she changed it because in case we have problems [uploading |
| 669 | David: | [we'll do it the day before/ no problem ((in sing-song voice)) no-one's gonna be/ we'll be/ don't worry |
| 670 | Bev: | [okay please so ah |
| 671 | Jay: | [okay so (.) [is (.) can |
| 672 | David: | [can you get the |
| 673 | Jay: | yeah? |
| 674 | David | the guidelines that's right |

In this excerpt Bev repeatedly tries to establish the deadline for their current project as a trouble. This starts with her announcement “I have a point to make”, after which she emphasises the dates and the fact that this “gives us seven days” to then produce a list of things that still have to be done in that timeframe (lines 654 & 656). While Jay backchannels during Bev’s turn he immediately turns to a solution-focused response by suggesting a next meeting with which he overlaps Bev’s listing of things that still need to be done (line 657). The others seem to equally adopt his more practical approach, with David wanting to check the guidelines again (line 659) and with Jay inquiring after the deadline (line 661), the responses continue to be more practical and solution-oriented and do not construct the deadline necessarily as a trouble.

Bev makes another attempt at emphasising the gravity of the trouble in line 666 by stressing the time change on the day of the submission, however, this gets immediately dismissed by Akshya who states "But then she clearly said she changed it because in case we have problems uploading" (line 668). The beginning of Akshya's utterance with "but then" suggests that she has understood Bev's troubles-framing, "but" objects and produces a counter-narrative in which this change was made to help them not to aggravate the troubles. Akshya notably changes her stance here as she seemed the only one potentially inclined to support the troubles construction when she states "and then do the audio" in line 658 thus adding to Bev's to-do list. David as well orients to a potential construction of the deadline as a trouble when he states (line 669) "we'll do it the day before (.) no problem (.) no-one's gonna be (.) we'll be (.) don't worry" explicitly telling Bev not to worry about it and thus disaligning himself from the construction of deadline-as-trouble. Bev makes another attempt at actually making her point, which has not been made explicit yet by stating "okay please so ah" (line 670) but gets overtalked by Jay and David which leads to the topic moving on to other matters.

When we look at this from a rapport management perspective, it seems that there are disagreements within the management of the discursive domain. Bev's "I have a point to make" is never fully realised or at least not taken up as a point worthy of making in this instance, likely threatening her interpersonal goals. Bev revisits the same topic about 400 lines later and we then learn what exactly her interactional goals seem to be (set days aside to work on the project so that they can finish it early). However, as we saw, Bev's attempt to pursue this goal with a troubles topic episode was not very successful. Together with disruptions in the discursive domain we also see a more competitive management of the participatory domain. Turn-taking comes with frequent overlaps and interruptions. Where those occur, we see team members trying to let each other speak (lines 671 & 672 for instance) thus there seems to be an orientation towards collaborative floor management, yet this is not always realised. The exception to these attempts at collaborative management to some extent seems to be with regards to Bev herself. Her utterance in line 670 "okay please so ah" is interrupted by both Jay and David and while they allow each other to go on, the same does not account for Bev, who only manages to revisit the point she was trying to make much later.

### 5.5.2 Competing storylines

The last section has highlighted how team members might disagree about the construction of something as a trouble and how this is negotiated at the beginning of a troubles talk episode. However, contesting a trouble or providing a different interpretation can also occur at later stages in a troubles talk episode. This section will discuss how contestive storylines are produced as part of the joint narration of a troubles talk episode.

In the following example team members have constructed the tightly packed schedule as a trouble that they have as MBA students, and have suggested that this leads them to not actually

remembering half the things they are learning. This topic has been discussed for about 15 lines when the following exchange occurs:

5.5-3 P2_M1_E7: The team is discussing the tightly packed schedule they have to deal with

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 203 | David: | But I guess that's one of the weaknesses of {name of school}/ it's it's quite academic in terms of how they assess you/ cause it's a University/ [whereas other business schools= |
| 204 | Akshya: | [oh god this is nothing/ =this is nothing |
| 205 | David: | what do you ↑mean↑? h |
| 206 | Akshya: | (.) the Indian business school |
| 207 | David: | all right (.) okay Indian business schools/ I can't/ I don't make comparison to Indian business schools (.) I haven't a clue about that |

Akshya has been fairly quiet in the interaction before, but now starts to question the construction of their school as overly demanding by overlapping David's turn with "oh god this is nothing" (line 204). In David's response in line 205 his voice goes up and he produces a little laugh at the end creating an impression of surprise or even disbelief at having his stance, which after all had been validated by several other team members, so directly contradicted, which indeed does not happen very often in the team outside of task discussions. After Akshya produces a fairly short response in line 206 on which she doesn't elaborate, David seems to get defensive in line 207 by stating: "okay Indian business schools I can't I don't make comparison to Indian business schools (.) I haven't a clue about that". David seems to try to dismiss her counterexample as irrelevant as he cannot be expected to know about it. After this introduction of the topic, the following conversation unfolds:

5.5-4 P2_M1_E7:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 208 | Jay: | Yeah yeah there are/ the Indian business schools |
| 209 | Akshya: | They/ they had an/ a simulation assignment for operations |
| 210 | Bev: | Are they difficult? |
| 211 | Jay: | EXTREMELY |
| 212 | Bruno: | But you have more time to study? |
| 213 | Bev: | How long is that? |
| 214 | Jay: | Two years (.) but two years is is really |
| 215 | Akshya: | It's a software computer simulation assignment |
| 216 | David: | I don't even know what that means |
| 217 | Akshya: | EXACTLY |
| 218 | Bev: | Oh trust me a year's worse/ This one year they've pretty much crammed everything into this first year |
| 219 | Akshya: | It/ it's a one-year program and they have eight semesters |
| 220 | David: | EIGHT?? how do they create more time? how do you get eight into one year? |
| 221 | Jay: | Yeah it's like two week courses or something like that |

The episode might be difficult to read as initially we have two conversations occurring at the same time: one between Jay, Bev and Bruno and one between Akshya and David (up until line

218 when the conversations join again). Jay immediately agrees with Akshya's point and simultaneously they construct a storyline of Indian business schools in general being much harder than the British ones the others are familiar with. Bev tries to re-emphasise their original point in line 218 that "this" is much worse, but this is immediately contested by Akshya in line 219. The conversation continues quite a few lines beyond what is shown here and gets harmoniously resolved by David and Bruno stating that they are already working to maximum capacity, a sentiment the others seem to agree with.

While there is a harmonious end to it, Akshya nonetheless disrupts a narrative most team members have affiliated with and actively helped construct earlier and in some sense it seems puzzling as this could be considered fairly face-threatening behaviour. It seems to allow her, though, to claim a superior epistemic position towards David, the one she is directly contradicting. Akshya is not displaying a rapport enhancing orientation here, instead she is doing identity work towards somebody she feels (according to the interviews) might be threatening that identity on a regular basis. This is not an uncommon occurrence in the team; the others joke about Akshya and David's long arguments, which usually happen over task-related issues though. They rarely penetrate the activity of troubles talk, but occasionally do. Example 5.5.1 above actually also features just such an example.

It does not seem to be generally rapport harming to forego a short-term rapport enhancing activity in favour of emphasising one's own equity rights (as being taken seriously and respected as a team member) or to enhance one's own face by suggesting the trouble described by others is not a real trouble in one's own eyes. To some extent it is important in a team to stand up for oneself as well.

In this case, we can see, however, how the whole troubles talk episode becomes more disruptive: There are two conversations occurring at the same time, turn-taking becomes more competitive and there are many more disagreements than is common in most troubles talk. It is likely that this episode left team members feeling less like a community with a shared fate and goals. With regards to Akshya it also seems questionable whether she has achieved her interactional goals towards David, who seems to find her intervention a little surprising and potentially odd as indicated by his short laugh and the following defensive response.

There are no instances of this kind in the data between the other team members and contesting a troubles narrative in an ongoing troubles talk episode is very rare. Contestive responses do occur with some regularity but seem mostly to be targeted at counteracting negative mood instead of contesting the legitimacy of the troubles construction.

5.5-5 P2_M6_E9: Half way through the meeting half the team have gone out to get coffees. Akshya, Bev and David stayed behind in the room and discuss the timeline

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1754 | Bev: | Let's try and finish this thing |
| | 1755 | Akshya: | I know! |
| | 1756 | Bev: | Completely wiped out/ I need to go home soon |
| | 1757 | Akshya: | What time we have to come tomorrow? Are we coming tomorrow? |
| → | 1758 | David: | ♫9 am (.) 9 am♫ |
| | 1759 | Bev: | We need to be a by nine (.) oh my goodness (xxx) |
| → | 1760 | David: | ♫Need to be he::re/ by nine am♫ |
| | 1761 | Akshya: | What? |
| | 1762 | Bev: | I think I'll probably come in at nine-oh-five or nine-oh-ten |
| → | 1763 | David: | >>nine-oh-five or nine-oh-ten?<< |
| | 1764 | Bev: | Yeah |
| → | 1765 | David: | See you then then |

In line 1754 to 1757 Akshya and Bev develop a storyline of being too tired and having to go home soon, that Akshya ends by asking when they have to be back in the morning of the following day. David provides an answer but instead of providing it neutrally or even in an annoyed tone that would affiliate him with the trouble, he answers in a happy sing-songy voice (line 1758). Bev in line 1759 treats this as another trouble by stating "oh my goodness", which David overlaps with, repeating a part of her statement by singing it, again seemingly contesting the construction of this as a trouble. Bev then indicates that she will probably come in slightly later, which again David treats humorously by repeating it back to her and then stating "see you then then" which partially rhymes with her previous utterance (line 1765). David thus maintains throughout a narrative of this not constituting a trouble and of cheerfulness in the face of Bev's troubles-construction. With that he is effectively counteracting Bev's seemingly bad mood from spreading. At the same time, he is of course displaying troubles resistance by indicating that it is not a trouble for him thus enhancing (or at least trying to enhance) his own face, while somewhat mocking Bev in the process. While this could be a bigger motive to him than preserving group mood, this is nonetheless consistent with a pattern we have repeatedly seen in the data: disaffiliation in the face of what appears to be actual negative emotions.

A few other examples of contesting and disaffiliating that seem to have exactly this function can be found in the data. These seem to be less a product of relational issues or differences in opinion but rather often seem to be a product of the escalating form that troubles talk tends to take. The following example is very similar to what we have seen in Example 5.4-2 where David "corrects" Akshya's assertion "it's gonna be harder' to 'it's gonna be A LOT harder".

5.5-6 P4_M3_E1:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 187 | David: | It was atrocious! hhhh being treated like a five-year-old |
| → | 188 | Bev: | Yeah, two-year-old, more like |
| | 189 | Akshya: | What was worse was somebody was doing that sound, shhhh, shhh along the ground |

In this example Bev in line 188 “corrects” David’s assessment (line 187) of having felt treated like a five-year old downwards to feeling treated like a two-year old. She does this to validate his point and in fact affiliate with it, but the escalating nature of troubles talk seems to prompt her to agree with the point by disagreeing with a minor aspect of it, which she has to present in a more aggravated fashion than the previous speaker has. This pattern can be found again and again in the data, however it does not seem to lead to any tension between speakers and as such seems like a permissible structural disagreement despite the fact that interpretations are routinely corrected and with that also contested. Rapport is thus not harmed by the minor disagreement, or rather this seems to be trumped by the joint construction of a narrative around a troubles.

There is another way in which disagreements and contestations of troubles seem to be produced routinely within troubles sequences, namely when it comes to ending the troubles talk. In fact, we have already seen examples of this earlier in the data when Bev states “no it isn’t” in Example 5.4-2 in response to Akshya’s assertion “Oh go::d this is bad”. This routine contestation takes a different form than the previous example as we do not have a disagreement that functions to escalate the troubles talk further, but to the contrary we have a disagreement that serves to rein in the escalation of troubles. Team members routinely do this, usually towards the end of troubles episodes. Often these disagreements might be what in fact initiates the end as they tend to be produced when the peak of permissible escalation is reached. If a troubles talk continues after such a disagreement the focus tends to shift to another previously not-discussed aspect of the troubles. In the following extract team members are framing technology as a source of trouble as they are having difficulties with accomplishing a task requiring technology.

5.5-7 P2_M5_E4: The team has just tried and failed to play a self-recorded video on the big screen

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2245 | David: | Yeah why isn't technology? why can't we throw things |
| 2246 | Bev: | [....] Come on |
| 2247 | Akshya: | Yeah why can't we do that |
| 2248 | Alden: | Yeah |
| 2249 | David: | <u>Fucking</u> technology |
| 2250 | Alden: | We/ we need a Apple Box can do this/ yeah your computer her phone can connect |

In line 2245 David frames technology itself as the trouble and not their own usage of it. While there is some initial agreement and affiliation with that point, Alden contests this in line 2250 by producing a solution-oriented statement. This comes right after David states “fucking technology” and while Alden does not explicitly disagree, he nonetheless steers the conversation away from further complaining and from establishing an angry mood in the group, by showing that technology is not really the problem. Contestation of troubles narratives thus seems to occur for different reasons and with potentially different relational

implications, and many of them do not seem to actually harm rapport. Troubles narratives can be contested in order to claim superiority, but they also impede the group mood from becoming more negative. This latter phenomenon unsurprisingly mostly occurs in troubles talk episodes that are not accompanied by a lot of humour, where the danger of it affecting group mood negatively is thus high. Finally, we have many incidents of smaller disagreements or corrections of a previous speaker's statement in the data, that seem to have virtually no relational impact as they are part of an escalating troubles narrative and as such are necessary in order to affiliate with the trouble but also to aggravate the trouble in the escalating construction.

### 5.5.3 Shifting focus to self

Like the last examples, this section deals with a phenomenon that has potentially a more negative impact on rapport and can be understood in very distinct ways: the shifting of the focus to the self in a troubles talk episode. This is different from the reciprocal self-disclosure discussed before, as in a reciprocal self-disclosure the focus is only shifted temporarily but largely still stays with the original person uttering the self-disclosure or results in the construction of a completely shared trouble amongst team members. However, we also have incidents in the data where the focus is not shifted back to the person experiencing the original trouble, nor is it shifted to the group as a whole. The following example illustrates this:

5.5-8 P4_M7_E7: Bruno, David and Alden have gone out to get coffees

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 547 | Akshya: | My head is hurting/ it's like= |
| → | 548 | Bev: | =Fuck that has been me for ninety-nine percent of today/ Like someone was using a hammer on my head |
| | 549 | Jay: | £Check this ou:t£/ Have we still got this? |

Akshya is sharing a trouble by disclosing that she is experiencing a headache. The topic is immediately picked up by Bev who discloses the same trouble but constructs it as seemingly worse than Akshya's by using "fuck" to introduce it and stating that this has been her for 99% of the day – so likely has been going on for longer than Akshya's. She also adds "like someone was using a hammer on my head" again suggesting that her trouble might be worse than Akshya's. Akshya, who may have been hoping for some empathy or more understanding when uttering her initial disclosure does not react to this. Neither does Jay who instead changes the topic. Similar to David's behaviour in 5.5-5 Jay's tone sounds exceedingly cheerful and may be interpreted as almost explicitly refusing to participate in a negative conversation.

In the following example Akshya is trying to tell the story of how she broke her laptop, but is not permitted to complete it as Bev keeps changing the focus back to the story of how she broke her own laptop:

5.5-9 P2_M5_E1: Akshya and Bev have branched off from the main talk and joke about Bev's new laptop, the team gradually falls silent and David joins their conversation

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 489 | Akshya: | no the whole point is/ the whole point is/ I had spilled it in my bag and then I hadn't realised= |
| → | 490 | Bev: | =That's the same thing that happened to me/ I told you/ I was travelling on Friday/ so I opened a little bit of coke and put it in my mouth/ sipped it then covered it/ put it in my school bag all through my journey to Manchester/ and until I got home at like 1 or 2 am that day/ the Coke was seeping into my laptop/ hhh and I didn't know/ so when I came home I just saw an empty bottle of Coke |
| | 491 | David: | that laptop? |
| | 492 | Akshya: | now [you know you know how I |
| → | 493 | Bev: | [not this one my other laptop so I had to get my husband's= |
| | 494 | David: | =is that a new? |
| | 495 | Bev: | yeah so yesterday all my {assignment name} was just gone |

In line 489 Akshya attempts to tell a story about her laptop, but as soon as Bev realises where the story is going she takes over the turn by stating "That's the same thing that happened to me" and then launching into a fuller narrative explaining what had actually happened to her. Akshya tries to take the turn back afterwards and tries to resume her story but gets overtalked by David and Bev continuing to discuss the incident Bev just reported.

I will provide one more example of this. In the following extract several people produce statements regarding their own troubles instead of focusing on the troubles of the others. At the same time this effectively leads to the construction of a shared trouble (scheduling) although the trouble looks slightly different for each person involved:

5.5-10 P4_M2_E12: The team discusses when their next assignment is due

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1265 | Akshya: | 21st |
| | 1266 | Bev: | How shitty |
| | 1267 | Bruno: | 21st? |
| | 1268 | Bev: | Same for financial analysis hhhh |
| → | 1269 | David: | I don't so that's fine |
| | 1270 | Bev: | Yeah that's good |
| → | 1271 | Akshya: | I've got the case study challenge I have to organise |
| → | 1272 | Bev: | And I've got a deadline as well/ We've got deadlines for management of change [that week/ So that's fun. |
| | 1273 | Bruno: | [mhhhhmmm |
| | 1274 | Akshya: | As if this is not enough I volunteered myself for things hhh |
| | 1275 | Bev: | For what? |
| | 1276 | Akshya: | The case study challenge. |
| | 1277 | Bruno: | You're you're crazy |

In line 1265 Akshya produces the answer to a previously discussed question when their current project is due. Bev immediately proceeds to frame this as a trouble by commenting "how shitty" (line 1266) and elaborates that this coincides with another deadline in line 1268.

Instead of commiserating, David simply states that he does not have that module and therefore is fine regarding the deadline (line 1269). Instead of reacting annoyed Bev simply states "that's good" which affiliates her with David but also functions to emphasise the troubles construction of her own additional deadline. In line 1271 Akshya adds her own take on the scheduling troubles by stating "I've got the case study challenge I have to organise". She noticeably does not add a deadline and it does not seem like the case study challenge occurs in that week so this seems a more general comment on scheduling but not directly related to Bev's deadline clash. In line 1272 Bev thus reverts the focus back to herself by highlighting that she has another deadline on top of the ones already discussed that week. This seems to apply to Bruno as well who simply sighs in misery in response. Instead of responding to this added trouble Akshya reverts the focus back to herself by stating that she has "volunteered herself for things". This time Bev accepts the shift in focus and inquires "for what?" (line 1275). The issue Akshya raises is, however, the same as before (the case study challenge), which means that she has not actually added to the troubles she has listed but only reiterated them. The response is – somehow unsurprisingly – non-affiliative with Bruno simply stating "you're crazy" in line 1277.

On the one hand this seems a surprisingly uncollaborative exchange – there is very little recognition of other's troubles and a constant shift in focus towards oneself. On the other hand, while all team members are focused on their own troubles, they nonetheless are sharing those regarding a common theme "scheduling", which gets emphasised more and more as the conversation progresses. While we do not really have the establishment of a joint narrative or even of affiliative responses that otherwise often accompany troubles talk, we nonetheless somehow have a joint construction of a trouble for at least Bev, Akshya and Bruno which might nonetheless serve to increase understanding for being distracted, stressed or less able to do a big chunk of work in the team. Thus, while the discursive and participatory domains are not managed as collaboratively as we have seen previously and none of the interlocutors show a particularly high involvement style, the messages that are communicated might be important for rapport in the long run, even if this is not a display of a particularly rapport enhancing moment in the team.

In this section I have reviewed some of the less collaborative practices that are a part of troubles talk. In general, it seems that the collaborative practices outweigh the less collaborative ones, which are often ambiguous in their function as this last example has shown. I have also shown that some of the interactional moves that can be considered contestive are in fact due to the structure of troubles talk itself but seem to have no serious repercussions for relationships or are in fact uttered for the benefit of the group. This leads us nicely to the topic of the next section, as there are other ways with which potentially negative consequences are counteracted that deserve attention.

## 5.6 Counteracting Potential Negative Effects of Troubles Talk

### 5.6.1 A cycle of complaints? Troubles talk trajectories across meetings

While I have so far discussed the overwhelmingly positive impact troubles talk seems to have for the team there are nonetheless two main dangers associated with it: From an organisational perspective troubles talk could potentially take a lot of time from the team that they could better spend in doing the task (though one might argue that rapport is essential in achieving the task). The second danger is that troubles talk becomes too negative and actually starts not only to negatively affect group mood, but also the team's relationship with the institution they are located in or with the tasks and clients they are dealing with.

It comes as no surprise therefore that troubles talk in the workplace has received mixed reviews in the literature I discussed earlier, with the only quantitative study conducted suggesting that complaints tend to spark complaining cycles which tend to lower group mood (Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Kauffeld, 2010). While it is not clear how exactly complaints were conceptualised – though they seem mostly to include indirect complaints – this finding does not seem to be replicated by this study. While it is of course a possibility that troubles talk lowers group mood, in this data set the vast majority of incidents group mood on the contrary seems to have improved. This suggests that group mood can go either way depending on the exact way in which troubles talk is done. The claim that complaints generate more complaints and thus disturb the workflow needs however some further considerations.

If this was true, it would be quite natural for troubles talk to increase over time. Figure 5.3 provides on overview of the occurrence per team meeting for each longer meeting transcribed in this case study:

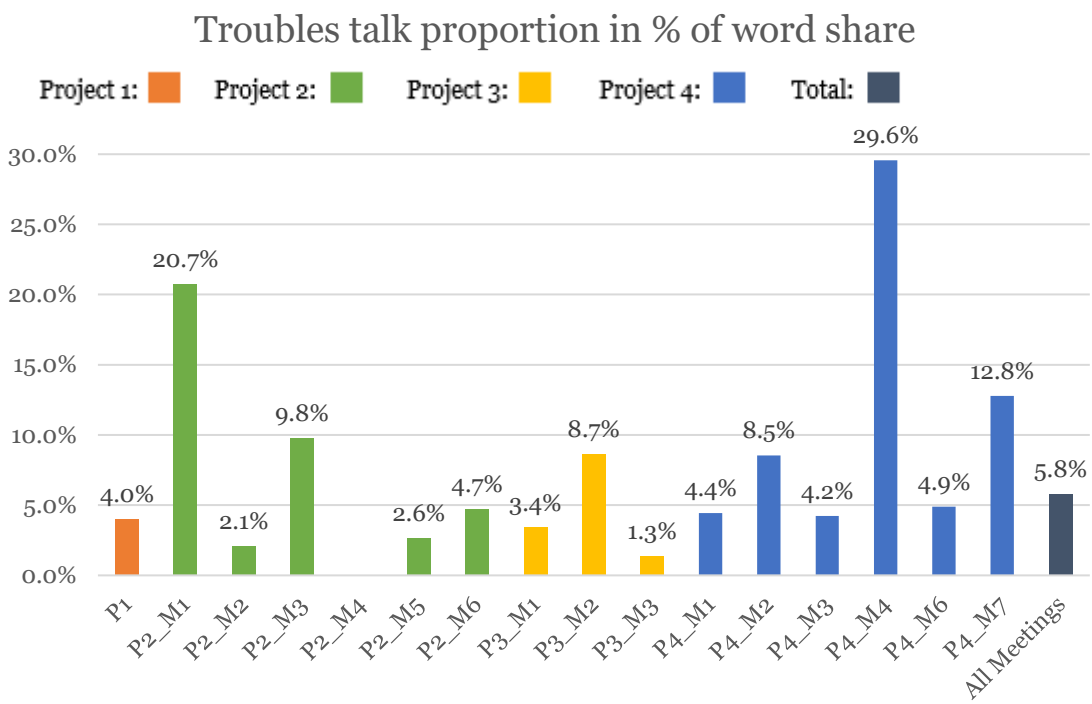


Figure 5.3: Troubles talk proportion per team meeting (in share of words)

As the table shows, while troubles talk differs vastly from team meeting to team meeting, there is no straight forward increase over time, which we should expect if complaints generally generated more complaints. We have, however, a very small number of team meetings where troubles talk takes up a significant proportion of the meeting and perhaps from an institutional perspective one could argue that it has taken away too much of the team's time and attention from the task. In the majority of meetings, however, although troubles talk takes a not insignificant proportion of the team's meeting time, it still makes up less than 10% in most meetings.

In addition, as shown at the beginning of this chapter, the average length of a troubles talk episode is only 14 turns before the team returns to talk about business as usual. This means that we can hardly speak of a downwards spiral of complaints. In any case, if we accept Kauffeld's and Meyers' (2009) findings that there is a tendency for complaints to generate more complaints, it seems that this particular team has developed strategies that guide the team away from entering into a negative spiral and from staying too long in a troubles talk episode lest it have a potentially negative impact. As such, understanding how this particular team manages to avoid this trap quite naturally and without any training on this matter seems a particular interesting point.

Some of these strategies have already been mentioned in the discussion of different troubles episodes. As I have shown in section 5.5.2, we can frequently see a team member, who has before participated in the troubles talk, disagree or disaffiliate once a point has been reached where the escalation of the trouble has peaked, and this serves to stop the escalation increasing to a point where it is no longer grounded in reality and it often ends the troubles talk episode.

In addition, throughout the troubles talk episodes there is a pattern in which very generalised and unspecific negative assessments tend to get contradicted. Thus, troubles talk tends to focus on a fairly specific trouble. Furthermore, as pointed out in previous examples, team members seem to disaffiliate immediately from a fellow team member who seems to show signs of "real" anger as opposed to a jokingly performed outrage. As such, a range of important interactional strategies that counteract potential negative effects such as bad group mood, or a downwards spiral have already been discussed.

What has not yet been fully discussed is how team members revert back to talk about the task and to "business as usual" from a troubles talk episode, which seems a significant contribution in maintaining the positive aspects of troubles talk within a team whose interactions tend to be focused on tasks.

### 5.6.2 Ending troubles talk: Reverting to business as usual

Jefferson (1984a) found that the end of a troubles talk also often marks the end of a conversation, unless there is a conversation *restart* that requires an explicit new start of a conversation but on a different topic. This often gets achieved with "how are you"-type questions. The talk after a troubles talk is therefore often topically disjunctive (Jefferson, 1984a).

In a team meeting, team members do not really have the possibility of simply moving into a conversation closing sequence, unless the work set out for the meeting is completed. In addition, "how are you"-type questions seem somewhat misplaced if produced in the middle of a meeting, thus team members need to find different ways of returning to business as usual, beyond the norms that seem established for more social (telephone) interactions.

Ending a troubles talk episode nonetheless requires interactional work and changing of the topic. Topic changes after troubles talk sequences thus tend to be in some way marked. The following extracts provide examples of this. In each of them we see the last two or three lines of the troubles talk followed by the move to business as usual:

5.6-1 P2_M3_E5: From their discussion of their client the team ventured slightly off-topic and discussed more general practices in the food industry that some members, most notably Bev construct as a trouble. This is the end of this episode

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 630 | David: | But they only cater for like 20 people [every day or something |
| | 631 | Bev: | [this is sad |
| → | 632 | Jay: | Al[right |
| → | 633 | Bev: | [Anyways lets go |
| | 634 | Jay: | So you guys are gonna write up the report/ I mean not the sorry/ the the points uh/ if anyone else has got to add anything to/ u:h to the things we discussed/ can send to Akshya so they can all put in the file and send it to us |

5.6-2 P2_M5_E3: The team was discussing the performance of another team in a previous project

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1202 | Jay: | Their major feedback was “what you already showed in the practice was the same in the final there was no improvement” |
| | 1203 | Alden: | [Oh terrible |
| | 1204 | Akshya: | [Yeah and I think the major feedback in the mock presentation was basically/ change your ideas hhh |
| → | 1205 | Bev: | Okay so we can do this |
| → | 1206 | Jay: | Okay alright (.) So it's a mixed layout then |

5.6-3 P1_M1_E1: The team discusses a ‘mock’ presentation session for one of their projects, in which some teams exceeded speaking times, which this team perceived as unfair

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 112 | Bev: | Poor Chris, "it's 15 minutes" [waves papers and imitates his voice] |
| | 113 | David: | It doesn't matter/ we have to stick to 15 |
| | 114 | Bev: | We have to stick to 15 |
| | 115 | Akshya: | Yeah |
| → | 116 | Bev: | Okay/ you guys/ you guys need five minutes to prepare/ or are you ready? |
| → | 117 | Jay: | We need five minutes to prepare |

In all three examples, team members mark the transition with boundary markers such as “okay”, “alright” or “anyways” that suggest a topic transition, but also a transition from the type of talk that is done. This often includes a change in register from humorous, angry or annoyed back to serious or focused. The transition particles are normally uttered in the “new” register and often spoken in a louder voice, thus further marking the end of one episode and the transition to another. We can also see that in all three episodes two people are engaged in transitioning the topic. In Example 5.6-1 Jay states “Alright” in line 632, which is overlapped by Bev stating “Anyways lets go”. Both of them have special roles in this exchange: Jay is the taskmaster of Project 2 and while there normally is not a formal meeting chair, the taskmaster tends to fulfil some of those functions, while Bev has initiated the troubles talk and most of it has also revolved around her. Her immediate agreement with Jay’s “Alright” thus signals her willingness to move on. This leads to Jay in line 634 producing a longer term in which he lays out the next steps.

In the second example the roles are reversed, Bev seems to suggest a topic change in line 1205 by stating “okay so we can do this”. This connects back to the conversation they had before the troubles talk episode began. This gets picked up by Jay who after some transition particles also picks up the earlier talk by producing a summary statement: “So it's a mixed layout then”. The “then” suggests some immediacy in his summary, but in fact the conversation he is summarising occurred many many turns previously.

In the third example, we have a slightly longer transition out of the topic. The team has been talking about the unfairness of some teams having been allowed more time during previously

held team presentation than others. This is disrupted in line 113 when David states “it doesn’t matter we have to stick to 15 minutes”. To some extent he disaffiliates from his teammates who are constructing a narrative in which they together have been treated unfairly and laugh about Chris (a professor) at the same time who has become more and more stressed out during the afternoon of presentations. As soon as David suggests that “it doesn’t matter”, disaffiliating from their complaints about it, the talk comes to an end with several people affirming his second point, that the team has to stick to the time in any case. Bev then completes the transition by asking if the practice of their presentation can begin. Bev is the taskmaster for this project and as such makes use of her right to structure the meeting.

Disalignment often precedes the end of a troubles talk episode and often seems instrumental in moving the talk on to different matters. While ultimately this is for the benefit of the team, who still need to get work done, it could nonetheless be a challenge to rapport. Team members need to position themselves albeit briefly outside of the group and potentially run the risk of being labelled as not having humour or not caring for the other team members’ worries or feelings by simply moving on. For the most part, however, exactly as in the initiation of troubles talk, we find a joint agreement to end the episode and shift the topic to something else by at least two team members. There are thus no abrupt shifts of topic, which Spencer-Oatey (2008) describes as potentially harming rapport.

The features we have seen here re-appear over and over in troubles talk incidents: Firstly, moving on often requires some form of collaboration (though we will see an incident below where this is not the case). If this collaboration does not take place, the attempt to move on can be unsuccessful: There are several incidents where team members seem to try to change the topic away from troubles talk but do not succeed as nobody joins in completing the transition. Secondly, there is a rather small set of words that are used to mark the transition. The most frequent one in the data is “okay”. Thirdly, disaffiliation by a team member from a trouble often foreshadows the end of a troubles talk episode, which seems to emphasise the importance of alignment and a shared floor in troubles talk episodes. Finally, one part in the transition is often (but not always) performed by the chair or by the person who was the focus of the troubles talk and now signals that it is okay to move on.

One way to end an episode of troubles talk that significantly differs from the pattern above is to produce a meta-comment, marking the current talk as the *wrong* type of talk to be had. Statements like this are rare in the data and are only produced by the taskmaster of the specific project. A particularly striking example is shown in the extract below.

5.6-4 P4_M2_E9: The team is in a troubles talk episode about a professor and her marking practices, that gets cut short by David (the taskmaster)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1049 | Akshya: | She cut five marks |
| | 1050 | Bruno: | Because it= |
| | 1051 | Akshya: | =There were too many citations |
| → | 1052 | David: | [PEOPLE (.) PEOPLE ((whistles)) |
| | 1053 | Bruno: | [I'm going to stalk her now, now that she's |
| → | 1054 | David: | WE'VE GONE completely off track, OKAY (.) Yes there's a lot of work to do but we still need to do this |
| | 1055 | Akshya | Yeah |
| → | 1056 | David: | Where we at? So, we said that we compile these by the 9th |

David first attempts to end the ongoing troubles talk by loudly saying "PEOPLE (.) PEOPLE" in line 1052. However, as this fails he whistles at them prompting Bruno to fall quiet mid-sentence. David continues by stating "We have gone completely off track" (line 1054). While he states "we" this nonetheless suggests some wrongdoing by the team in the sense that it would clearly be better to be on-track. David then in some way completes the troubles talk and makes the connection to the new topic by producing a troubles summary statement with: "Yes, there's a lot of work to do but we still need to do this" (line 1054). After this he moves on to the timeline they were discussing.

While this is clearly an effective way of ending a topic and moving on, we have some indications that this strong deviation from the normally more collaborative transitions might negatively affect relationships. While Jay and Bev in their capacities as taskmasters both also make statements to point out that the team is off-topic or needs to move back to on-topic talk, the two use them very sporadically and employ more mitigation devices than seen in this example. David seems to use them more frequently (though still not overwhelmingly); however, the interview data makes clear that team members perceived his leadership style as slightly too strong and domineering in a team of equals and that this actually harmed rapport, as outlined in Chapter 4. This final example makes explicit that the violation of interactional norms established in an egalitarian team, including shared ownership and equal access to the discursive and participatory domain, in fact can seriously harm rapport. It is therefore no surprise that those instances are few.

There is one more important difference from Jefferson's (1984a) data: Some of the troubles talk topics are very close to the "business as usual" topics (even if the form in which they are discussed is very different). On occasion, team members thus do not completely change the topic but only the manner in which it is discussed. In quite a few incidents team members seem to follow suit and start treating the topic seriously, especially if the troubles talk episode is short. In those cases, we have an almost flawless transition in and out of the episodes within a few turns, while after longer episodes, especially after very humorous ones we sometimes have serious and troubles modes co-existing or competing for a few turns as for example in Example 5.7-1 below.

What I have shown in this section is how troubles talk can be ended in a way that preserves (in most cases) the rapport built within the episode. We have already seen the number of ways in which team members minimise the negative impact of troubles talk, including mitigating mood, humour and only doing troubles talk in a mode that suggests that "this is play". The relatively seamless and shared move back to the tasks laid out in front of the team is one further way in which the potential negative side effects of troubles talk are mitigated.

## 5.7 Functions of Troubles Talk

The previous sections have pointed to several specific functions that troubles talk seems to fulfil in the team beyond enhancing rapport, which I see as the more general function. These have, however, so far not been discussed systematically, and I will do so in this section. Troubles talk seems to fulfil seven major functions in the team including: 1) creating common ground and a shared world view, 2) shared norms, 3) constructing "the team" and talking it into being, 4) developing a sense of solidarity, empathy and trust, 5) doing identity work, 6) enhancing group mood, 7) coping, 8) pursuing interpersonal goals.

This is not to suggests that troubles talk is exclusive in achieving those functions, nor that each troubles talk episode necessarily has to contribute to every single category. There is however a considerable overlap in functions and most troubles talk episodes seem to accomplish several different functions. I will discuss each of them in turn in the next sections.

### 5.7.1 Creating common ground and a shared worldview

As we have seen previously, troubles talk for the most part tends to be a collaborative interactional activity with respect to a number of interactional domains. Right from the start team members suggest or point to a given trouble, which if the topic is picked up, gets jointly constructed as a trouble, after which its severity and the different aspects of the trouble and its potential impact are negotiated. From its onset, troubles talk is thus about developing a shared understanding of an issue and of establishing a common worldview towards this issue. However, it seems that often the common ground and the shared worldview established in troubles talk goes beyond the construction and sharing of the trouble itself, to more broader themes in their lives.

This seems particularly important since the team considers itself to be intercultural and occasionally explicitly reflects on areas in which behavioural expectations or common ground diverge due to "their cultures". This occurs most notably in regard to participation in team meetings and the degree of initiative that is expected. Yet, little of these difficulties are visible in troubles talk, though we see a hint in Example 5.3-3 where David contests the legitimacy of Akshya's India example. For the most part though, troubles talk seem to allow the team to find and build common ground relatively easily.

It also seems important to look back at the setting in which team members find themselves, especially at the beginning of the teamwork: All team members had relocated for this year, most of them even from another country. In addition to completely new surroundings, team members found themselves in the completely new role of being a mature student, after having had a successful career. While a lot of their interactions tended to be task-focused and quite professional, troubles talk seems to have provided them with the important opportunity to actually make sense of this new role and environment and for checking and comparing each other's experiences and understandings of certain issues without running the risk of violating professional interactional norms or having very serious heart-to-heart-interactions with people who were complete strangers at the beginning of the year. The topics covered in the troubles talk (section 5.1) seem to confirm this, given that a large majority of troubles talk episodes deal with some aspect of "being an MBA student".

If we look at the extracts already shown, some of the most obvious examples in the data stem from troubles talk episodes about professors and difficult exams in which team members gained the assurance that they were not alone in finding a particular behaviour unacceptable or were struggling with specific situations. I will now turn to two interesting examples to show this in more detail. Both are related to how the team works together and what their priorities are, and it becomes evident how troubles talk also affects the decisions they take as a team and their general dealings with each other:

5.7-1 P2-M1-E10: The team is planning the timeline for their project. Lines 398 till 412 are coloured in grey as they are accompanied by continuous loud laughter overlapping the whole interaction, that gets re-ignited with every spoken turn.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 380 | David: | Alright (.) so it says that interviews would be useful but not essential/ so should we? (.) Alright bear in mind that we have 20 days? |
| 381 | Bev: | What 20 days? £We've got how many days?£ |
| 382 | David: | When is this due? hhhh |
| 383 | Bruno: | I guess Tuesday morning its |
| 384 | | ((laughter)) |

[11 lines omitted in which they establish the deadlines and Bruno and Jay keep joking with each other]

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 395 | Bev: | Yeah 19 days and {module name} is 18 days so |
| 396 | David: | S:o bear in mind that we have got {module name} to do at the same time |
| 397 | Bev: | hhhhh |
| 398 | David: | And we'll also have a group project in {module name} due at some point as well hhh |
| 399 | Akshya: | Which hasn't been even [(xxx) |
| 400 | David: | [They hadn't even had (xxx) about that/ let's keep this as simplistic as possible hhh |
| 401 | Jay: | Yeah |
| 402 | Bev: | hhhhhhhh |
| 403 | Bruno: | hh that sounds like a very good point David hhhh |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 404 | Bev: | I totally just [(xxx) |
| 405 | Akshya: | [Do you just want to do |
| 406 | Bruno: | But I would like to (xxx) |
| 407 | | ((laughter and some overlapping conversation)) |
| 408 | Bruno: | Keep it very simple hhhhh |
| 409 | Bev: | PLEASE/ no research hhhh |
| 410 | David: | I want no more hhh |
| 411 | Bruno: | No more {module name} for the next 100 days hhhhhh we're going to= |
| 412 | Bev: | =WE don't care (xxx) please hhh |
| 413 | Jay: | Yeah let's do something simple |
| 414 | David: | So let's just take a really simple operation |
| 415 | Jay: | Yeah yeah |
| 416 | Akshya: | {UNIVERSITY NAME} {university name} accommodation |
| 417 | Jay: | {SUPERMARKET NAME} |
| 418 | David: | Like someone that makes coffee or something like that |
| 419 | Bev: | Yeah hhhhhh |
| 420 | David: | And we just go look that a coffee here and they take it over there |

In this extract the team takes a fairly important decision on the whole project (to keep it simple and not do extra research), which is constructed as the only sensible decision after a set of troubles has been jointly identified. David's initial question sounds fairly neutral but already hints at a potential trouble as he points to the deadline in order to establish how they should approach this project. From the onset the project is thus treated as having to be accomplished in a very limited amount of time. The others immediately subscribe to this view, with Bev contesting in line 381 that they even have 20 days to accomplish it and Bruno joking that it is probably due on Tuesday morning, which is received with loud laughter. Within a very small number of turns the team thus constructs the time available to be extremely limited and, after establishing the actual deadlines, more items get listed that diminish the time available for this project that go completely unchallenged. Thus, it seems a natural conclusion for David to state: "Let's keep this as simplistic as possible hhh" in line 400. The whole exchange is accompanied by loud laughter that further constructs the situation as ridiculous. Team members together laughingly construct their grievances until in line 413 Jay says in a more factual way "yeah let's do something simple". By this time the decision has been made and all team members seem to have fallen in line with that decision. Right after this exchange team members then move on to brainstorm organisations they could focus the project on (line 416 onwards), and the main criteria later explicitly established for this are a) it has to be nearby and b) it needs to be a simple organisation. There are no objections voiced and the team manages to achieve a decision quite quickly, while the team meeting continues in a quite cohesive and humorous fashion. "Keep it very simple" also remained something of a slogan (or motto) for this entire project. This does not mean that team members did not work hard, however several decisions ended up being made based on this principle, including getting rid of some more complicated work they had done for the final presentation.

We can see that this exchange establishes a remarkable cohesion in the team. In this extract team members very quickly adopt a shared view of their project based on a troubles construction that seems to bode well for the relational aspects of their work. The sequence features loud laughter, humour and overall a high involvement style.

However, there is a counter-story to this seeming success. While their collaboration on the project was fairly smooth, the project discussed here ended up being graded with their lowest score. In the interviews, Alden made it clear that he was not on board with this decision and that in his mind, if you do something simple just to get the project out of the way you do not get high marks, nor do you learn anything and that, in contrast, his purpose in coming here was to learn. This reveals a completely different perspective on the trouble and the solution the team constructed in response.

The team did not know this, as Alden did not voice his perspective in the meeting but looking back at the data we can find him completely absent from this exchange, although he was in the room. While he often stays quiet, in this exchange we cannot even hear him laughing on the recording, which is often the case in other instances. While there are quite a few instances in the data where he does voice objections to decisions and approaches to work, he chooses to stay silent here. Disagreeing with the approach at this point in time would have forced Alden to take a stance against the rest of the team, thus threatening the rapport established and positioning him as an outsider. It seems questionable whether after an exchange like this, providing a counter narrative would have made any difference as well, which seems somewhat unlikely. Alden seems to come to the same conclusion. Jay, who ended up being the taskmaster for this project stated in the final interview "I don't remember how we made this decision (.) but it was the wrong decision". This quote does not refer to the instance we have just seen, but to the decision to take out the more complicated things they had done from their presentation. However, it seems unlikely that that decision would have been made without the common ground developed here that simplicity and saving time is key.

What this extract has shown is how quickly and powerfully common ground and a shared outlook can be formed around a trouble. However, it has also shown that while there is a great potential for building relations, there is also a risk of excluding team members who are not on board and possibly steering the team in a wrong direction as counternarratives beyond the common ground are to some extent made impossible, at least without harming the rapport that is being established.

### 5.7.2 Establishing shared norms

Very closely related to the establishment of common ground is the establishment of shared norms. The two are nonetheless distinct as I understand *norms* here as carrying more of a value judgement regarding good or bad behaviour that gets established in the team.

To some extent we have witnessed this also in the previous extract (Example 5.7-1), albeit implicitly. By the highly involved way and the joint laughter that accompanied this episode there is at least an implicitly suggested norm that contradicting this could be problematic and that it is "better" to join the team and get behind the joint vision. This might be one of the reasons why Alden chose not to dispute the teams shared outlook. In addition, behaviours that would lead to resolving the project simply and quickly are likely to be also framed as "good" as a result of this exchange as opposed to very in-depth engagement and a more complex search for solutions. "Doing research" and "conducting interviews" are two activities that are explicitly framed as unnecessary endeavours and thus might run the risk of incurring negative judgement if conducted anyway. While this is quite implicitly done here (as in fact it is in many episodes), there are some other troubles talk episodes where we have quite an explicit endorsement or critique regarding behaviours in teams, as the following extract shows.

5.7-2 P2_M3_E1: Bev and Akshya report on their experience of working with another team for a short exercise

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 190 | Bev: | Actually this afternoon we realised/ I realised I don't want to be in a team with Hamid he's soooo strong "guys do this/ do that" ((exaggerated pronunciation & lower tone of voice)) |
| 191 | Akshya: | No [but he is not like that in his team |
| 192 | Bev: | [I was literally scared |
| 193 | Akshya: | I tell you why/ because he's got Lizzie and Francine in the same team hhh |
| 194 | Bev: | I was scared today/ I really was which is so unlike me/ I usually be/ I am always more going to the point/ in our team both of us were [like what's going on here? |
| 195 | Akshya: | [no I was more scared |
| 196 | Bev: | There was so much trouble as to power= |
| 197 | Akshya: | =yeah I was like/ I was lost |
| 198 | Bev: | Between Lizzie and Jack and Francine they're all/ like "what's going on with the power?" |

In this extract, Bev and Akshya frame "power struggles in teams" as uncomfortable, scary and thus something not to be done. Bev gives an explicit example in line 190 of being ordered around in a team as a direct quote, while producing it in such an intonation that the person originally speaking sounds unlikeable. While Akshya seems to disagree in line 191 and line 193, these utterances function to add to the problematisation of power struggles in teams, emphasising that not only is Hamid very strong but so are Lizzie and Francine. What is noticeable is that in addition to this more relational aspect discussed there is at least a suggestion that such a behaviour would impact not only the relationships but also performance in a team.

While there are only a small number of incidents like this in the recordings, I have witnessed a large number of troubles talk about other teams during my observations, especially in more informal settings. In the final round of interviews team members told me of a number of

‘troubles’ incidents in other teams that seem to have been widely shared amongst their cohort and that seem to have had great normative functions in establishing “good” and “bad” team behaviours.

There are of course many incidents in which good and bad behaviours in specific settings are constructed more implicitly. It seems that troubles talk allows team members to establish or suggest these norms without threatening anybody’s face and to also establish certain norms pre-emptively, before certain troubles might occur in one’s own team.

### 5.7.3 Constructing the team and talking it into being

As we saw in the previous example, by talking about other teams and other team’s members a clear boundary is drawn between “my team” and “their team”, with often more positive evaluations of one’s own team. While talking about other teams seems a very obvious example for this, this is of course also done in troubles talk episodes on other topics.

As we have seen in section 5.1 the vast amount of troubles talk episodes discuss troubles that are to some extent shared. Workload, professors, exams, task-related troubles are all troubles that concern the whole team. Within these episodes the team tends to be positioned as jointly suffering under the same troubles, with a frequent need for developing joint strategies for coping with it. Team members share the same “fate” of enduring what they construct to be useless events, bad teaching and difficult exams – but also devise joint coping mechanisms by laughing together at the troubles, as I will discuss in more depth in section 5.7.7.

### 5.7.4 Developing a sense of solidarity, empathy and trust

Troubles talk also seems an important way in which the team establishes solidarity, empathy and trust. While these features might seem similar to the “creation of team”, it seems to be achieved by somewhat different means and with somewhat different foci. While the construction of external troubles implicitly requires the construction of a team in an “us” versus “them" manner – which might also instil a sense of camaraderie – there are several more structural features in the troubles talk episodes that seem to deepen and refine these senses of togetherness and to increase trust and empathy team members might have for each other.

Whenever a team member admits to a trouble it is a sign of trust in the team to protect the utterer’s face, which has been made vulnerable. As we have seen in the vast majority of episodes team members react to this by sharing a similar trouble, or in the cases where the trouble was not shared by expressing what appears to be genuine empathy or by constructing the trouble as something to be laughed at and as such not a sign of a personal inadequacy.

This is most obvious in the responses to self-disclosures: Through collaborative other-face saving moves, team members tend to reciprocate with similar admissions, even if those do not seem to be grounded in reality (e.g. in the proofreading example 5.4-5). Over time this seems

to increase team members' trust that the others will show solidarity and will do their part to save the faces of all involved. At the same time, sharing one's own specific troubles increases empathy by precisely making troubles explicit that are not and cannot be shared. We have already seen an excellent example of this in Example 5.4-10, in which Bruno shared his language struggles in reading everything in English with the team. Since Bev and David are native speakers and Akshya and Jay have gone to English speaking schools it seems likely that they have no insights into what doing an MBA feels like for their less proficient team members. Bruno constructs this narrative around his experience that also serves to construct a positive identity for himself, suggesting he would be better at this in German. Incidents like this are likely to increase awareness and understanding of personal troubles and thus pre-empt them to some extent from harming rapport. More generally, troubles talk allows team members to exchange certain personal information that they deem relevant but otherwise could not share easily in the team. Team members can then show interest, commiserate and participate in their team mate's lives, while getting to know them gradually better.

### 5.7.5 Identity construction

This section will draw attention to some of the identity construction that is present in troubles talk. While much could undoubtedly be said about this topic, I will only discuss some contextual factors that seem important and, in the light of those (selectively) chosen contextual factors, analyse the identity work that is done within the troubles talk episodes. In this identity construction, I will focus on two major themes that are present frequently in the data and appear, at least to some extent, to be in a certain tension with each other. These themes follow along two broad lines. The first one is being an adult, being independent, resisting institutional demands, being better than others. The second broadly focuses on the theme of being collaborative, being responsible, being a good team member and being equal. In some sense this also represents the tension of being an individual and being a member of a group.

I will firstly discuss some contextual information that seems relevant and then look at different examples of how this is constructed in troubles talk interactions. Before starting the MBA, team members had successful careers, some of them in managerial positions. For all team members the beginning of the MBA thus marks a loss of self-determination and a larger dependency on an institution and its administrative staff and professors who suddenly continually grade and assess them and dictate their schedules and to some extent treat them like *students* again. It became clear in the interviews that this was a huge change of track for all of them. What is important is that there seemed to be no real resentment around this nor is this ever explicitly discussed in the team. What we can see during the troubles talk incidents, however, are different claims to identities that position the individual above a student. Perhaps one could even describe this as an "MBA-identity". There are a number of examples in the data in which this is done quite explicitly and many more where it is done implicitly. I will only provide one example here for illustration.

5.7-3 P4_M2_E5: During a discussion about some of their clients' practices Bruno reports on an incident from his accommodation

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 353 | Bruno: | But this is actually something very common in the UK here/ to offer something in return of something. like in our kitchen/ "yeah/ please show up for the kitchen meeting and you can win a box of Ben and Jerry" |
| 354 | Bev: | hhhhhhhh |
| 355 | I: | Seriously? |
| 356 | Bruno: | Seriously |
| 357 | David: | People are more likely to do things for free than a small incentive/ aren't they? |
| 358 | Bruno: | Because they feel like "are you kidding me?" |
| 359 | David: | Yeah |

The talk prior to this incident centres around their client having problems incentivising people to participate in surveys, so while Bruno's contribution is not completely irrelevant it is also not strictly on topic. He mitigates that by making the claim "here in the UK", which seems to function as providing the continuity of the talk. Bruno proceeds to tell a story of how he is being communicated with in his university owned accommodation. While his statement reads factually, his intonation pattern on the recording suggests that he is decidedly annoyed by this, thus making an identity claim that he should not be talked to like this. Bev immediately picks this up and affiliates with loud laughter, while I ask whether this has seriously happened, also implying that it was inappropriate. Bruno is actually the oldest member in the team and has had a successful career, so the idea that he was likely to do something for the chance to win a box of Ben and Jerry's ice cream seems ludicrous. When David does respond factually in line 357, Bruno proceeds to emphasise the point in line 358 by stating "because they feel like are you kidding me?" which then prompts David to affiliate more with Bruno's story. Through sharing this incident Bruno wins back part of his identity as a successful adult, who feels like he has unfairly or mistakenly been treated like a teenager and manages to establish that identity within the team but likely also to re-affirm it for himself.

We have also seen that by laughing at troubles, team members indicate that they are troubles-resistant and as such can lay claim to an identity of coping and of succeeding amidst difficulties.

## 5.7.6 Enhancing group mood

Group mood is the affect team members experience at the group level generated through social interaction (Barsade & Gibson, 2012, p. 119). Members of groups have been found to exchange and synchronise their affective states both through non-verbal (Kelly & Barsade, 2001) and verbal interaction (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Lehmann-Willenbrock, Meyers, Kauffeld,

Neininger, & Henschel, 2011). Mood is often categorised along the two dimensions aroused-unaroused and pleasant-unpleasant (Larsen & Diener, 1992).

Within troubles talk, group mood seems to be a fairly complex issue. As we have seen, emotions get expressed through swear words and sometimes even completely explicitly. David for example states "I'm so angry" repeatedly during a troubles episode. In addition, negative attitudes are shared explicitly through negative evaluations. At the same time, as we have seen repeatedly in the examples, troubles talk tends to feature high arousal and lots of humour – thus often it appears to be quite pleasant.

Looking back to Example 5.7.1 we can see that it is dominated by laughter and ends with a smooth transition into an on-task brainstorming session in which team members exuberantly volunteer ideas. Thus, not only is the troubles talk itself highly aroused, this spills over into adjacent talk regularly. The effect on group mood is particularly noticeable in humorous episodes but even the non-humorous ones seem to have a positive effect on the affective states in the team. This may in parts be due to the rapport they develop and the similarities they discover as they build common ground.

At the same time, it is also a somewhat delicate type of talk, which team members seem to be aware of. We have repeatedly seen examples of team members disaffiliating from too negative emotions or exclamations – thus interactional work is done to stay within the positive affect that doing troubles talk tends to generate. Team members thus show sensitivity in preserving the mood and use different strategies to do so. In addition to disaffiliating from very negative statements, these include signalling that a troubles talk episode has reached its peak of escalation, humour, and doing identity work to dispel any negativity.

### 5.7.7 Coping

As already outlined above, team members are in situations where their positive identities become threatened again and again by the changed circumstances they find themselves in. In addition, they are exposed to large amounts of stress – if we believe their troubles talk on scheduling and workload – which, according to them was significantly more than they had previously experienced in the workplace.

For both these aspects of their lives they need to develop coping strategies that help them deal with them. One such strategy seems to be troubles talk (I am by no means suggesting that it is the only one). Troubles talk itself seems to be a way of coping: Establishing that most troubles are shared makes it easier to cope with them, as does joint commiseration. In addition, within troubles talk some specific features seem particularly useful for coping with stress and frustration: laughing at the troubles (Lefcourt, 2001) and swearing (Dewe & Guest, 1990).

While I have not specifically measured stress levels or coping, in many cases team members seem to have felt comforted by the fact that troubles are shared. Bev for example comments in a discussion on a particularly difficult exam:

5.7-4 P3-M1-E3:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 336 | Bev: | to be sincere I actually thought I was gonna fail accounting until I came out and then I heard everybody “oh don't worry; we'll all fail together, it’s no problem” |

Bev’s statement suggests that she was worried, but tone and performance of this utterance now do not suggest any of this worry being left after having found out that she was not the only one to experience the exam this way. While it is not always made as explicit as here, many troubles talk episodes seem to have just this effect: Worries are alleviated and burdens become shared. In addition, the joint laughter and the sheer fact that some of these issues become sayable in the team during troubles talk seem to minimise stress.

### 5.7.8 Pursuing interpersonal goals

One point that has previously not been discussed in depth – though some readers may have noticed this in previous data examples – is the pursuit of interpersonal goals. While the definition of troubles talk emphasises that troubles talk does not involve direct complaints or requests for change to a person responsible, it seems that sometimes team members introduce a trouble with the goal of prompting a specific decision or to back up a specific suggestion. While one could argue whether this constitutes real troubles talk, in the team studied here the uptake is quite mixed, with team member sometimes ignoring the construction of the trouble (see Example 5.5-2) whereas sometimes they engage in a real troubles talk episode without necessarily allowing themselves to be convinced by an agenda.

It is of course hard to tell from the data if somebody is attempting to convince the team of a particular issue by constructing it as a trouble. In some examples it seems more tangible, especially where team members seem to establish a specific conclusion very quickly as logically following from a trouble. But to some extent it seems dependent on an individual team member’s finesse. David’s initiator in Example 5.7-1 might well constitute just such a case:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 380 | David: | Alright (.) so it says that interviews would be useful but not essentia::l (.) so should we (.) Alright bear in mind that we have 20 days? |

David already refers to the fact that interviews are not essential before any discussion of problematic timelines has occurred, but then stops himself short of making a suggestion as he interrupts himself after “so should we”. He then first points to the perceived trouble (“we have 20 days”) that seems to be at the heart of the first part of his utterance, which very much seems to say “let’s not do any interviews”. About 11 lines later he inserts into the ensuing troubles talk about deadline and other projects due: “Let's keep this as simplistic as possible hhh”. As a reader/observer one is left to wonder whether this conclusion was perhaps the specific goal

of the troubles talk. While we cannot show this for sure in this case, it seems completely in the realm of possibility that team members might do just such a thing successfully.

## 5.8 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a thick description of troubles talk done in an intercultural team and in a workplace context (in a broad sense). By analysing a number of different features prominent in troubles talk, I have tried to shed light on an interactional phenomenon that for all we know is ubiquitous but has received little academic attention so far. One of the reasons for focusing on the activity of troubles talk was the fact that based on my observations and my initial analysis, troubles talk seemed to have been particularly beneficial for the rapport management and enhancement in the team I studied. Within the analysis I have therefore tried to trace whether this is truly the case and if yes, why. For this I have queried how rapport is managed within the different domains Spencer-Oatey (2008) has outlined. Interactional strategies in the team's troubles talk differ, sometimes quite strongly, from their usual work-talk. In general, the interactional style used in troubles talk is more jocular and humorous and features more laughter and swearing than is present outside of troubles talk, while the participatory domain is managed more equally and collaboratively and with greater concerns for equity and association rights and face concerns. Similar claims seem true for the management of the discursive and the illocutionary domain. Overall, team members seem to display a more explicit rapport enhancing orientation than is tangible in the more general work-talk. Troubles talk thus seems to provide an important break from more competitive talk and provide a chance to enhance rapport, especially when rapport maintenance may have suffered in the more task-focused discussions. I will now turn to discuss the value of the rapport management framework and the broader implications of my findings on troubles talk.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

In Chapter 5, I have given an account of my analysis of all troubles talk episodes collected in the data. While I started by identifying these incidents by their topic and the construction of something as a trouble, during the analysis it became quickly apparent that several recurring interactional features characterise these troubles talk incidents. These differentiate troubles talk as an interactional activity from other types of talk occurring in the team and many of them seem particularly well suited for enhancing rapport. I will briefly summarise the findings on the more structural and interactional features, before discussing them in the light of the previously published literature. Afterwards I will turn to the topic of rapport management and enhancement. It should be noted though that the separation is to some extent artificial as the structure of troubles talk and its features are of course intrinsically linked to the way rapport is managed.

## 6.1 The Structure of Troubles Talk

### 6.1.1 Main findings

The recurrent features appearing in troubles talk include the largely collaborative initiation (section 5.3) and ending (section 5.6.2) of troubles talk. Troubles tend to be either introduced ambiguously or with an emphasis on their immediacy and personal relevance (section 5.3) and then become validated as troubles and constructed as joint troubles (section 5.4.1) by the team.

One of the most striking recurring features is how troubles narratives are jointly constructed as opposed to being produced by individuals (section 5.4.1). The floor in these incidents remains shared even if troubles are not, which often leads to team members adding to troubles and supporting others in exploring them further even where the trouble itself is only experienced by one member. Team members explicitly create interactional space and supportively allocate turns within troubles talk indicating interest and support to each other (section 5.4.2).

In addition, we have seen that troubles narratives sometimes tend to escalate, with team members slowly stretching and testing the limits of the troubles construction in terms of its interpretation, the culpability of people involved and its severity. This seems to be in part due to the nature of shared storytelling, the involved humour that sometimes consists of fantasy humour, but also the often ambiguous and tentative introduction of the trouble. Most importantly, however, it forms part of the construction of a shared worldview and with that more shared mental models, as by jointly exploring how far one can go in the construction of the trouble, an emerging interpretation is jointly constructed that everyone then can subscribe to.

In addition to these more structural features of troubles talk I have highlighted some speech acts and linguistic devices that seem to occur more frequently in troubles talk than in any other type of talk in the data. These include self-disclosures (section 5.4.4), laughter and the usage of swearwords (section 5.4.6). Furthermore, with regards to speech acts I have also highlighted that the speech act traditionally associated with troubles talk, namely *indirect complaints*, while certainly present in many cases, seems to be better described in more neutral terms as *explicit negative evaluations* as they often lack any attribution of blame (section 5.4.5).

I have considered how troubles talk is managed to maintain a largely positive function in the face of talk focused on negative issues and have highlighted the role humour plays in this (section 5.4.7), but also the disaffiliation from team members who voice actual anger (sections 5.4.1 and 5.4.6.1) and the broader orientation to maintaining a positive group mood, often through the features already mentioned, but also by disaffiliation from troubles once things seem to have gone too far.

### 6.2.2 Discussion

As I have shown in the literature review, hardly any studies had been previously conducted on troubles talk beyond the dyad, nor on troubles talk in intercultural or workplace settings. To the best of my knowledge this is also the only study to investigate troubles talk occurring over a longer period of time. This makes it unsurprising that a number of structural features were found to differ quite strongly from the structures and features found in previous troubles talk studies.

First and foremost, we do not find a clear distinction between a troubles-teller and a troubles-recipient as originally suggested by Jefferson (1988) and Tannen (1991) and mirrored in most troubles research, with the exception of Goldsmith (2004). As with Goldsmith's data, this partly seems to be due to the fact that troubles are often shared among interlocutors, which would make the telling by one person unnecessary (and potentially odd). However, even when troubles are not shared we rarely find full narratives developed by one person (Example 5.4-3) although it happens occasionally (Example 5.4-10). This might be due to how the floor is managed more generally in the team. During team meetings the pace is often quick and team members compete for interactional space. While troubles talk shows a markedly different quality, it might nonetheless seem inappropriate to occupy the position of speaker for too long – especially because troubles talk is often more collaborative than on-task discussions and as such team members might be more focused on doing being collaborative, thus yielding the floor faster. Therefore, even where a trouble only pertains to one person, the roles of teller and receiver nonetheless become blurred.

With this, many of the other features of troubles talk previously established in the literature become blurred as well or are dispensed with altogether. While we have seen quite a few initiators to troubles talk featuring the systematic ambiguity Jefferson reported (1980, 1988),

they constitute not even half of the incidents. In most other cases, troubles talk is brought on by more forceful statements that seem to prioritise the likelihood of uptake over considerations of face or non-imposition on one's team mates. As a result, Jefferson's (1988) first three stages of approach, arrival and delivery become more blurred and often merge together. It seems that in a team of six with regular competition for the floor, more forceful statements might be needed to guarantee uptake than in a dyad. Jefferson herself has pointed out that the broad structure she proposed regularly became disrupted in the segments she studied, so this might be one of the more specific ways in which these disruptions occur: The local norms of the encounters would often not have permitted a structure as found by Jefferson in telephone interactions.

One very noticeable structural difference due to the more blurred lines between teller and recipient also exists in the case of laughter. Jefferson (1984b) found that troubles tellers would laugh at some point during the troubles telling, either at the trouble itself or an adjacent matter to indicate troubles-resistance, while the troubles recipient would refuse to join in. Unlike in many other situations where this would constitute a dispreferred response, during a troubles telling it is in fact the sign of a "properly aligned troubles-recipient" (Jefferson, 1984b, p. 367).

This pattern is completely absent here: Even in the few cases where the roles of troubles teller and recipient seem to fit, receivers regularly laugh with the troubles teller or even just laugh about the trouble by themselves (Example 5.4-10). It seems that troubles are by default treated as laughable in this context, potentially because indicating troubles-resistance is more crucial in workplace situations and towards one's colleagues than it is with friends in social interactions. In some cases, it even seems that those listening to a trouble laugh in order to save the teller's face by indicating troubles resistance for them.

Another surprising finding given the large number of studies that have focused on advice-giving as a response to troubles talk, is the almost complete lack of this phenomenon in the data here. There are so few instances of advice giving that they seem almost negligible. Advice was only given in a handful of cases and only where it was explicitly solicited and even then, often appeared to be given reluctantly.

There seem to be two main reasons for this: For one, troubles are mostly shared and it might therefore seem less appropriate to give advice on problems that oneself is also facing. In addition, as we have seen in the analysis, troubles talk was focused on establishing equality among team members, something that would have been disrupted by giving advice, which entails a claim to a higher epistemic status made by an interlocutor (or an attribution of such in case advice is solicited) (Riccioni et al., 2014). This, however, provides more evidence against Tannen's (1991) two-culture hypothesis regarding communication by men and women. Tannen claimed that giving advice was the typical male response and commiserating the typical female response to a trouble. In the data here we find virtually no difference among troubles responses by men and women. Moreover, despite the fact that male team members outnumber female team members two to one, 'typically female' responses dominate the

discussion of troubles – and this is not due to a tendency of all four male team members to use a more normatively feminine interactional style in general. Instead this seems to be a product of an orientation to rapport and equality more generally that is present in the team during troubles talk.

What my findings do clearly mirror though, is the close alignment of structure of the talk and the management of the relationships. Jefferson (1988) suggested that:

> "The parties start out at an interactional distance appropriate to their routine conversation, become gradually closer, arrive at an intense intimacy as the trouble is focused upon, and then return to a more distant relationship as they re-engage with business as usual." (Jefferson, 1988, p. 419)

This seems true despite the structural changes to troubles talk occurring in the group setting with the dispensing of a teller-recipient model.

This study has contributed to our understanding of this gradually achieved closeness and intimacy by highlighting a number of shifts in interactional norms that serve to distinguish it as an interactional activity from other types of talk. This includes changes in allowable contributions, face-management, floor management and key, that all seem to support the minimisation of interactional distance. In addition, I have suggested several (relational) functions troubles talk fulfils that – at least in the context of a workplace – seem to have effects well beyond the troubles talk itself. While relationships become more distant again after the conclusion of troubles talk many of these functions do not simply disappear thereafter with the onset of another type of talk.

## 6.2 Rapport Management in Troubles Talk

### 6.2.1 Summary of findings

Following my initial decision to focus on troubles talk, I observed that there was something different and important about its role in rapport management. The summary above of more structural findings already indicates that there are a number of differences to other types of talk done by the team and that very often these consist of specific strategies or ways of managing the various rapport management domains that Spencer-Oatey (2008) has outlined.

First and foremost, I have found an overwhelming emphasis on doing things together within troubles talk. Discursively, it seems the vast majority of topics discussed are such that all team members can relate and potentially contribute. As such, topics are inclusive and relatable, and too personal or controversial topics seem to be avoided, which points to a generally rapport enhancing orientation (section 5.1).

Interestingly, troubles talk topics that become irrelevant tend to get replaced by alternative topics rather than dropped. This is for example the case with assignment briefs: These were a frequent troubles talk topic in the first three projects, but were not available as a topic in

project 4, where the team set its own brief. In this project, instead of framing the brief as the trouble, they shifted to framing their client's practices as troubles, which they tended to do relatively rarely before. It seems therefore that there is the desire to talk about something as a trouble even if it is necessarily a severe problem that requires attention. This seems to be true for many of the issues they constructed as troubles. Team members stated that they were in general quite happy with their course, their teachers, tasks and their clients yet these were nonetheless a frequent source of troubles talk.

The action of troubles talk thus sometimes seems to be more important than the actual topic that gets discussed as a trouble. This seems to confirm the initial sense that troubles talk fulfils some important function for the team. At the same time troubles talk frequently starts after a silence, which to some extent could also suggest that it is the go-to talk when no other talk is currently available.

Finally, exploring the temporal location of troubles talk in meetings shows that troubles talk is often positioned somewhere towards the beginning or towards the end of team meetings, which could suggest that it plays a role in setting the tone for the meeting. This position at the beginning and the end of a meeting is reminiscent of greetings and closings, which Laver (1981) suggests are used to define and re-affirm relationships in interactions. While the two are clearly not the same and do not fulfil the exact same functions, it seems intriguing to consider whether troubles talk might be doing similar things – setting a specific tone for a meeting, including establishing common ground and shared goals and then affirming this shared ground again towards the end. This comparison might become more relevant with more research in the future, as observations suggest that troubles talk initiators are in fact good conversation openers, an observation also made by Boxer (1993b) (an example will be given below).

At the intersection of the participatory and the discursive domain, I have explored the initiation and uptake of troubles talk (section 5.3). While I have made a number of observations regarding face saving strategies, these are likely to be similar to other instances of introductions of new topics. What seems striking, though, is the amount of interactional space and time that is collaboratively freed up against the backdrop of not having time – as is frequently discussed in the team. While there is of course the possibility that team members are merely procrastinating, it seems more likely that troubles talk is seen as essential, be it for rapport, sensemaking, identity work or coping. We can also take this as a sign of team member's rapport enhancing orientation in the first place. Enfield suggests that there is an "inverse relationship between time spent interacting with any individual, and number of individuals with whom one interacts" (2008, p. 235). This means that there is a limited amount of relationships an individual can maintain, and thus choosing to engage in non-solution focused talk at work seems to constitute an indication of one's willingness and interest to invest in the relationship. I have similarly shown evidence of team members repeatedly trying to introduce troubles talk even on different troubles, which suggests that the activity of

doing troubles talk is more important than the exploration of the troubles themselves (section 5.3).

The emphasis on sharedness and of "doing things together" seems, however, most pronounced in the telling of the troubles, that is in the management of the participatory domain (sections 5.3 & 5.4.1-5.4.3). In many ways, turn-taking seems less competitive during troubles talk, and space is specifically allocated to exploring the trouble with further questions. Despite this, Alden does not actually contribute more during troubles talk than in other types of talk, a point I will return to. For the rest of the team, however, it seems that the nature of the shared narratives, the joint elaborations and escalations appear to be crucial in building shared common ground and a shared outlook and how "the team" as a joint entity is constructed. In a sense, the sharedness of the floor seems to lead to a sense of sharedness more generally.

The highly affiliative talk only becomes disrupted where threats arise to the rapport built in the episode. The two main ways in which this happens are by utterances that consist of unspecific but negative assessments (e.g. "Oh go:d this is bad") and utterances that convey actual anger. In both cases team members quickly disaffiliate, often by ending the troubles talk episode or by mitigating the other person's anger with the use of humour. It seems that maintaining rapport at the group level and maintaining positive group mood frequently trumps the maintenance of rapport within the dyad, turning it into rapport-neglect as a result of prioritising the group. This is even true between dyads who are friends. Very occasionally, within troubles talk this rapport is also threatened by individuals doing specific identity work; however, this seems to be exclusively due to previous disruptions in relationships (section 5.5.2) or a large focus on the self (section 5.5.3).

Looking towards the illocutionary domain, we find several features that seem to enhance rapport significantly. There seems to be a general orientation towards emphasising equal status in the team – something that is not always this present outside of troubles talk. Where team members self-disclose troubles, these are usually reciprocated, even if purely to emphasise equality, or they are treated as laughable. Laughing is not done in a mean-spirited way, but in a way that suggests trust towards the individual to cope successfully with the trouble. In fact, most troubles talk episodes are accompanied by at least some laughter, which helps team members cope, but also does identity work by indicating troubles-resistance, which seems one way in which positive benefits of troubles talk are reaped.

This also seems to be the case for humour and swearing, both part of the stylistic domain. Humour often seems to enable team members to show troubles resistance, but also is used to dispel potential relational tensions. At the same time just having fun together also seems a crucial aspect of what team members like about their team. With regards to swearing it seems that the joint breaking of a norm leads to an increase in cohesion and rapport and, in the case of joint swearing, an emphasis on a shared outlook. It seems, however, likely that such benefits depend on no member of the group having a particularly strong stance against swearing, which is the case in the data here.

Finally, one further interesting finding was made regarding disagreements. Within the overarching rapport enhancing activity of troubles talk, we find a number of disagreements uttered that do not seem to harm rapport. This is true for disagreements that upgrade or downgrade the severity of the trouble, but also for disagreements that serve to rein the troubles in and stop the episode from escalating further, and often stopping it altogether. There seems to be an understanding that these disagreements are not personal, but that the team cannot regularly escalate troubles too far, without them threatening rapport and negatively affecting their outlook on their work. As such, team members momentarily disaffiliate from the team or from specific team members or even explicitly disagree with some of their colleagues, but this seems often to be for the benefit of the team – which tends to be recognised and therefore is not sanctioned. Again, rapport becomes neglected in the dyad or triad as the focus is shifted to enhancing the work experience for the team overall.

As I have highlighted in section 5.7, through these rapport management strategies, a number of functions are fulfilled that are much more specific than the more general rapport management that I meant to investigate initially. These include the establishment of common ground; shared goals; a sense of being one team; establishing solidarity, empathy and trust; constructions of group and individual identity and positive group mood. In addition, and somewhat removed from the more relational issues, troubles talk also seems to function to facilitate coping and sometimes is used to pursue interpersonal goals. I will discuss each of these in the next section.

More generally however, this raises questions with regards to the rapport management framework and with regards to pragmatic research on relating. I will discuss these issues in section 6.3 but first will address the functions found and the meaning of these findings more broadly.

### 6.2.2 Discussion

#### 6.2.2.1 Functions of troubles talk

I will now turn towards discussing the functions of troubles talk. While it seems that, as Jefferson (1988) suggested, interactional distance is reclaimed after the end of a troubles talk episode, the functions identified nonetheless seem to work well beyond the immediate boundaries of a troubles talk episode. We have seen this particularly clearly with regards to the establishment of common ground and a shared outlook. Troubles talk seems to accomplish this in two distinct ways – where talk concerns personal troubles with assignments, living conditions, or shared troubles regarding the MBA experience in general, it seems to create more understanding between interlocutors, while where troubles talk concerns the team's work it seems to regularly inform some of their decisions and attitudes towards a project more generally. These shared attitudes regarding tasks as well as the sense of having a common fate regarding many of the less-pleasant parts of the MBA experience seem to last well beyond the troubles talk itself. In addition to this affiliative side of common ground, where empathy,

perspective-taking and a shared outlook are established, on the cognitive side common ground also facilitates communication more broadly, allowing for an economy of expression (Enfield, 2008) while mental representations become more shared (Žegarac, 2007).

While there is limited research on relationships in workplaces, in one of the few published investigations, Langley (2012) maintains that finding common ground is essential for building positive relationships in workplaces, but stresses that this can be particularly challenging in diverse workplaces and teams. Troubles talk thus might constitute one type of talk with which this can be achieved. In this data set, during troubles talk, interlocutors position themselves jointly vis-à-vis a trouble, thus creating additional external grounders for their relationships that can anchor them beyond the reciprocal relationship of being team members. Reciprocal relationships are relationships where rights, obligations and status in the relationship are mutually defined (Enfield, 2013), which is the case in role relationships such as mother-daughter, waiter-customer or in this case team member-team member. Externally grounded relationships on the other hand are defined by a third entity, that is by how interlocutors stand towards a third party or an object. In case of the team this means that they have a reciprocal relationship to each other about whose forming they had no control but which was to some extent mandated. This relationship is mutually defined by rights and obligations, such as "do your fair share and you should have influence over the project". Troubles talk is one of the ways in which team members position themselves in regard to adjacent issues, such as difficult exams and heavy workloads and develop shared positions on these issues. This adds to their reciprocal relationship and provides additional grounders, which strengthens the relationships and allows the team members to perceive the team as an entity. Team members thus *discover* and establish sharedness that contributes to defining their relationship, provides them with shared topics, a shared outlook and common ground. Figure 6.1 and 6.2 give a basic depiction of this.

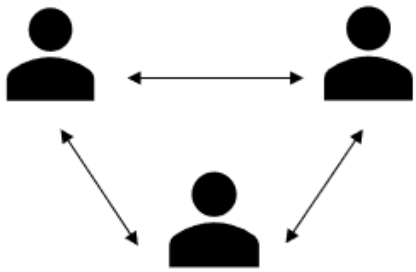

Figure 6.1 Reciprocal team member relationships (adapted from Enfield, 2013, p.8)

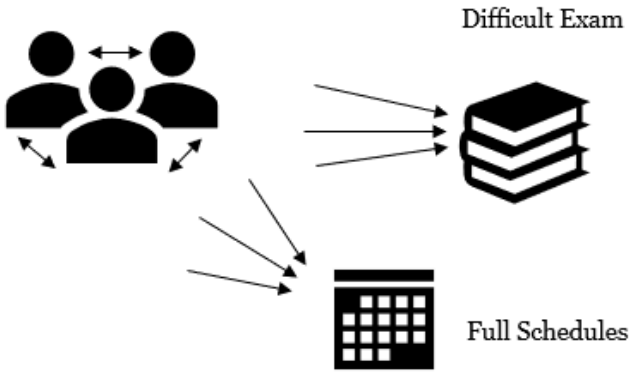


Figure 6.2 Externally grounded relationship through troubles (adapted from Enfield, 2013, p.8)

The external grounders for team member relationships do not replace the reciprocal one as team members but add to it in a positive way that strengthens ties, adds to common ground and opens up space for further interactions. As part of this, team members also develop a shared perspective on matters relevant to their work and on their team dynamics, while it moreover allows them to establish certain norms – either by discussing negative incidents in other teams, or by establishing consensus regarding their goals and priorities (e.g. "no more research!"). Interestingly, while this establishing of common ground, shared perspectives and shared norms seems to be the most impactful function in my own data, it has not really been discussed in previous research. Boxer (1993, p.167) might come closest by suggesting that indirect complaints can be used to check the validity of one's own interpretation and of seeking agreement, and while this aspect is present in my data, my findings significantly extend this.

Other functions found in the data have, in contrast, been discussed much more in the literature, and this is especially true for the case of coping. Some of the studies were specifically focused on exploring coping and social support (Goldsmith, 2004), while others highlighted the benefits of venting frustrations (Burchard, 2001) and doing troubles talk in a workplace (Mewburn, 2011). In all studies participants seemed to experience stress relief by doing troubles talk, which also seems to be the case for the team studied here. While most of these studies are based on observations and not measurements of stress levels, in this study team members also verbally indicated relief upon finding out that some issues were perceived as troubles by all of them and that they were, in fact, struggling together, which seemed to lighten the severity of a perceived trouble. The sharedness of their experience and the joint laughter at troubles thus seems to have significantly lightened the perception of their severity.

Another function discussed in the literature was the possibility of building community through doing troubles talk (Burchard, 2001; Faircloth, 2001; Kyratzis, 2000; Mewburn, 2011), which seems similar to the category of "creating team" and developing a sense of solidarity, trust and empathy that I have found in my data. Langley (2012, p. 168) suggests that "Regular positive, in-the-moment connections increase feelings of inclusion in a team and a sense of belonging." Troubles talk, or rather some of its features, seem to provide exactly this opportunity for more

genuine and positively connotated in-the-moment connections, that even if experienced only momentarily can increase feelings of inclusion. At the same time, "team" is created by positioning team members jointly vis-à-vis a trouble.

Both Kram and Isabella (1985) and Sias (2009) have provided evidence that troubles talk is characteristic of close peer relationships in the workplace, with Sias' study suggesting that it is in difficult workplace environments and while talking about these difficult environments that relationships amongst colleagues in fact become closer. While this study cannot comment on this (we have no long-term insights into who remained truly close, and with whom team members discussed troubles outside of meetings), the connection between talking about troubles and building rapport has been clearly made. At the same time, we have seen that this is not a simple and straightforward equation, as I will discuss further below.

Haugh (2016) and Mewburn (2011) both suggest that during troubles talk important identity work is done. While the scope of this study and the focus did not allow an in-depth study of identity work within this data set, one particularly crucial feature from a rapport management point of view that has come out and has not been discussed previously in any of the studies, is the emphasis on equality within the identity work done. Opportunities for claiming a more positive identity are often forgone in order to maintain equal status among team members. This means that two very different types of identity work had to be accomplished: The first one is regarding the troubles in which team members indicated an identity of being troubles resistant, and as laughing and coping and as not really being that affected by the troubles. At the same time, in order to maintain a socially positively connotated identity as a good team member, they had to emphasise equal status in the team. This means team members indicated coping, but not more than their fellow team members. Even where troubles were not shared, as we have seen, team members thus often passed up opportunities for doing identity work that would allow them to claim a superior status and instead indicated similar problems, even when it seemed doubtful that those were real. This is most evident in the troubles talk about proofreading, in which the L1 speaker Bev suggested having the same writing-troubles as Bruno, an L2 speaker who sometimes struggled with English (Example 5.4-5). Identity work during troubles talk thus seems to occur amidst a certain tension of coping but of not doing too well at the same time. Again, this is markedly different from some of the identity work done outside of troubles talk, where team members emphasise their own competence or "territory" in the team more.

With regards to the function of enhancing group mood, an interesting picture emerges. Kauffeld and Meyers (2009; also Lehmann-Willenbrock, Meyers, Kauffeld, Neininger, & Henschel, 2011) found that complaints negatively influence affect in a group. In their data, complaints seem to consist mostly of indirect complaints and as such seem similar to what is called troubles talk here. This, however, stands in diametric opposition to the findings of this study. None of the troubles talk episodes seem to have a significantly negative effect on team

affect and mood, while many of them seem to be outright positive and leave team members in a cheerful and collaborative state.

This discrepancy raises a number of questions. The troubles talk done by the team studied here might have been exceptional in the way troubles talk was accomplished; if this is the case, the strategies outlined here would be highly relevant for providing solutions to teams who are indeed negatively affected by troubles talk. On the other hand, all qualitative investigations report positive outcomes to troubles talk, so the discrepancies might be a result of a different focus (i.e. relational vs institutional) and the chosen methodological approach and embedded previous assumptions (i.e. complaining as a problem). In any case it seems necessary to see whether the findings reported here extend to other groups in different settings and to seriously consider potentially harmful effects of doing troubles talk.

The final function found here concerns the pursuit of interpersonal goals. This has not previously been discussed in the literature; however, it seems that team members can and sometimes do initiate a troubles talk episode with a specific goal in mind. As outlined, the shared common ground established in a troubles talk episode is frequently used as a basis to make decisions and thus could be used (or even abused) by a team member to prompt the team to make specific decisions that are in line with one's personal goals. This links to the more task-related concerns that rightfully can be held over troubles talk. Simpler decision-making is not always desirable. Teams are often assembled precisely because they are likely to have diverse opinions and this can lead to better solutions (Adler & Gundersen, 2008), thus too much cohesion in decision making might not be ideal. On the other hand, while some of the decisions taken by the team may have been influenced by the shared perceptions of troubles, these may have been what allowed the team to work together in the first place, by providing some common ground. It might have also influenced team members to put up with some of the less pleasant aspects of team work and to maintain relationships even with people they developed a personal dislike for.

In addition, while the literature (Kyratzis, 2000) has pointed out that negative effects such as exclusion and ridicule of outgroups or even mobbing behaviour are a possible side effect of troubles talk, this could not be found in the team studied here. There were occasional jocular exchanges about other teams in their cohort and the problems they have– but they seemed to serve more to establish norms for their own team, than to purposefully ridicule others. As such, maliciousness towards individuals, even towards professors who were the most frequent target in troubles talk, was absent and on the one or two occasions where team members made very unfavourable comments, the team immediately challenged those.

#### 6.2.2.2 Does it have to be troubles talk?

An important question to be raised is why troubles talk should be in any way special in fulfilling these particular relationship-enhancing functions. After all, troubles talk could simply be standing in for any potential topic a group of people might enjoy discussing. If by

coincidence all team members were fans of a particular manga series, for example, exchanges over this would very likely also enhance rapport and be made up of a number of the features I described here as components of troubles talk, such as a more collaboratively shared floor than is present in most task-focused interactions, or could even spark more personal self-disclosures and almost certainly would create common ground. Nonetheless, I argue that this could not simply replace the positive effects that troubles talk has on relationships.

For one, troubles talk is not dependent on the coincidence of having a shared interest but on a (more easily attainable) rudimentarily shared context and on somewhat similar attitudes towards a phenomenon. We have seen evidence of this versatility of troubles talk also in the literature I discussed. Within the old people's living community troubles talk was a readily available topic (Faircloth, 2001) and the same was true for children (Kyratzis, 2000). This makes it a particularly intriguing concept for intercultural communication where commonalities might be few and barriers to sharing might be higher.

While it seems likely that different cultures and contexts afford differences regarding what is an appropriate subject for troubles talk and how troubles talk can be realised appropriately, this did not seem to be a problem in the team studied here. Shared norms regarding this seem to have developed quickly and, as we have seen, troubles talk followed a more light-hearted, often jocular pattern focused more on commiseration than on assigning blame and was characterised by almost complete absence of prolonged negative emotions. While Alden did not participate much, there are nonetheless several incidents where he joins in and we can regularly hear him laughing along – thus there is no indication that he objects to troubles talk per se. Instead it seems that the team has found a fairly "safe" and uncontroversial way of doing troubles talk, which might be due to the constraints of being in a professional setting, of not knowing others too well initially, and of being in an intercultural team where variations of norms are likely.

To support this versatility of troubles talk further, I will give a brief example from outside of the team discussed here: After beginning this research, I started to pay a lot more attention to the troubles talk going on around me, and one of the most frequent settings where I witnessed this was on my regular commutes to and from the University, where troubles talk was regularly done among complete strangers over train delays. One time, I became part of a non-verbal troubles talk when a delay was announced, as the lady sitting across from me rolled her eyes annoyedly while making eye contact with me, to which I responded with a sigh, while another time a train change was announced and the lady across from me sighed and said to me "Oh no! And I am soooo hungover" – thus making an unmitigated self-disclosure to a stranger. Both incidents present a spontaneous response to an external stimulus, but nonetheless one that is within the agency of an interlocutor to make or not to make. While sharing one's frustration or venting might be the primary goal here, this nonetheless establishes a sense of solidarity among the people sharing the same fate. In both cases, we knew virtually nothing about each other and shared nothing apart from being in the same space (and in the cases

cited the same gender). However, commiserating together and expressing our annoyance in some small way established some form of positive relationship with the other person that led to the obligation (or entitlement) to say goodbye when leaving the train an hour later, which is not a common practice in the UK and something I would not feel obliged to do after most conversations on public transport. Troubles talk thus resembles a bit what Maynard and Zimmermann (1984) have termed *setting talk* in their study, in which both acquainted and unacquainted dyads commented on their surroundings as an initiator to an interaction. However, while the authors suggested that setting talk tends to have somewhat distancing functions, troubles talk might be its more affiliative counterpart.

I consider both train incidents to be troubles talk episodes, albeit very brief ones, and they also show that many of the structural features I have described are not a prerequisite for troubles talk and are merely descriptive. I would therefore understand them as a set of likely features that can be drawn on to do troubles talk, of which many are rapport enhancing, but it is likely that not all of them are present in all episodes. Here, we saw a reciprocal expression of a negative emotion (annoyance) in both cases and an unsolicited self-disclosure in one.

Jefferson (1988) understands troubles talk as a divergence from "business as usual" and there is plenty of evidence for this in my own data. What this study has confirmed is that the divergence brings about a different pace, a different outlook and different norms of interaction from the features of much of the team's other talk. Style and structure of the talk changed in the team, while in the train examples we went from non-interacting strangers to having some form of relationship, requiring us to say goodbye when leaving. This divergence from business as usual seems to be crucial for the rapport enhancement found in the data here. Team members are able to do things interactionally that do not seem to constitute allowable contributions outside of troubles talk. This includes expressing emotions, worries, failures and various states of being. It allows participants to briefly abandon the need to be professional in talking to one's colleagues and allows them to encounter each other as humans. It seems unsurprising therefore that this talk would alter the way interlocutors relate towards each other more generally. Within this sequence then, it seems almost easy to come to joint decisions in the team and to adopt a shared stance and common ground (Example 5.7.1), although this does not guarantee that decisions taken are necessarily the optimum ones.

Troubles talk further allows this to happen specifically with regards to work. It often comprises talk on processes and tasks, but nonetheless dispenses with at least some of the constraints present outside of troubles talk when discussing these issues. Thus, common ground and shared goals are established with regards to the raison d'être of the team and not some other more arbitrary topic.

#### 6.2.2.3 Troubles talk in intercultural settings

This leads us to some considerations regarding troubles talk in an intercultural setting. As I have suggested above, troubles talk proved to be an easily available talk activity to be done in

the intercultural setting of the team, as few pre-requisites were necessary, and troubles talk seemed versatile and readily available. While it seems likely that differences exist across cultures in how troubles talk is done, including what is seen as complainable and how one should respond to such a talk, this could not be detected in the team studied here – especially not to an extent that actually harmed rapport or negatively affected troubles talk.

However, it should be noted that it is somewhat more difficult to interpret Alden's largely non-verbal participation in this regard and, while it seems that he endorses the activity by laughing along, this might cover more subtle differences in regard to doing troubles talk. Clyne (1994), however, who investigated whinges in a number of Australian workplaces with a very diverse employee-base, also reported not much variation in the whinges in his data, which seems to be generally confirmed in this study. While the sample of 6 interlocutors is far too small to make any generalised assertions regarding cultures more broadly, at least no significant differences in relation to doing troubles talk or conflicts surrounding this activity were detected in the data. While there are individual differences between team members (for example, David and Bev are the only ones who express anger, while Jay is often more diplomatic in comparison to the others who are sometimes blunter), these do not seem to hinder the activity or perception of troubles talk, and none of these differences seemed clearly connected to cultural issues.

The ease with which troubles talk was done seems, however, contradictory to some previous studies. In an activity between language learners and native speakers, Barraja-Rohan (2003) found that language learners interviewing native speakers struggled with aligning and appropriately responding to troubles reported by interviewees. The setting of this interaction is, however, far from naturally occurring and so one needs to question whether those struggles were actually language struggles or were brought on by the insecurity of how one reacts to bad news as an interviewer, that may have been aggravated by insecurities around language use. The data collected here shows no problems around alignment and responding to troubles for the team's L2 speakers – however, it needs to be noted that very severe troubles, which might be more difficult to react to, are not discussed.

#### 6.2.2.4 The "who" in doing troubles talk

Considering the general focus on relationships in this study it seems crucial to consider the "who" in troubles talk a little further. I have taken this to be self-evident so far, as this entire study focuses on one team and the troubles talk they do during team meetings, which seems to clearly determine the "who". Nonetheless it seems important to question and discuss this further. As I have shown, in the troubles talk episodes the floor tends to be shared and troubles talk episodes appear to be inclusive and open for everyone to share, and only very rarely are specific team members addressed. It therefore seems that in general, every team member is a ratified participant during troubles talk. I have suggested that this reflects a general orientation to rapport enhancement within this specific interactional activity and that this helps to construct common ground, a shared outlook, a sense of team and so forth.

At the same time, it reflects assumptions that team members make about each other and each other's orientations to rapport, ability to comprehend and affiliate with a trouble, commitment to the team and commitment to the relationships. Team members after all assume that others care enough to listen and respond and assume others are likely to understand and empathise. The overall successful completion of troubles talk and its existence throughout the teamwork suggests that those assumptions are correct.

That these assumptions to some extent underlie troubles talk is, for example, confirmed by Burchard (2001) who reports that participants in his study chose who they vented to according to who they thought would *understand*. He suggests that the ability to understand was perceived to be present in others who were similar and close. While I would maintain that troubles talk was equally important in actually constructing relationships that were close and in discovering similarities, it seems nonetheless likely that participants engaged in troubles talk as they viewed each other to be sufficiently similar to understand and sufficiently close to care.

Looking at the topics of troubles talk we can see, however, that troubles talk was only done over troubles that were in fact relevant to everybody. The fact that there are no discussions of personal troubles with the team might also suggests the limits to which they were comfortable sharing and how close and how similar they perceived the others to be. This is not to say that individuals in the team did not share personal troubles with other individuals in the team, whom they perceived to be friends; however, they did not share those with the team overall. This might of course also have been due to the context of the team meeting. Thus while some team members might have been willing to share personal issues with the whole team they might have opted not to do so in the context of a pre-organised meeting featuring a specific agenda and a certain amount of time pressure.

Mandelbrot and Pomerantz (2005) on the other hand suggest that the activity of talking about personal troubles is appropriate to interlocutors with the role relationships of friends or family members, but inappropriate to the role relationships of acquaintances and strangers. The relationship between team members in this case falls somewhere in between those categories: they interact too often to see each other as mere acquaintances, but also do not view every member of their team as a friend. Their troubles talk seems to take this into account: while participants regularly engage in troubles talk, they avoid overly personal topics.

At the same time, if we assume that what Mandelbaum and Pomerantz (2005) are describing is a widely acknowledged interactional norm, engaging in troubles talk even on not very personal topics might signal a willingness to minimise distance in a relationship further and indeed seek a closer relationship, for example a friendship. Thus, by adapting a type of talk traditionally reserved for close relationships, team members move their own relationships towards more intimacy. I will discuss this in more detail in the next section, as the link between rapport enhancement and better relationships deserves some more consideration, as do the way troubles talk impacted the relationships in the team.

## 6.3 Team Relations and Troubles Talk

In this section I will discuss the relationship between troubles talk and the relationships formed in the team. To some extent this needs to be a more speculative discussion: While we have seen a rapport enhancement orientation displayed during troubles talk and the in-the-moment relationships constructed are characterised by displays of intimacy and affect, it is much more difficult to make inferences about the more enduring relationships. In parts this is due since it is difficult to "measure" a relationship, let alone measure its improvement. At the same time, it has become clear as well that rapport management and relationships are not the same issue and whether well-executed rapport enhancement actually leads to better relationships seems underexplored, although this seems to be an implicit assumption in much of the literature on relating and politeness.

To discuss relationships adequately it seems first important to consider the notion of relationship itself. Any interaction constitutes a relationship and in any interaction this relationship is constructed and negotiated, and my analysis has shed some light on how this is done during a troubles talk episode. At the same time the relationships discussed here are of a more enduring nature (Enfield, 2013) and have a history (Kádár & Haugh, 2013), that means they do exist outside of the interaction itself, despite the fact that they are constructed within interactions. Thus, while interactions and relationships have a reciprocal relationship and one constitutes the other, more enduring relationships are harder to grasp precisely because their enactment in specific moments in time might only reveal one or a few facets of a multifaceted phenomenon that is continuously negotiated for example through the management of the dialectics proposed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). Within pragmatics, relationships further tend to be seen as tightly connected to role relationships (e.g. Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005) that are characterised by power, distance and affect (Spencer-Oatey, 1996) against which the particulars of an interaction are then negotiated (Enfield, 2013).

Within any sequence of talk interlocutors thus negotiate the specifics of their relationship for this moment in time against the backdrop of their more enduring relationship. While it seems likely that these in-the-moment constructions add to and shape the more enduring relationship overall, this is more difficult to track. In the team for example, rapport orientations and with them the in-the-moment construction of relationships varied significantly between on-topic talk, which was less relationally focused and sometimes (but not always) indicated more of a rapport neglect than an enhancing orientation. As we have seen, within troubles talk relationships are constructed as relatively intimate, friendly and equal, however this does not mean that this is in general characteristic of the relationships held in the team. While all team members seem included in the troubles talk and in the friendly and intimate construction of their there-and-then relationships, when we look at the more enduring relationships we see vast differences, that do not allow us to map troubles talk and rapport enhancement simply and straightforwardly against relationship improvements.

As outlined in Chapter 4, relationships in the team vary. They vary across time and they vary depending on each dyad. Even each individual's relationship to the team overall is subject to change and at several points in time team members really like their team and at others they wish the teamwork would be over. If we look at the relationships and the role troubles talk seems to fulfil at the different stages of the teamwork the following picture seems to emerge:

At the beginning, where team members hardly knew each other and somehow had to bond, troubles talk seems to have helped significantly in creating these initial bonds and sense of team, independent of the individual relationships that were forming. Through troubles talk team members could communicate their interest and care for their team members as well as their orientation towards enhancing rapport and maintaining good relationships.

Later on, especially after discussions that may have been more rapport neglecting than enhancing, it allowed for team members to re-emphasise the positive aspects of their relationships and allowed them to re-affirm their desire to get on well, find common ground and joint solutions. As such, in many situations troubles talk may have functioned as repair or a general avowal of intent. This is not meant to imply that troubles talk is simply a mitigation device – as I have outlined, it has a number of relationship affirming functions that can create good relationships and not just patch them up. However, troubles talk provided team members with a way of coming back to more relationally focused talk activities amidst a task-focused environment. In this sense troubles talk offered the team a change of gear from their usual work-talk, which was inevitably less relationship- and more task-focused and in which team members competed for turns and influence. As such, it seems that troubles talk again and again emphasised certain relational values in the team (such as equality or wishing each other well) that then carried them through some of the less relationally focused interactions in which rapport management tended to oscillate between maintenance and neglect.

This seems particularly true for the final project. As outlined in Chapter 4 some of the relationships had deteriorated with a number of team members having formed negative evaluations of and attitudes towards David. In parts because of this, team members were also less motivated to engage in the teamwork and were not always looking forward to participating in team meetings. As such, there was a real danger of interactions in the team becoming more acrimonious during this stage. Nonetheless, team members engaged in troubles talk and continued to display rapport enhancing orientation throughout, including towards David. They continued to respond to his troubles initiators and did not ignore his contributions. It seems unlikely that they did this out of a desire to establish a closer relationship, given the stage they were at affectively at this point, but also considering the approaching end of their teamwork. This is supported by some of my observations and the final interviews that suggest that no serious attempts at continuing the relationship beyond the teamwork were made regarding David (though many of the others did stay in touch with each other). However, they very much had an interest in *getting on* as well as possible for the duration they had to interact, and it seems that troubles talk facilitated this.

In addition to keeping communication channels open amongst interlocutors, troubles talk seems to have been a good type of talk not only across different cultures and backgrounds but also to encompass different degrees of affect in relationships. Through the activity of troubles talk, different levels of closeness within the team were bridged, equality and togetherness became emphasised and a more general rapport enhancement orientation towards all was displayed, not just towards people who were already known to be friends. Troubles talk thus seems to have fulfilled some important work regarding relationships at the group level in maintaining the relationships between the individual and the team and within the team as an entity, even if underneath this, some dyadic relationships were not as smooth.

Some of these relational effects of troubles talk fit into the categories Fletcher (1999) outlined (see Table 2.3: Preserving, Mutual Empowering, Self-Achieving, Creating Team), that in her case study had important effects on relationships. Looking at the behaviours and strategies she identified, it seems that troubles talk manages to contribute to a number of these areas. Most obviously it "creates team" by "affirming individual uniqueness through listening, respecting, and responding"; and "facilitating connections among individuals by absorbing stress, reducing conflict, and creating structural practices that encourage interdependence" – thus it creates a setting in which relationships can flourish. At the same time, it seems that troubles talk also facilitates "sharing information", "connection" and "eliminating barriers and cutting slack" (Mutual Empowering), "using feelings as a source of data", "responding to emotional data" and it moreover leads to "reconnecting after disconnection" (Self-Achieving) (Fletcher, 1999, p. 85). Troubles talk thus seems to include a number of important relational behaviours that are not explicitly discussed within Spencer-Oatey's (2008) framework nor in any framework in interpersonal pragmatics.

I will now turn to discussing Spencer-Oatey's (2008) framework in more depth as this study highlights some important aspects for the study of rapport.

## 6.4 Theoretical Implications for Rapport Management

This study has applied Spencer-Oatey's rapport management framework to a longitudinal case study of teamwork. My analysis has provided both support for her framework but also highlighted some areas where it might need to be extended, especially with regards to strategies of rapport enhancement, which have been the focus of this study.

My analysis has explored the management of a number of rapport management domains and provided evidence for the importance of the different domains which Spencer-Oatey suggested need to be managed in order to manage rapport. Considering the overwhelming focus on the illocutionary domain within relational studies of pragmatics so far, this points to some important areas for further research while also contributing to our existing knowledge of management of these domains.

Rapport orientations varied depending on the type of interactional activity interlocutors were engaged in as well as on interlocutor's specific goals, attitudes and cognitive and emotional states. Nonetheless, for the most part all six interlocutors displayed fairly consistently a rapport enhancing orientation in troubles talk, but not to the same extent in other types of talk. It thus seems that some interactional activities might be more prone to the enhancement of rapport than others. At the same time, interlocutors also seem to synchronise their rapport orientations, which as far as I am aware has not been explicitly researched so far, yet could be an interesting focus of future research.

With regards to rapport enhancement this study makes a number of contributions but also raises different questions. In line with Spencer-Oatey's (2008) definition of rapport as the "(dis)harmony, smoothness-turbulence, warmth-antagonism in a relationship", we can conceptualise rapport enhancement as: Increasing the smoothness, harmony and warmth in a relationship. Her framework suggests that rapport increases when the bases of rapport are managed well, i.e. when equity and association rights are sufficiently taken into account, face is enhanced in an appropriate way and interactional goals align or are at least sufficiently considered. That this results in an improvement of relationships is at least implied and, in any case, seems intuitively highly likely. However, from the analysis of my data several questions arise: Firstly, with regards to the understanding of how exactly rapport is enhanced and secondly, raising queries as to how *good* relationships are actually formed. Following from these two questions it seems necessary to further explore and question the link between rapport and relationships. I will discuss these questions in the following sections.

### 6.4.1 Enhancing rapport

While I maintain that team members have enhanced rapport during troubles talk this has in many ways occurred much more implicitly than in some previous studies on this topic (e.g. Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 1998) where interlocutors seem to have purposefully targeted relationship building to relatively unknown counterparts, for example by stating how important the relationship is to them. While many of these behaviours can be found in the initial stages of the teamwork, rapport enhancement seems to be done differently and by more implicit means the longer the relationship existed. More enduring relationships almost inevitably go through ups and downs in the degrees of rapport, affect and distance felt by interlocutors. I thus understand rapport enhancement here as the "up" in these balancing moves.

One needs to question whether the suitable management of the bases of rapport is all that is needed to improve rapport or whether there are other factors that might also influence the establishment of rapport. In the analysis I have identified a number of strategies, including (reciprocal) self-disclosures, collaborative floor management, shared narratives, swearing and humour, that seem targeted at enhancing rapport, but at the same time did not seem directly related to a management of face, rights and obligations or interpersonal goals although they

are relevant to all of them. Instead these strategies seemed targeted at creating specific relational properties including the creation of common ground, shared norms, solidarity and empathy, increase of trust, enhancing mood and the sense of being one team.

In parts, these findings have to do with my approach to analysing the data, as I have not analysed how face is managed or how goals are managed, but I have instead examined how the different domains are managed to enhance rapport, which has led to different insights, such as these specific management strategies that are not explicitly discussed in Spencer-Oatey's framework.

Instead, I have found that the specific talk activity team members engage in as well as some specific interactional features, most notably self-disclosures, shared-floor, laughter and swearing, seem to have been an important factor in building the good rapport present in troubles talk. The different strategies I have outlined however, seem frequently targeted at manipulating the participant relations (Power & Distance) themselves in order to enhance rapport. Thus, it seems that participant relations are not only a contextual variable but also form part of the actual rapport enhancing strategies, for example manipulating the power-variable by emphasising equality, or minimising distance through swearing and laughing together.

In addition, affect also seems to be targeted as many of the strategies also seem to enhance affect including showing empathy, commiserating, self-disclosures and laughter. It seems therefore likely that there is a reciprocal relationship whereby rapport is enhanced as relational variables are altered and improved at least momentarily.

Spencer-Oatey's (2008) framework focuses on explaining the turbulence or smoothness in interactions and lays out many of the contextual variables that influence these; however, it does not explicitly explain how exactly rapport is established. In fact, it seems like such a framework does not exist at all in the literature so far, despite it being potentially an important contribution. While more research is certainly needed in order to produce such a framework, the research reported on here makes an important step in this direction by highlighting some important areas including specific strategies and their functions for the development of relational properties that seem to contribute to rapport building and in a sense to relationship building overall. As I have hinted at before, the two effects seem very difficult to differentiate and we will discuss their relation in more detail in the next section.

### 6.4.2 Enhancing rapport versus enhancing relationships

If we look at the relationships in the team that have actually ended up being mutually perceived as positive more generally, the question arises what role rapport enhancing interactions played in establishing and maintaining those or whether there were other (interactional) factors that influenced the forming of these relationships.

It seems difficult to make any definite claims here; however, from the conceptualisation of relationship put forth in section 6.3, we could consider a relationship as positive and improving if affect increases and the distance decreases and this is mutually endorsed and desired. How interlocutors can minimise distance and increase affect interactionally seems to have been little explored within pragmatics as this is not a core component of any of the theories and frameworks on relationship management within the field of pragmatics or sociolinguistics.

Troubles talk more generally, however, seems to have resulted in this and could as such be considered a super-strategy (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987), in which other strategies are embedded. Distance was decreased as troubles talk prompted an increase in familiarity by self-disclosing information and emotions, sometimes even unfavourable ones. The same seems to have been true for affect. Laughing together and telling stories, commiserating and venting seem to have been very beneficial in promoting and increasing affect among team members. Research has shown that self-disclosures cause liking (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dindia, 2014) and the same is true for swearing (Jefferson, 1974) and thus it seems unsurprising that a talk activity where those can be made is likely to positively affect relationships and features rapport enhancing interactional management, depending on the appropriateness of such interactional strategies of course. However, it seems more problematic to relate these findings back to the bases of rapport directly.

What becomes evident in the data, though, is that if the bases of rapport are not managed well, relational improvement is unlikely to take place. We can see this in the case of David, especially towards the end. His rapport management is seen as insufficient and this has clear relational repercussions as indicated by his team members in the interviews. Nonetheless while relationships are harmed, the team does not exclude him from the troubles talk and the troubles talk remains as rapport oriented and collaborative as previously. The in-the-moment construction of the relationship, or the rapport, in the episodes is thus one of a good collegial, equal relationship. While this construction is not permanent and does not result in better relationships with David long term – it permits the team to continue to work together, making troubles talk an effective tool for maintaining and managing fragile or problematic workplace relationships in addition to it seeming beneficial for rapport more generally.

While rapport enhancement can be understood as the "up" in a specific relationship we can clearly see in a team of 6 people that the same talk activity does not necessarily result in the same outcome for all involved. While it seems to have improved relationships in general, for some team members this meant beginning friendships while for others it merely kept the relationship from becoming more hostile. At least in the team under study here we can thus see that relationship management became increasingly complex over time, which might in part be due to the fact that relational problems were rarely discussed openly and resolved but tended to stay beneath the surface as many team members commented on in the interviews.

On the other hand, with the case of David the data shows clearly that (perceived) rapport neglect leads to a worsening in relationships so there seems to be a more direct link in one direction but not to the same extent in the other. It thus seems that increasing affect and decreasing distance are more complex phenomena than decreasing affect and increasing distance, or in other words: it is more complex to make somebody like you than to make that person dislike you. In this sense it seems that Spencer-Oatey's framework might lend itself more to explaining how rapport, and also relationships are managed or mismanaged than how relationships are improved. Rapport enhancement and an improvement of relationships seem to need more than an appropriate management of face, rights and goals – although it does need those – but it seems to also need interactions that minimise distance, by building common ground, creating a shared outlook, increasing trust and empathy and possibly by simply laughing and having fun together – as is the case with troubles talk. As such, this study has identified a number of strategies used to manage the bases Spencer-Oatey proposed, but also extended these by outlining how relational factors are managed at the same time as bases of rapport are managed.

One other interesting observation related to this can be made: What we have seen in the data here is that to some extent it is precisely the breaking of specific social norms, for example by purposefully threatening one's own face by making a self-disclosure, that is crucial in this minimisation of distance. This, however, to some extent conflicts with a more traditional understanding of politeness as the appropriate management of face, but also of an acquiescence to social norms and generally appropriate behaviour. Instead it seems that the occasional (!) move away from such behaviour is what can make a person more relatable. By allowing others to perceive vulnerabilities and become more exposed as a person, rapport seems to be enhanced in the team.

Swearing – similarly the breaking of a social norm – seems to achieve similar things by making the emotions of the person uttering the swearword palpable and ultimately again relatable. Thus, it seems that often precisely the deviation of what is traditionally conceived as polite and appropriate, is what can minimise distance and ultimately enhance rapport as it allows interlocutors to get to know the person better beyond behaviours that are dictated by social norms. There are clearly many constraints to such behaviour, and an interlocutor takes considerable risk in deviating from what is deemed appropriate as it might simply be deemed very inappropriate and with this might be sanctioned.

In the data here, the deviations from "appropriate" behaviour that seemed to have been beneficial seem to be those behaviours that are considered to pertain to the role relationships of friends, which can be considered as relationally one step up from the role relationship of *team member*. Examples of such deviations from appropriate behaviour include for example usage of swearing and improprieties, which Coupland and Jaworski (2003) found in friendship groups, but also troubles talk as an activity itself, which Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005) have attributed to interactions shared with friends and family. These

interactional activities, which are appropriate to a relationship that is slightly closer and more affectful than the one interlocutors ordinarily have, are only used in specific moments, but it seems that occasionally using them can aid in moving the relationship in just that direction.

Following these observations, focusing on interactional moves that make people relatable might be an interesting addition to the current overwhelming focus on face if we are to understand rapport enhancement better. This study has contributed to this area, yet much more remains to be done.

As a final point that already came out slightly in the discussion so far, the analysis raises questions regarding the connection between rapport and relationships. We have seen a number of team members display rapport enhancing orientations AND manage rapport well in some interactions, yet this has only maintained the ability to work with each other, not actually enhanced relationships. In part this is due to the focus of the study on one single talk activity. For a thorough understanding of the relationships and how they are shaped other types of talk would also need to be analysed. Rapport orientation has also varied quite a bit across different talk activities in the team, although only David is perceived to be actually neglecting rapport, something that gets commented on by the team with each other but also in the interviews. However, that the same talk activity does not necessarily result in the same outcome is not surprising given that the rapport that is managed has different starting points. Thus, while we have an "up" in all relationships this does not mean they will uniformly also end in the same place.

However, this nonetheless means that sometimes even successfully executed rapport enhancing behaviour does not necessarily lead to better relationships, which raises questions regarding how the two are exactly connected.

## 6.5 Implications for Rapport Management at Work

This study carries several implications for relating at work. I have firstly shown how rapport is managed successfully in and through a specific talk activity: Troubles talk. Within this talk activity interlocutors managed to construct several relational properties that seemed crucial for their ability to work together as a team but also seem to have implications for their wellbeing and performance. These most notably include: Building common ground that facilitates communication and workflow; Strengthening relational ties by finding more external grounders beyond the role relationships of *colleagues*; Establishing empathy and trust through sharing personal troubles, which allows team members to cut others slack and engage with them more respectfully; Developing shared perspectives that facilitate decision making. In addition, doing troubles talk about contextual issues that are relevant to all team members allows the team to make sense of their surroundings and their task and has also helped them with coping productively with problems and challenges.

Importantly for workplace settings, troubles talk not only occurred in off-topic talk or small talk, but also in process and on-topic talk and thus can play an important part in meetings and among colleagues who do not necessarily interact socially with each other. Thus, even colleagues who are not close or find they have little in common, or have already strained relationships could potentially begin building some common ground and rapport, making troubles talk a potentially important tool for workplaces – even if managers or organisations might fear that it might give rise to negative evaluations of them. Future research could engage with the contexts in which troubles talk remains productive in order to prevent such negative evaluations from forming.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis has reported on a longitudinal single case study of rapport building in an intercultural team of MBA students. Data collection included observations and audio recordings of team meetings and interviews with the participants at the beginning and the end of the teamwork, which extended over eight months in total. During this time team members built different relationships with each other and with the team overall, yet they consistently displayed a rapport enhancement orientation during the interactional activity of doing troubles talk. In order to better understand how team members of an intercultural team seek to enhance rapport and increase affect in their team, troubles talk has been explored in depth. Troubles talk is here defined as consisting of talk about negative issues or experiences that oneself or others have encountered that are however not blamed or attributed to the person/people addressed, and can range from very severe issues to only mildly inconvenient or completely other-focused incidents. In the team this frequently involved talk about professors, clients, tasks, exams, accommodation and scheduling, which enabled them to do important relational work that influenced their task and relationships more broadly. In this respect, this study makes both theoretical as well as practical contributions, which I will summarise in the next section.

## 7.1 Contribution of the Study

Managing relationships and rapport successfully can be very challenging in intercultural work situations where team members and co-workers have to find a way to get on with each other. This study has shed light on some of the complexities involved but also on the successful strategies team members used to increase rapport. First and foremost, the analysis has shown that troubles talk in itself seems to allow for a range of rapport enhancing moves and thus can be considered a kind of super-strategy. Sharing troubles seemed to have sparked the creation of empathy, common ground, trust and a shared outlook onto the work context that facilitated collaboration and decision-making more broadly. Accordingly, troubles talk allowed team members to jointly build certain relational properties they could draw on even outside of troubles talk to manage relations. These relational properties are not merely a result of the topic of the talk but arise from the way troubles talk itself is structured. All successfully initiated episodes of troubles talk featured some of the following: shared narratives and a shared interactional floor; supportive communication that includes commiserating, alignment and other-oriented responses; making oneself vulnerable by self-disclosing potentially harming information which tended to be reciprocated, even where this seems to have been done for purely relational reasons, and creation of intimacy though swearing, laughing or sharing troubles with each other. They also featured frequent uses of humour and of revealing emotions and information making speakers more relatable. Many of these features were absent or much less frequent in other types of talk and seemed to position team

members more as friends than as colleagues. Broadly speaking this research thus makes two particularly important contributions: I have firstly given an in-depth account of troubles talk in a work context and have shed further light on relating and rapport. I will discuss both aspects in turn.

### 7.1.1 Troubles talk

Troubles talk seems to be an almost ubiquitous activity. While previous research has generated important insights (most notably in respect of the work of Jefferson) my research has extended these insights in several ways. I have shown that troubles talk does not have to follow a teller-recipient model and I have outlined what troubles talk, going beyond such a model, looks like. In addition, I have identified a number of recurring features that characterise this talk that have not previously been discussed in the literature. These could help people who are new to working in diverse teams, language learners but also individuals who struggle socially to improve communication practices. The study further lends support to the research that has connected troubles talk to relationship and community building – which notably has not been done before within a linguistics paradigm. Taken together, these insights suggest that troubles talk could perhaps have a more important impact on everyday life than has been attributed so far. An important focus of research following from this would also be to identify contexts in which troubles talk seems to flourish and in which it develops its full positive potential. Organisational culture is likely to play an important role here, as well as the specifics of particular workplaces. For example, Clyne (1994) found that troubles talk occurred mostly in small intimate work groups with little power difference and tasks that actually left them with time for social interaction. Other settings might inhibit such interactions or push them into a less benign direction than has been found here.

While research into troubles talk in the workplace is extremely limited, it has tended to treat troubles talk as something problematic, which negatively affects the group (Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009) or is a result of low self-esteem (Heck, 2001). As such, the role of research has largely been to identify ways of stopping troubles talk from happening (Alicke et al., 1992; Heck, 2001) – which is in diametric opposition to the implications of the present study's findings. While the positive aspects of troubles talk probably depend on how troubles talk is done and that it does not completely take over other talk activities, no evidence of negative outcomes were found in the team studied here and thus it seems potentially detrimental to aim to eradicate all troubles talk in workplaces. Managers should consider instead how they can support the occurrence of troubles talk in a way that reaps its benefits but pre-empts potentially negative effects where troubles talk is not as benign as that found in the case scrutinised here. This could consist of allowing teams to pursue troubles talk in team meetings as was the case here or of creating time and space where employees can have such conversations, including joint coffee or lunch breaks – while noting that this may require the manager to actually be absent. Given the importance attributed to troubles talk and laughing at these troubles for coping (Lefcourt, 2001) and the peer social support it seems to provide

(Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias, 2009) managers should take the importance of troubles talk for employee relationships but also well-being and (mental) health seriously. Having regular joint breaks, self-managed meetings and some time together away from their work context has facilitated doing troubles talk in this team, and has thus certainly helped the team deal with the challenges it faced at work, team member relationships but also with coping with frustrations, worries, stress and identity threats.

Overall this has shown that troubles talk fulfils a much more important task than some of its more negatively connotated labels such as "venting", "griping" "bitching" or "whingeing" suggest. It therefore may be time to rehabilitate it as a productive and important talk activity instead of treating it as a nuisance and potentially harmful in workplaces.

### 7.1.2 Relating and rapport

Research on relating and rapport has so far overwhelmingly focused on the mitigation of face threats and more generally on the avoidance of relational problems in interaction, or, in the case of research on rudeness and impoliteness, on the exact opposite (Culpeper, 2011). However, research focusing on how interlocutors manage their everyday interactions beyond the mitigation of threats, how they build more positive relationships, and how they try to establish rapport is much less explored. My study makes an important contribution to this area and this shift in research focus has led to a number of interesting insights. Firstly, while much research in the field of interpersonal pragmatics has focused on the illocutionary force of utterances and on directness and indirectness, this was only one among many aspects that had an influence on the rapport relations established in troubles talk in the data here. Instead, a number of other ways in which rapport was managed and created have been outlined, thus broadening our perspective of how rapport is achieved in interaction. This was possible as the present study provides an important in-depth example of empirical research on relating in a field that has largely focused on conceptualisation and to a lesser extend on empirical work.

Secondly, as part of this broader perspective on relating, a number of relational strategies have been outlined that highlight certain properties of relations. These include: common ground, shared norms, trust, empathy, solidarity, a sense of team and a shared outlook. How these relational qualities or properties fit in with the previously suggested frameworks in the field of interpersonal pragmatics remains, however, unclear. In many situations they might constitute relational strategies in themselves (i.e. when we talk about interlocutors building trust or finding common ground). However, in longer-existing relationships they might be contextual variables or relational properties that characterise relationships and that interlocutors can draw on to maintain and enhance rapport. In any case, it seems that they play an important role in rapport and relating in a team and likely in relating more generally, and it seems striking that they have not yet received more attention within interpersonal pragmatics. Exploring these relational properties further as well as the strategies that seem to create them seems an important area for future research.

I have made a start on investigating these topics here by outlining a number of different strategies that team members use within troubles talk to create and enhance rapport, though there are likely to be many more beyond and within troubles talk. Table 2.4, which summarises interactional strategies for building and enacting good relationships could thus be extended by the following points:

Table 7.1 Interactional Strategies for building/enacting positive relationships

| **Strategies for building/enacting positive relationships** | **Ascribed Functions (where specifically stated beyond "building positive relationships")** |
|---|---|
| *Troubles Talk* | *Super-Strategy facilitating all points below* |
| Sharing the floor | Building common ground |
| Shared story-telling | Building common norms |
| Shared topic management relevant to all | Building common ground,<br>Creating sense of team |
| Self-disclosing information and emotions | Increasing relatability;<br>Creating intimacy |
| Reciprocating those self-disclosures | Emphasising equal status;<br>Showing solidarity |
| Seeking and constructing alignment | Building common ground |
| Commiserating | Demonstrating and building empathy |
| Focusing on the other | Showing interest and care,<br>Building trust |
| (Joint) swearing | Creating intimacy,<br>Increasing relatability |
| Joking and laughing together | Creating intimacy |

All these strategies were enabled by the activity of troubles talk and most were otherwise largely absent from the data, which is why I am suggesting that troubles talk seems to be a super-strategy within which other rapport-enhancing moves can be made.

Of course, the more traditional relational aspects of face management, goal management and management of rights and obligations also played an important role and should not be ignored in studies on relating. However, as I have outlined, several other relevant issues seem also to have an influence and deserve more research attention. In addition, while I have only briefly touched on the question of relatability, it seems that precisely the deviations from polite behaviour and a smooth management of face and right and obligations is what has caused team members to become more relatable – for example through self-disclosures or sharing of negative emotions through swearing. How a person becomes relatable is little explored, but considering the apparent contradiction to traditional views on politeness found in the data here might provide an interesting focus for future research both from a theoretical as well as practical viewpoint.

The longitudinal nature of this study has also shed some light on the connections between rapport and relating and relationships more broadly – although it has mostly raised more questions about the two. Research within interpersonal pragmatics has focused on understanding the relational work conducted and the rapport built at specific moments in time. Applying these tools over a longer period of time has however shown that there are clear gaps between the rapport build in the here-and-now and the more enduring relationships interlocutors construct. How rapport and relational work in the here-and-now connect to these more enduring relationships or influence relational trajectories seems much less explored.

The analysis has also demonstrated that the same talk activity can lead to different relational impacts for different relationships: For some it permits the continuation of working together without major conflict (i.e. maintain rapport even if relationships are harmed), while for others it might validate the close relationship built. Nonetheless, the present study calls some of these connections into question and shows that there is no straightforward conversion from doing relational work or doing rapport enhancement to having a better relationship. Instead there seems to be a more complex reciprocal relationship where interlocutors can manipulate the traditional markers of a relationship, distance and power, in interaction and can "borrow" talk activity types that are at least theorised to belong to different role relationships (the second traditional relational marker) in order to enhance rapport. More conceptual and empirical work is clearly needed to shed light on this complex issue.

Finally, although not the original goal of the study, through the in-depth exploration of relating and relationships in the workplace the benefit of specific relational activities and positive relational properties for effective teamwork have also been discussed. These are summarised in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2 Relational properties/activities and their contribution to effective teamwork

| **Relational Properties/Activities** | **Contribution to effective teamwork** |
|---|---|
| Common ground and shared perspectives | Facilitates communication, workflow and decision making |
| More external grounders beyond reciprocal relationship of 'colleagues' (e.g. through small talk) | Strengthens relational ties |
| Sharing personal troubles | Establishes empathy and trust;<br>Allows team members to cut each other slack and engage more respectfully;<br>Supports coping with challenges and stress |
| Discussing contextual issues, team's surrounding, leadership etc. | Facilitates making sense of the teams' surroundings and their task |

This provides further evidence for the importance of good relationships in the workplace not only for wellbeing but task achievement and performance, while providing insights into how these can be established and which specific relational properties might be particularly important. This thesis thus also makes a contribution to the teamwork and organizational behaviour literature.

### 7.1.3 Intercultural communication

Finally, I have provided insights into a successful talk activity that seemingly occurred with relative ease in an intercultural context. As highlighted in the workplace literature, building rapport and cohesion in diverse and intercultural groups seems to be particularly challenging, which has been found to have negative impacts on individuals and organisations alike. In the data set here troubles talk nonetheless has shown itself to be a relatively "easy" type of interaction that needs little commonalities amongst interlocutors to initiate and to continue it successfully. More research on this is of course needed. But if it proves to be a generally more successful type of talk for building relationships in intercultural contexts, doing troubles talk might be an important addition to language classrooms but could also be an important strategy for individuals, especially in intercultural settings, for creating connections and initiating conversations that lead to rapport, common ground and the ability to work together over a longer period of time.

## 7.2 Limitations

The study has of course a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. By design it sheds light on only one case of teamwork. To what extent these findings would emerge in another context is unclear and certainly needs further exploration, although I have taken care to focus on an interactional activity that seems to be widespread both in regard to different languages it has been reported in and contexts in which it has been documented.

As with any talk activity, the structural features I have outlined of how troubles talk is done are a product of the co-construction of six individuals and the norms they established in the context of their encounters. Thus, other groups might do troubles talk differently in different or even the same context. More research is thus needed to explore how recurring these features truly are and whether the rapport-enhancing orientation is indeed a facet of the talk activity itself – although much suggests that it is. For these reasons the study lends itself much more to a theoretical contribution than to practical applications, which is why I have phrased these very tentatively.

Since I only decided to focus on troubles talk after the data collection period was over, no insights on the talk activity were collected from the participants themselves, which could have enriched the study. Similarly, observations were not focused on troubles talk per se and as such some important non-verbal clues that could have contributed to the understanding of how rapport is built in troubles talk might have been missed.

I chose troubles talk as a focus since my initial sense was that important relational work was being done in this activity and this was confirmed by the orientation and behaviour of team members throughout the analysis. At the same time, the absence of tools to measure the quantity or quality of rapport or relationships (or a consensus as to which measurable variables can be associated with rapport) must be acknowledged. In addition, how rapport translates to relationships and vice-versa is little explored. As such, much of what has been reported here is an analyst's judgement based on the interactional features of local encounters – although this is of course exactly what interlocutors themselves base their judgements on.

## 7.3 Recommendations for Further Research

The outlined contributions and limitations highlight the need for further research in several areas. With regards to troubles talk, future studies should explore its features in different contexts and across different groups to see if the findings from this study can be reproduced regarding the structure, but also regarding the relational work that seems to get done in troubles talk. Since a lot of the exploratory groundwork has been done here, these studies could compare different data sets instead of exploring one case in depth and across a longer period of time. It would be especially interesting to see if the benefits for rapport tend to occur in intercultural groups, which would have a number of important practical implications.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the phenomenon of troubles talk in other countries often involves emic terminologies and cultural concepts, for example the concept of *sudern* in Austria German (personal communication with Nadine Thielmann, 01.10.2017) or *kiturim* or *kuterai* in Hebrew (Katriel, 1990). As such, exploring the rules and structures that accompanies these activities could prove an interesting focus of research, especially if compared to contexts in which a focus on negative issues might be seen as an inappropriate talk activity. This could contribute to our understanding of the functions of troubles talk overall and of how intercultural encounters can be shaped by more emic speech routines.

With regards to rapport and relating, the present study has shown just how important empirical work is in generating new insights, especially if we move away from the traditional focus on managing threats and problems and instead explore how rapport is managed in specific situations and especially how it is enhanced. More research in this area is needed to explore 1) additional strategies, (especially in the non-verbal domain that was not investigated here), 2) interlocutor judgement on those strategies, 3) additional features belonging to what I have called "relational properties" that might be crucial for building and maintaining relationships. There seems to be virtually no framework specifically outlining how interlocutors build rapport or positive relationships in interaction, which seems like an area of research that should be addressed with urgency. Finally, it has become clear that much more conceptual work on relationships and their connection to rapport and relational work especially across time is needed in order to understand how it is that interpersonal relationships are built and managed in interactions.

# Appendix 1: Overview of troubles talk literature

| **Reference** | **Type** | **Data** | **Number of interlocutors** | **Language/ Country** | **Focus on** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Haugh, M. (2016). Complaints and troubles talk about the English language skills of international students in Australian universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *35*(4), 272–740. | Informal conversations | Focus group | Small group | International students in Australia/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| MacGeorge, E. L., Guntzviller, L. M., Branch, S. E., & Yakova, L. (2016). Paths of resistance: An interpretative analysis of trajectories in less satisfying advice interactions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *35*(5), 548–568. | Informal conversations | Non-naturally occurring:<br>Problem discussions between friends | Dyads | US/English | Response |
| Bodie, G. D., Cannava, K. E., Vickery, A. J., & Jones, S. M. (2015). Patterns of nonverbal adaptation in supportive interactions. *Communication Studies*, *67*(1), 3–19. | Informal conversations | Non-naturally occurring:<br>Unacquainted dyads were recorded talking about a stressful event | Dyads | US/English | Response |
| Bodie, G. D., Vickery, A. J., Cannava, K., & Jones, S. M. (2015). The role of "active listening" in informal helping conversations: Impact on perceptions of listener helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness and discloser emotional improvement. *Western Journal of Communication*, *79*(2), 151–173 | Informal conversations | Experiment<br>Participants shared troubles with trained and untrained listeners | Dyads | US/English | Response |
| Haugh, M., & Chang, W.-L. M. (2015). Troubles talk, (dis)affiliation and the participation order in Taiwanese-Chinese online discussion boards. In M. Dynel & J. Chovanec (Eds.), Participation in public and social media interactions (pp. 99–133). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | unknown (Online Forum Responses) | Taiwan/Mandarin Chinese | Response |
| Riccioni, I., Bongelli, R., & Zuczkowski, A. (2014). Mitigation and epistemic positions in troubles talk: The giving advice activity in close interpersonal relationships. Some examples from Italian. *Language and Communication*, *39*, 51–72. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Mostly dyads | Italy/Italian | Response |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Taniguchi, H., & Kaufman, G. (2014). Gender role attitudes, troubles talk, and marital satisfaction in Japan. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *31*(7), 975–994. | Informal conversations | quantitative Questionnaire | Dyads (spouses) | Japan | Troubles-telling |
| Feo, R., & LeCouteur, A. (2013). 'I just want to talk' Establishing reason for call on a men's counselling helpline. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *28*(75), 65–81. | Counselling conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | Australia/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| Mewburn, I. (2011). Troubling talk: Assembling the PhD candidate. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *33*(3), 321–332. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Mixed | US/English (NNS&NS) | Troubles-telling |
| Pudlinski, C. (2005). Doing empathy and sympathy: Caring responses to troubles tellings on a peer support line. *Discourse Studies*, *7*(3), 267–288. | Counselling conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | US/English | Response |
| Edwards, D. (2005). Moaning, whinging and laughing: the subjective side of complaints. Discourse Studies, 7(1), 5–29. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | UK?/English | Troubles-telling |
| MacGeorge, E. L., Graves, A., Feng, B., Gillihan, S. J., & Burleson, B. R. (2004). The myth of gender cultures: similarities outweigh differences in men's and women's provision of and responses to supportive communication. *Sex Roles*, *50*(3–4), 143–175. | Informal conversations | Recording pf participants response to a vignette & questionnaire about last troubles talk | Survey participants: US college students | US/English | Response |
| Goldsmith, D. J. (2004). Communicting social support. Cambridge: Cambridge Univerity Press. | Informal conversations | Non-naturally occurring problem discussions by couples | Dyads (couples) | US/English | Troubles-telling |
| Basow, S. A., & Rubenfeld, K. (2003). "Troubles talk": Effects of gender and gender-typing. *Sex Roles*, *48*(3–4), 183–187. | Informal conversations | Questionnaire | Survey participants: US college students | US/English | Response |
| Barraja-Rohan, A. M. (2003). Past troubles-talk in nonnative-native interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *35*(4), 615–629. | Informal conversations | Interviews | Dyads (one triad) | Australia/English (NNS+NS) | Troubles Telling and Response |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ouellette, M. (2001). “That’s too bad”: Hedges and indirect complaints in “troubles-talk” narratives. *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics (WPEL)*, *17*(1), 107–126. | Informal conversations | Recorded interactions among co-nationals<br>in research setting | Triads | Participants are from Korea, France & US, but all living in US<br><br>Communicating in English with their own compatriots for the study | Troubles-telling |
| Faircloth, C. A. (2001). “Those people” and troubles talk social typing and community construction in senior public housing. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *15*(4), 333–350. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data/ Ethnography | - | US/English | Troubles-telling |
| Kyratzis, A. (2000). Tactical uses of narratives in nursery school same-sex groups. *Discourse Processes*, *29*(3), 269–299. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data/ Ethnography | Small groups of 4-year olds | US/English | Troubles-telling |
| Goldsmith, D. J. (1999). Content-based resources for giving face sensitive advice in troubles talk episodes. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *32*(4), 303–336. | Informal conversations | Vignette +Audio recording of imagined answer | - | US/English<br>(students) | Response |
| Michaud, S. L., & Warner, R. M. (1997). Gender differences in self-reported response to troubles talk. Sex Roles, 37(7–8), 527–540. | Informal conversations | Vignette + indicating ones ‘reaction’ on a questionnaire | - | US/English (mostly students) | Response |
| Miller, G., & Silverman, D. (1995). Troubles talk and counseling discourse: A comparative study. *Sociological Quarterly*, *36*(4), 725–747. | Counselling conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads | US/English | Response |
| Edwards, D. (1995). Two to tango: Script formulations, dispositions, and rhetorical symmetry in relationship troubles talk. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, *28*(4), 319–350. | Counselling conversations | Naturally occurring data | 1 couple + counsellor | UK/English | Troubles-telling |
| Boxer, D. (1993a). Complaining and commiserating: A speech act view of solidarity in spoken American English. New York: Peter Lang.<br><br>Boxer, D. (1993b). Social distance and speech behavior: The case of indirect complaints. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *19*(2), 103–125 | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads | US/English | Troubles Telling and Response |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pritchard, R. E. (1993). Supportive devices in language and paralanguage in the achievement of affiliation in troubles talk. Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, 16(1), 57–70. | radio broadcast | Naturally occurring data | 5 plus councellor | Australia/English | Troubles-telling |
| Bayraktaroğlu, A. (1992). Disagreements in Turkish troubles-talk. *Text*, *12*(3), 317–342. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads/Triads | Turkey/Turkish | Response |
| Tannen, D. (1991). You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation. London: Virago Press. | Informal conversations | Anecdotes, observations | Dyads | US/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| Grainger, K., Atkinson, K., & Coupland, N. (1990). Responding to the elderly: troubles talk in the caring context. In H. Giles, N. Coupland, & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), *Communication, Health, and the Elderly* (pp. 192–212). Manchester: Manchester University Press. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads/Triads | English | Response |
| Jefferson, G. (1988). On the sequential organization of troubles talk in ordinary conversations. *Social Problems*, *35*(4), 418–441. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | US & UK/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| Jefferson, G. (1984a). On stepwise transition from talk about a trouble to inappropriately next-positioned matters. In M. J. Atkinson (Ed.), Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversation Analysis. Cambridge Univerity Press. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | US & UK/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| Jefferson, G. (1984b). On the organization of laughter in talk about troubles. In M. J. Atkinson (Ed.), *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversation Analysis* (pp. 346–369). Cambridge Univerity Press. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | US & UK/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| Jefferson, G., & Lee, J. R. E. (1981). The rejection of advice: Managing the problematic convergence of a "troubles-telling" and a "service encounter." *Journal of Pragmatics*, *5*(5), 399–422. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone) | US & UK/English | Troubles Telling and Response |
| Jefferson, G. (1980). On "trouble-premonitory" response to inquiry. Sociological Inquiry, 50(3–4), 153. | Informal conversations | Naturally occurring data | Dyads (telephone)) | US & UK/English | Troubles Telling and Response |

# Appendix 2: Participant information sheet

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

RESEARCH STUDY
Title: Working Together in Project-focused Teams

My name is Carolin Debray. I am a PhD student at the Centre of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick.
I am doing **research on teamwork**, specifically I am researching how team members achieve cooperation and complete their tasks over time. Considering the amount of teamwork that is being done both at university and in workplaces, it seems crucial to develop a better understanding of the role communication plays in this process. I am looking for teams and team members willing to contribute this research, by giving me access to their interactions and experiences. This document will give you some information what this entails exactly. I am very grateful, if you would read through it and consider participating, however, that is completely voluntary and up to you.

As part of the research, I would like to gather data in various ways with the key ways being a) conducting and audio-recording **two interviews,** one during the teamwork and one after the teamwork is completed and b) **observing and recording team meetings**, either by voice recorder or camera, over the course of the teamwork. If your team works a lot virtually, I would also ask you for access to the communications occurring using different technologies (i.e. email etc.). After the teamwork is completed, I will provide you with **feedback and the insights gained during the research**, if you are interested. This will allow you to gain better understandings of your own way of communicating in teams and of the communicative challenges and available strategies for improvement, especially in teams with high diversity.

Please note that participation is **completely voluntary** and that you can withdraw from the research process at any time. You can also consent to only being observed in team meetings but not to give any interviews or vice versa. Of course, teams will only be observed if every team member has consented to be a participant in the research. Please note, however, that your decision should be your own and not influenced by the decision of your other team members.

Use of data and dissemination of findings
**All data will be completely anonymised**. The data will primarily be used for the writing of a doctoral dissertation, which will be publicised either as a whole or in parts. It is likely to include short extracts of transcribed team meetings or interviews. Video clips may be shown at conferences, but will only remain in the use of the researcher. However, **it is completely up to you to specify in which ways the data can and cannot be used** and you can do so on the consent form you will be given. If you are interested in the study, I am also very happy to share any written work with you. You may also request to receive a draft version prior to publication in order to provide feedback to the work done.

Please note that in any form of dissemination, all steps will be undertaken to preserve your identity – this means names, places and organisations will be anonymised, unless you specifically request being identified. The whole process of the research and its dissemination will comply strictly with the *Guidelines for Ethics in Research* developed by the University of Warwick. This work is being supervised by Prof Helen Spencer-Oatey and Dr Daniel Dauber.

If you have any further questions, which you would like to clarify, please write to me at: C.Debray@warwick.ac.uk. You can also ask me on the first day of your module, where I will be present to introduce myself.
Thank you very much in advance,

# Appendix 3: Consent form

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

## Participation & Recording Consent Form

**Research Project Title: Working together in project focused teams**

**Names of researchers:**

Carolin Debray – Researcher (contact: C.Debray@warwick.ac.uk)

Prof. Helen Spencer-Oatey & Dr. Daniel Dauber – Supervisors

I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above project and that I agree to take part in the study as described. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask any questions that I may have and that I may keep the Information Sheet for my records.

As part of this project, I would like to audio and video record group work meetings and analyse it in various ways for the research project. Depending on your way of working I might also ask you to share some written correspondences (e.g. emails) with me and conduct audio recorded interviews. Please indicate below what uses of the data you are willing to consent to. This is completely up to you and we will only use the records in ways that you agree to. If you have any questions regarding the uses of the data, please contact the researcher indicated above for further clarification.

In any use of these records, names, places and organisations will be anonymised.

*Please indicate your consent in the tables below:*

| Your participation can be video and audio recorded. | | Yes *(Please circle)* No | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Transcript of Recording (Yes/No) Please use ✓ or X** | **Audio Recording (Yes/No) Please use ✓ or X** | **Written Data (e.g. email) (Yes/No) Please use ✓ or X** | **Video Recording (Yes/No) Please use ✓or X** |
| 1 The data can be studied by the researchers for use in the research project. | | | | |
| 2 The data can be used for academic and professional publications. | | | | |
| 3 Extracts from the data can be used in training and assessment materials. | | | | |
| 4 Extracts from the data can be showed/played to students or professionals interested in the research project. | | | | |
| 5 Extracts from the data can be shown in presentations to non-specialist groups. | | | | |
| 6 The record of the data can be made available to other academic researchers, under the same conditions as the named researcher for this project | | | | |

*I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of records as indicated in the table above.*

Name _____ (please print)

Signature _____

Email:_____ Date_____

Appendix 4: Topic Guide First Interview

# First Interview

1) General background information (age, previous work-experiences, education, experiences abroad, etc.)

2) Expectations and thoughts on the teamwork to be done on the course

3) Previews Teamwork Experiences

4) Thoughts on successful/unsuccessful teamwork (What went well/badly in previous teamwork experiences)

5) First impressions of the team and the team dynamics

5) Experiences in the team so far (especially regarding things I have missed)

6) Team Meeting Processes – How are your meetings run?

7) Team Roles – Are there any particular tasks team members take up or roles they play in the team?

8) Getting on - How do you get along as a team so far?

9) Areas for Improvement – Are there areas where you would like the team to improve?

10) Insights into other Teams on your course

## Appendix 5: Topic Guide Final Interview

# Final Interview:

General Thoughts and Attitudes:

- How do you feel about teamwork now after all these months and experiences?
- How do you feel about it being over?
- Are you still in contact with your team members?
- What would you recommend next years' students for the teamwork module?
- Are you still working in other teams in electives, if yes, how is that going?

Teamwork Experiences and Processes:

- Can you talk me through the different projects you have done
  - What is your review of the individual projects?
  - Which one went particularly well and why?
  - Can you tell me a bit about each of the projects and how they went?
- Who did the most work?
- Who talked most?
- Who would you want to work with again?
- Looking back what do you think were the things that worked best in your team? What was worse?
- What have you learned by doing it?

Strategies:

- Considering the things you told me that didn't go so well (I anticipate comments on language and non-participation, dominance and general incompetence here): What have you done to deal with it? How well has that worked?
- What do you think other people have done in order to deal with these difficulties?
- Looking back what do you think should have been done? (what should the person you are referring to have done?)

Final Comments

- Is there anything important about your team or teamwork in general that we haven't spoken about yet? Or anything you would like to add?

# Appendix 6: Overview of troubles talk incidents

| | Episode (sorted chronologically) | Type of Talk | Lines | Lines total | Contains humour | Topic(s) | Included in thesis as Example... |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | T1_E1 | Process talk | 157-163 | 7 | non-humorous | Time | - |
| **2** | T2_E2 | On-topic talk | 665-682 | 18 | humorous | Task-related | - |
| **3** | P1_M1_E1 | Process talk | 105-115 | 11 | non-humorous | Professor | 5.3-6; 5.6-3 |
| **4** | P1_M1_E2 | Process talk | 443-452 | 10 | non-humorous | Time | - |
| **5** | P2_M1_E1 | Off-topic talk | 24 | 1 | non-humorous | Unspecific | - |
| **6** | P2_M1_E2 | Off-topic talk | 50-56 | 7 | non-humorous | Unspecific | 5.3-22 |
| **7** | P2_M1_E3 | Off-topic talk | 58-89 | 32 | humorous | Professor | 5.4-2 |
| **8** | P2_M1_E4 | Off-topic talk | 121-135 | 15 | some humour | Professor/bad classes | 5.3-2 |
| **9** | P2_M1_E5 | Off-topic talk | 147-169 | 23 | non-humorous | Living in UK | - |
| **10** | P2_M1_E6 | Off-topic talk | 170-187 | 18 | humorous | Technical problems | - |
| **11** | P2_M1_E7 | Off-topic talk | 188-230 | 43 | some humour | Time/workload | 5.3-9; 5.5-3; 5.5-4 |
| **12** | P2_M1_E8 | Off-topic talk | 351-354 | 4 | humorous | Difficult exam | 5.4-13 |
| **13** | P2_M1_E9 | Off-topic talk | 373-379 | 7 | humorous | Professor | 5.3-19 |
| **14** | P2_M1_E10 | Process talk | 380-415 | 36 | humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **15** | P2_M1_E11 | Off-topic talk | 812-832 | 21 | non-humorous | Campus facilities | 5.3-5 |
| **16** | P2_M1_E12 | Process talk | 1183-1286 | 104 | some humour | Difficult exam/assignment | 5.3-14; 5.4-4; 5.4-7 |
| **17** | P2_M1_E13 | Off-topic talk | 1397 | 1 | non-humorous | Unspecific | - |
| **18** | P2_M1_E14 | Off-topic talk | 1410-1411 | 2 | non-humorous | Difficult exam | 5.3-10 |
| **19** | P2_M2_E1 | Off-topic talk | 175-196 | 22 | some humour | Time/workload | - |
| **20** | P2_M2_E2 | Off-topic talk | 217-221 | 5 | humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **21** | P3_M1_E1 | Process talk | 205-218 | 14 | some humour | Professor/assessment criteria | - |
| **22** | P3_M1_E2 | Process talk | 237-242 | 6 | some humour | Professor | 5.4-16 |
| **23** | P3_M1_E3 | Process talk | 256-259 | 4 | humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **24** | P3_M1_E4 | Process talk | 265-268 | 4 | humorous | Time/workload | - |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **25** | P3_M1_E5 | Process talk | 333-373 | 41 | some humour | Time/workload | 5.3-11 |
| **26** | P3_M1_E6 | Process talk | 567-568 | 2 | some humour | Unspecific | - |
| **27** | P3_M1_E7 | Process talk | 1333 | 1 | non-humorous | Unspecific | 5.3-21 |
| **28** | P2_M3_E1 | Off-topic talk | 183-198 | 16 | some humour | Other teams | 5.7-2 |
| **29** | P2_M3_E2 | Process talk | 292-294 | 3 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **30** | P2_M3_E3 | Process talk | 306-312 | 7 | some humour | Technical problems | - |
| **31** | P2_M3_E4 | Off-topic talk | 319-320 | 2 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **32** | P2_M3_E5 | On-topic talk | 592-631 | 39 | non-humorous | Client | 5.6-1 |
| **33** | P2_M3_E6 | Process talk | 652-672 | 21 | non-humorous | Time/workload | 5.5-2 |
| **34** | P2_M3_E7 | Process talk | 935-945 | 11 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **35** | P2_M3_E8 | Process talk | 1012-1018 | 7 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **36** | P3_M2_E1 | Process talk | 26-31 | 6 | non-humorous | Time | 5.3-3 |
| **37** | P3_M2_E2 | Off-topic talk | 77-87 | 11 | non-humorous | Campus facilities | - |
| **38** | P3_M2_E3 | Off-topic talk | 409-420 | 11 | some humour | Difficult exam | 5.3-4; 5.4-6 |
| **39** | P3_M2_E4 | Off-topic talk | 422-455 | 34 | humorous | Difficult exam | 5.4-3 |
| **40** | P3_M2_E5 | Process talk | 577-593 | 16 | humorous | Nature of task | 5.4-8 |
| **41** | P2_M5_E1 | Off-topic talk | 481-504 | 24 | humorous | Technology | 5.5-9 |
| **42** | P2_M5_E2 | Off-topic talk | 672-681 | 10 | humorous | Professors | 5.3-7 |
| **43** | P2_M5_E3 | Off-topic talk | 1182-1204 | 23 | humorous | Other teams | 5.6-2 |
| **44** | P2_M5_E4 | Process talk | 2245-2262 | 18 | non-humorous | Technology | 5.5-7 |
| **45** | P2_M5_E5 | On-topic talk | 2502-2503 | 2 | non-humorous | Difficult assignment | 5.3-15 |
| **46** | P2_M6_E1 | Off-topic talk | 416-438 | 23 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **47** | P2_M6_E2 | Off-topic talk | 439-456 | 17 | humorous | Difficult assignment | - |
| **48** | P2_M6_E3 | Off-topic talk | 474-511 | 38 | humorous | Difficult assignment/ professor | - |
| **49** | P2_M6_E4 | Off-topic talk | 554-558 | 5 | some humour | Professor | - |
| **50** | P2_M6_E5 | Off-topic talk | 783-788 | 6 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **51** | P2_M6_E6 | Off-topic talk | 1666-1669 | 4 | non-humorous | Language | 5.4-12 |
| **52** | P2_M6_E7 | Off-topic talk | 1704-1711 | 7 | non-humorous | Time/workload | 5.3-16 |
| **53** | P2_M6_E8 | Off-topic talk | 1716-1727 | 12 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **54** | P2_M6_E9 | Off-topic talk | 1754-1775 | 23 | some humour | Time/workload | 5.5-5 |
| **55** | P2_M6_E10 | Process talk | 2951-2952 | 2 | non-humorous | Technology | - |
| **56** | P2_M6_E11 | Process talk | 2974-3000 | 27 | some humour | Time/workload | 5.4-1 |
| **57** | P2_M6_E12 | Process talk | 3150-3155 | 6 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **58** | P2_M6_E13 | Process talk | 3703-3705 | 3 | non-humorous | Professor | - |
| **59** | P2_M6_E14 | Process talk | 3784 | 1 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **60** | P3_M3_E1 | On-topic talk | 663-667 | 5 | some humour | Client | - |
| **61** | P3_M3_E2 | Process talk | 815 | 1 | non-humorous | Technology | - |
| **62** | P3_M3_E3 | Process talk | 882-890 | 9 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **63** | P3_M3_E4 | Process talk | 2408-2427 | 20 | non-humorous | Time/workload | 5.3-1 |
| **64** | P4_M1_E1 | On-topic talk | 91-104 | 14 | non-humorous | Client | 5.5-1 |
| **65** | P4_M1_E2 | On-topic talk | 288-305 | 18 | some humour | Client | 5.3-8 |
| **66** | P4_M1_E3 | Process talk | 448-458 | 11 | some humour | Client | - |
| **67** | P4_M1_E4 | Off-topic talk | 894-905 | 12 | some humour | Previous task | 5.3-18; 5.4-17 |
| **68** | P4_M2_E1 | Off-topic talk | 3-17 | 15 | some humour | Professor | - |
| **69** | P4_M2_E2 | Off-topic talk | 31-42 | 12 | some humour | Professor | - |
| **70** | P4_M2_E3 | On-topic talk | 92-100 | 9 | some humour | Client | - |
| **71** | P4_M2_E4 | On-topic talk | 164-168 | 5 | some humour | Life in UK | - |
| **72** | P4_M2_E5 | On-topic talk | 353-361 | 9 | non-humorous | Life in UK | 5.7-3 |
| **73** | P4_M2_E6 | On-topic talk | 362-377 | 15 | non-humorous | Client | - |
| **74** | P4_M2_E7 | Process talk | 950-956 | 7 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **75** | P4_M2_E8 | Process talk | 1000-1039 | 10 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **76** | P4_M2_E9 | Off-topic talk | 1040-1053 | 14 | humorous | Professor | - |
| **77** | P4_M2_E10 | Process talk | 1132-1133 | 2 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **78** | P4_M2_E11 | Process talk | 1220-1227 | 8 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |
| **79** | P4_M2_E12 | Process talk | 1258-1291 | 34 | some humour | Time/workload | 5.4-14; 5.5-10 |
| **80** | P4_M3_E1 | Off-topic talk | 185-196 | 12 | humorous | Professors | 5.4-15; 5.5-6 |
| **81** | P4_M3_E2 | On-topic talk | 1053-1071 | 19 | non-humorous | Client | - |
| **82** | P4_M3_E3 | Off-topic talk | 1214-1220 | 7 | non-humorous | Facilities | - |
| **83** | P4_M3_E4 | Off-topic talk | 1377-1380 | 4 | non-humorous | Time/workload | - |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **84** | P4_M3_E5 | On-topic talk | 1577-1587 | 11 | humorous | Client | - |
| **85** | P4_M3_E6 | Off-topic talk | 1620-1625 | 5 | some humour | Client | - |
| **86** | P4_M3_E7 | On-topic talk | 1630-1652 | 23 | some humour | Not getting job/being an MBA | - |
| **87** | P4_M3_E8 | Process talk | 1716-1722 | 7 | some humour | Time/workload | - |
| **88** | P4_M3_E9 | Off-topic talk | 1996-2001 | 6 | some humour | Being an MBA | - |
| **89** | P4_M4_E1 | On-topic talk | 4-14 | 11 | non-humorous | Client/sponsors | - |
| **90** | P4_M4_E2 | On-topic talk | 37-58 | 22 | some humour | Client/sponsors | - |
| **91** | P4_M4_E3 | Off-topic talk | 94-116 | 23 | non-humorous | Classmates house burnt | - |
| **92** | P4_M4_E4 | Off-topic talk | 117-128 | 12 | humorous | Facilities/life as MBA | - |
| **93** | P4_M4_E5 | Process talk | 141-148 | 8 | non-humorous | Time/workload | 5.4-9 |
| **94** | P4_M4_E6 | Off-topic talk | 211-232 | 22 | some humour | Personal topics | - |
| **95** | P4_M6_E1 | Off-topic talk | 84-105 | 22 | some humour | Proof reading | 5.4-5 |
| **96** | P4_M6_E2 | Off-topic talk | 117-124 | 8 | some humour | Proof reading | 5.3-17 |
| **97** | P4_M6_E3 | On-topic talk | 925-932 | 8 | humorous | Work process | - |
| **98** | P4_M6_E4 | On-topic talk | 1071-1082 | 12 | humorous | Nature of task | 5.3-20; 5.4-18 |
| **99** | P4_M6_E5 | Off-topic talk | 1569-1629 | 57 | some humour | Difficult assignment | - |
| **100** | P4_M7_E1 | Off-topic talk | 330 | 1 | non-humorous | Unspecific | - |
| **101** | P4_M7_E2 | Process talk | 403-406 | 4 | humorous | Facilities/technical problems | - |
| **102** | P4_M7_E3 | Off-topic talk | 419-426 | 10 | humorous | Bad classes | - |
| **103** | P4_M7_E4 | Off-topic talk | 473-482 | 10 | humorous | Living in UK | 5.3-12 |
| **104** | P4_M7_E5 | Off-topic talk | 528-532 | 5 | humorous | Assignments | - |
| **105** | P4_M7_E6 | Process talk | 533-542 | 10 | non-humorous | Facilities/technical problems | - |
| **106** | P4_M7_E7 | Process talk | 547-548 | 2 | non-humorous | Personal topics | 5.5-8 |
| **107** | P4_M7_E8 | Off-topic talk | 594-602 | 9 | some humour | Personal topics | 5.3.13 |
| | | Median length: 10 lines | Average length: 14 lines | | | | |

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