Constructing good relations through troubles talk in intercultural teams

Linguistikzirkel WU Wien,
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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)
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)
- **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.


- 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

- 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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic - Category</th>
<th>Topic - Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being an MBA student (74)</td>
<td>Time &amp; 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)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task (20)</td>
<td>Client (12); Problems with executions (5); Nature of task (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life on campus/in the UK (8)</td>
<td>Provisions on campus (3); Accommodation (2); UK (2); Weather (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Party (3)</td>
<td>Other teams (2); Colleague’s accident (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Issues (3)</td>
<td>Physical wellbeing (2); Girlfriend moving away (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undefined (6)</td>
<td>Interrupted/Topic changed before trouble became clear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Akshya: we actually had a session to solve those question papers=
David: =↑what’s/ what is the point? ↑
Akshya: I’m like (. ) EXACTLY
David: ↑what is the what is the point? ↑ [hits table]
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’
David: Yeah (. ) it's gonna be a lot harder hh
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 like really confident
Akshya: YEAH (. ) and [then
David: [LAST year/ they must have all got really good marks last year
Bev: I know
Jay: Yeah
Akshya: yeah
David: and then they must have been like ‘ah we can't have this’ hhhh ((laughter))
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Example 1
Relatively fast, but uncompetitive floor-management, frequent alignments, escalating narrative.
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Shared storytelling
Example 1

66   Akshya: we actually had a session to solve those question papers=
67   David: =↑what’s/what is the point? ↑
68   Akshya: I’m like (.) EXACTLY
69   David: ↑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’
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72   Jay: No that/ that's what I was telling him/ I think he did more bad than
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certain
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))
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
419  Bev:      Yeah/ I don’t want to see it because it will ruin my Christmas
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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

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))]  
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
Akshya: ((reads)) "the summary should not be more than 250 words" (. ) THE SUMMARY h

Bev: (xxx) hhhh

David: no not the whole report [that’s like a text message hh

Akshya: [=yeah

((laughter))

Bruno: we can send it via what's app

David: A what’s app hhh

((laughter))

David: OH >>1500 words?<< ((exaggerated voice))

((laughter))

David: that's ten text messages hh

((laughter))

Akshya: including hundred (xxx) hhhhhhh

David: are you shitting me? (. ) maybe we should choose a company that got a short like/

Bev: excluding cover page hhh

David: 1500 words let's just not use vowels or or write "[name of company] operation good"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational Parameters</th>
<th>Meso-strategy Creating…</th>
<th>Interactional Strategy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shared floor (Quick, non-competitive turn-taking)</td>
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<td>(Reciprocal) self-disclosures</td>
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<td>Construction of troubles as laughable through use of humour; Absence of advice and commiserating responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Reciprocal) self-disclosures</td>
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<td>Alignments (especially to emotional states and troubles)</td>
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<td>Frequent explicit agreements</td>
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<td>Face saving orientation</td>
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<td>Closeness</td>
<td>Common ground</td>
<td>Joint storytelling</td>
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<td>Escalating storytelling that frequently sparks fantasy humour</td>
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<td>Topic choice and management</td>
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<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Self-disclosures</td>
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<td>Common ground and intimacy</td>
<td>Elliptic utterances</td>
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<td>Joint laughter</td>
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<td>Shared perspectives</td>
<td>Joint construction of something as a trouble</td>
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<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>Joint transgressions</td>
<td>Swearing</td>
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<td>More transgressive troubles tellings</td>
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<td>Establishment/Enhancement of positive group mood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increasing liking</td>
<td>Self-disclosures</td>
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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!
References


References


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