Constructing good relations through troubles talk in intercultural teams

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Dr. Carolin Debray

Universität Hildesheim

@carolin_debray

Research Interest

- Study and workplaces as spaces of encounters
  - Relationships over which participants have limited control
  - But that are enduring
- Positive relationships are important for wellbeing, job and life satisfaction and employee effectiveness (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Simon, Judge, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2010)

Research Interest

Relational Practices in the Workplace:

1) "constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships"

2) "damage control, [...] constructing and maintaining workers' dignity, [...] saving face and reducing the likelihood of offense being taken [...]"

(Holmes & Marra, 2004, p.381)

Enhancing relationships

- Small talk (Holmes & Marra, 2004; Holmes, 2003; Coupland, 2000)

- Humour (Spencer-Oatey, 1996, Schnurr, 2010, Holmes & Marra, 2004)

- Joint construction of narratives (Eggins & Slade, 1997; Vine 2010)

- Displaying shared knowledge (Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 1998; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Enfield, 2013)

- Paying compliments and attributing value to the relationship and person (Spencer-Oatey, 1998)

- Transgressive Storytelling (Coupland and Jaworski, 2003)

- Swearing (Daly, Holmes, Newton & Stubbe, 2004; Stapleton, 2010)

- Jocular Abuse (Daly, Holmes, Newton & Stubbe, 2004)

- Self-disclosing information (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dindia, 2014)

Troubles Talk

Definition:

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.

    Jefferson (1980, 1984a, 1984b, 1988; with Lee 1981)

■ Indirect complaints, "griping", "venting", "bitching", "whinging"

Troubles Talk

- Troubles talk is ubiquitous (Boxer, 1993), especially in workplaces (Heck, 2001)

- Yet it has received almost no attention in workplace research (Mewburn, 2011)

- Research is somewhat split in its evaluations of troubles talk

Troubles Talk

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- Community creation (Faircloth, 2001; Mewburn, 2011; Pouthier, 2017)

- Identity construction (Mewburn, 2011)

- "venting frustrations, checking the validity of a negative evaluation, or seeking agreement" and for creating solidarity (Boxer, 1993, p.167).

- Problems are only discussed with "special peers" (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias & Cahill, 1998).

-

- Problematic for performance and employee mood (Heck, 2001; Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009)

- Can lead to "marginalisation and othering" (Mewburn, 2011, p. 330)

- Device to claim/confer power and status (Kyratzis, 2000)

Study Design: Single Case Study

- 9 months long case study of one team of MBA students including observations, recording team-meetings and interviews

- > 100h recorded team interactions & 14h interview data

- Transcribed 20 meetings (≈25h)

- Departed from the observation that troubles talk tended to be very animated and friendly and that relations seemed particularly positive.

Team Members

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Professional Background
Akshya	28	F	Indian	Team leader in marketing office
Alden	29	M	Chinese	Accountant, head of department
Bev	25	F	Nigerian	General management
Bruno	39	M	German/Italian	Sales manager
David	27	M	British	Team leader in large oil and gas company
Jay	25	M	Indian	IT Consultant

An "intercultural" team?

- **Structural arguments**
  - Different first languages
  - Nationalities
  - Ethnicities
  - Professional Backgrounds
  - Age

- **Self-perception of the group**

- **Culture made relevant in the interaction?**
  (Piller, 2017)

An "intercultural" team?

- "Future studies should focus on **how successful communication is achieved** in intercultural settings instead of simply focusing on miscommunication" (Poncini, 2002)

- "What good does it do to see a given moment of communication as a given moment of intercultural communication?" (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012, p.2)

Study Design: Single Case Study

Troubles Talk:

- 107 incidents across 20 team meetings

- Average length: 14 turns

- Appears during on-topic, off-topic and process talk

- In-situ relations were consistently constructed as: close, equal, trustful and as featuring positive affect/liking.

- Which interactional strategies help to construct/enact these positive relations?

Enacting Closeness

Troubles Talk Topics

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

Example 1

66   Akshya: we <u>a</u>ctually <u>ha</u>:d a session to so:lve those (.) question papers=

67   David: =↑what's/ what is the point? ↑

68   Akshya: I'm like (.) EXACTLY

69   David: ↑what is the what is the point? ↑ [hits table]

70   Akshya: He could have at least told that during the session that 'guys you know this is all fine/ but the test is gonna to be different/ and it's gonna to be harder'

71   David: Yeah (.) it's gonna be a lot harder hh

72   Jay: <u>No</u> that/ that's what I was telling him/ I think he did more bad than good by sharing previous years' papers because we were like really confident

73   Akshya: YEAH (.) and [then

74   David: [LAST year/ they must have all got really good marks last year

75   Bev: I know

76   Jay: Yeah

77   Akshya: yeah

78   David: and then they must have been like 'ah we can't have this' hhhh

79   ((laughter))

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> Relatively fast, but uncompetitive floor-management, frequent alignments, escalating narrative.

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Shared storytelling

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66 Akshya: we actually ha:d a session to so:lve those (.) question papers=

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79 ((laughter))

> Shared Common ground, shared understanding of their context

Enacting Equality and Trust

Example 2: Self-Disclosures

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 fi:ne

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> Relatively fast, but uncompetitive floor-management, frequent alignments, escalating narrative.

Example 3

```
83                  (4.0)
→ 84     Bruno:     Oh yeah/ Nice (.) My girlfriend/ she sent me back
                    my assignment (.) [and o:h g::od
85                                     [((laughter))
                    [lines omitted]


→ 88     Bev:       My husband is turning mine into a red minefield
89                  ((laughter))
```

Example 3

83   (4.0)

→ 84   Bruno: Oh yeah/ Nice (.) My girlfriend/ she sent me back

                              my assignment (.) [and o:h g::od

85   [((laughter))

                            [lines omitted]

→ 88   Bev: My husband is turning mine into a red minefield

89   ((laughter))

- Reciprocal troubles-disclosure, even where the situations are not comparable;
- Laughter positions the speakers as coping and the listeners as aligned

Example 4

1233	Akshya:	((reads)) "the summary should not be more than 250 words" (.) THE SUMMARY h
1234	Bev:	(xxx) hhhh
1235	David:	no not the whole report [that's like a text message hh
1236	Akshya:	[=yeah
1237		((laughter))
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"

Relational Parameters	Meso-strategy Creating….	Interactional Strategy
Equality		Shared floor (Quick, non-competitive turn-taking)
		(Reciprocal) self-disclosures
		Construction of troubles as laughable through use of humour; Absence of advice and commiserating responses
Trust		(Reciprocal) self-disclosures
		Alignments (especially to emotional states and troubles)
		Frequent explicit agreements
		Face saving orientation
Closeness	Common ground	Joint storytelling
		Escalating storytelling that frequently sparks fantasy humour
		Topic choice and management
	Solidarity	Self-disclosures
	Common ground and intimacy	Elliptic utterances
		Joint laughter
	Shared perspectives	Joint construction of something as a trouble
Positive Affect	Joint transgressions	Swearing More transgressive troubles tellings
		Establishment/Enhancement of positive group mood
	Increasing liking	Self-disclosures

Troubles talk was used to…

- …enact relations that are equal, close, friendly, trustful and collaborative

- …make sense of their experiences

- …collect relevant information from others

- …share information about oneself

- …create the team and draw boundaries around it

- **…demonstrate rapport-orientation, often after more tense and acrimonious types of talk**

- **…re-establish relationships, re-connect after conflict**

What's so special about troubles talk?

- Allows for a number of linguistics devices to be employed that have been found to enhance relationships ('superstrategy')

- These devices are not frequently used outside of troubles talk in the data set

What's so special about troubles talk?

- 'Troubles talk' tends to be done with friends and family -> indicates intimacy (Mandelbaum & Pomerantz, 2005)

But:

- Requires few pre-requisites
- Resembles 'Setting-talk' (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984) however unlike setting-talk it creates intimacy not distance

Relating in WP during Covid:
Private meeting side-chats

- New research project with Steph Schnurr
- Increasing number of private "side-" conversations during virtual meetings on a variety of different platforms

Example 2

11:51 - N: So tomorrow we have another 2h meeting

11:51 - B: With new ideas

11:51 - N: <GIF>

11:52 - N: so we can have another live-ticker

11:52 - B: 🤣🤣🤣🤣🤣🤣

11:54 - N: and a 'Try not to laugh challenge'.

11:54 - B: Hahah indeed

Implications

- Specific interactional strategies seem to be particularly effective in building positive relationships and these appear more in some types of talk than in others

- Overthink the relationship between face and positive relationship building

- Relationships vs relations 'in situ' (Locher & Graham, 2010, p.1)

- Limited understanding how they relate to each other

Thank you for listening!

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