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Co-constructing good relations through troubles talk in diverse teams

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the in-situ relations that interlocutors co-construct during troubles talk in a working team, with a focus on talk centred around negative issues or experiences that speakers do not blame or attribute to others present. Research in various fields has pointed to the important role that troubles talk plays in the construction of positive social relations, but more detailed pragmatic insights are still needed to understand exactly how these positive social relations are brought about in interaction. To address this, we draw on 25 h of recorded and transcribed team meeting data from an MBA team, collected over a 9-month period. Troubles talk stands out throughout from other types of talk in this dataset, as relations were continuously constructed as equal, close, safe, and featuring positive affect. We examine the interactional strategies that team members used to construct these positive relations in troubles talk and highlight a number of these strategies, including joint story-telling, participatory floor-management, humour, and shared transgressions. Reciprocal self-disclosures were found to be central to constructing positive relations and were used by team members even when troubles were not shared. With this we add further empirical insights to the area of interpersonal pragmatics concerned with fostering good relationships and establish descriptors on how such relations can be characterised and investigated.
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1. Introduction

Many employees spend a considerable amount of time engaging with diverse colleagues, during which social relations are necessarily formed and negotiated, and they rarely have any control over who they work with. Workplaces are therefore important spaces for observing social encounters and relating. While task-focused or transactional communication in the workplace occupies a lot of attention, the relational aspect is also very important for the individual as well as for the organisation: high satisfaction with relations at work has been shown to have a positive effect on wellbeing, job and life satisfaction, and employee effectiveness (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008; Simon et al., 2010). It is also crucial in progressing and completing tasks in a team: Fletcher (1999) describes the myriad of relational behaviours necessary for task completion in the workplace, such as information sharing, resolving conflicts and providing support. Thus, how individuals can build good relationships at work is a crucial question for researchers and organisations alike.

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Holmes and Marra (2004: 380) describe two types of relational practices taking place at work:

> First, there is RP [Relational Practice] that is oriented to constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships, to establishing and maintaining solidarity between team members, and to networking and creating new work relationships. […] Second, there is RP that is […] concerned with damage control: RP oriented to constructing and maintaining workers' dignity, to saving face and reducing the likelihood of offense being taken, to mitigating potentially threatening behavior, and to minimizing conflict and negotiating consensus.

We contend that, so far, these two types of relational practices have received vastly different amounts of research attention: the second type, which refers to the traditional approach of politeness research with its focus on mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs) (i.e. Brown and Levinson, 1987), has received considerably more research attention than the first type, which is focused on constructing good relations.

Yet, researching how good relationships are constructed seems especially important in the context of diverse workplaces and intercultural relations. Researchers have suggested for some time that relations tend to be more problematic in diverse teams than in more homogenous workgroups (e.g. Stahl et al., 2010) and much has been written about the different communicative and relational challenges that intercultural teams face (e.g. Behfar et al., 2006; Debray and Spencer-Oatey, 2019; Tenzer and Pudelko, 2017). Fletcher (1999) pays special attention to the question of relating in teams and suggests that team members need to engage in relational behaviours that create team by "creating the background conditions in which group life can flourish and the feeling of team can be experienced" (p.85). Thus, how diverse teams can establish good relationships in the social space that is the workplace is a crucial question that deserves further attention from researchers. In this paper, we investigate one of the ways social relations are co-constructed in the workplace by exploring the troubles talk maintained by a diverse team of six MBA students over the course of their 9-month long collaboration.

Troubles talk seems to be ubiquitous in workplaces (Boxer, 1993b; Heck, 2001) and has often been lauded for fostering positive relationships (e.g. Pouthier, 2017; Mewburn, 2011; Boxer, 1993a). In this article we therefore explore the interactional features of troubles talk and investigate the relations-in-situ that interlocutors co-construct during episodes of troubles talk, with the goal of understanding how workplace relationships are fostered through this interactional activity.

2. Co-constructing relations in troubles talk

We use the term 'troubles talk' to refer to interactions in which team members jointly complain about a perceived source of trouble. Troubles talk is broadly defined as any talk about negative issues or experiences encountered by a speaker that are not blamed or attributed to any of those present, and which can range from serious issues to only mildly inconvenient or completely other-focused issues. Other researchers have sometimes used different terms for troubles talk, such as indirect complaints, griping, venting, or whinging. Our proposed definition seems to encompass most of these phenomena and importantly also worked well in the identification of troubles talk episodes in the data collected for this study.

Troubles talk has received a reasonable amount of academic attention since Jefferson (1980) first popularised the term. We will only mention the literature here that is directly relevant to relational issues; for a more comprehensive and systematic review of this literature see Debray (2018).

At first glance, troubles talk presents a problematic and precarious type of talk. Interlocutors often need to reveal a problem that is likely to threaten their own face, or that could diminish their own position fleetingly or more permanently (Bayraktaroğlu, 1992), for example through revealing that one is struggling with the workload or a task in a team. While the fault underlying this trouble might be allocated elsewhere, initially interlocutors have to admit to struggling with something, which runs the risk of appearing incompetent or difficult and thus potentially threaten their own face. It thus leaves interlocutors vulnerable to losing their "moral high ground, status or the appearance of authority" (Mewburn, 2011:330). A successful troubles talk episode therefore requires careful face and relational management. The same is true for recipients of troubles tellings. Studies investigating responses to troubles talk found that advice is frequently rejected and that listeners struggle to appropriately align with the teller, causing disruptions in the relationships (Feo and LeCouteur, 2013; Jefferson and Lee, 1981; Riccioni et al., 2014).

Troubles tellers and listeners have been found to use a variety of mitigation strategies, including ambiguous initial tellings until the listener indicates appropriate troubles alignment (Jefferson, 1988), laughing while telling of troubles to indicate resilience (Jefferson, 1984), and disagreements as preferred responses to personal troubles tellings in order to position the teller as coping and the issue as unproblematic (Bayraktaroğlu, 1992).

Jefferson and Lee's (1981) work has also shown that solving a problem and getting advice is often not the main purpose of troubles talk. Instead it appears that the functions of troubles talk are subtler, such as increasing social support amongst couples (Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2014) and promoting communal coping (Goldsmith, 2004).

Boxer (1993a, 1993b) in her seminal research on troubles talk in the workplace, studied indirect complaints amongst university staff members and postgraduate students and found them to be primarily a device for creating solidarity, but also for "venting frustrations, checking the validity of a negative evaluation, or seeking agreement" (1993a: 167). She also differentiated indirect complaints according to their focus on self, others, or situations. Depending on the focus and the addressee, specific functions of troubles talk were found to differ; for instance, self-directed indirect complaints tended to function as apologies to strangers but as "fishing for compliments" when used with friends (Boxer, 1993a:172).

Other studies in a university environment have pointed to the crucial role of troubles talk for communal identity construction (Haugh, 2016; Mewburn, 2011). Mewburn (2011:330), who investigated a cohort of PhD students, concluded that:

> 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.

A similar phenomenon was reported by Faircloth (2001) in an ethnographic study of an elderly residential community. Faircloth found that community was created through talking about troubles in the neighbourhood and about individual members of the community. Similar effects were also described in Pouthier's (2017) investigation into workplace communication. Pouthier demonstrated how important griping and humour were for creating team and energizing meetings in a cross-boundary palliative care unit. With this, her research points to the important role that good social interactions play in creating a positive team identity in a diverse team, which also affected the team's ability to function and collaborate as well as their ability to complete tasks successfully.

At the same time, troubles talk appears to involve relational risks, especially if there is a specific and regular target of the talk. While this might "foster team" among a subgroup of colleagues it can lead to "marginalisation and othering" of others (Mewburn, 2011:330). Boxer (1993a) also reports that this can have negative effects for the troubles teller, if they are perceived to complain overly frequently or too indiscriminately.

Unsurprisingly therefore, research on troubles talk in the workplace is somewhat split in its evaluation with regards to its positive effects. Some research from the field of organisational behaviour and psychology suggests that indirect complaints in the workplace might also be problematic for performance or employee mood and may generate cycles of complaints (Heck, 2001; Kauffeld and Meyers, 2009). Other studies in the management field have suggested that talking about troubles at work and providing emotional support are important workplace behaviours. In particular, troubles talk was found to be an important marker in the development of closer workplace relationships, as colleagues tend to engage with only a chosen few co-workers in these types of interactions (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Sias and Cahill, 1998).

Ethnographic and (socio)linguistic research also paint a more positive picture. Positive outcomes have been frequently reported, including promoting solidarity (Burchard, 2001; Clyne, 1994; Daly et al., 2004; Pouthier, 2017) and externalising or off-loading negative feelings (Burchard, 2001; Daly et al., 2004). Employees were found to not complain indiscriminately but only to colleagues they perceived as similar (Burchard, 2001) and between whom social distance was small (Clyne, 1994).

The literature thus presents a somewhat mixed picture in regard to the effects of troubles talk on interlocutor relationships and leaves various research gaps open:

- Many of the studies cited above are not based on linguistic or pragmatic approaches to troubles talk, but rely on ethnographies or interview data. As such, we know comparatively little about exactly how troubles talk in the workplace sounds.
- We know little about the topics people address in troubles talk and how this can contribute to the negative or positive impacts outlined in previous research.
- Similarly, we know little about the way in-situ relations are constructed during troubles talk. Jefferson (1988) points to strong relational intimacy at the height of a troubles telling, but whether this applies to groups in the same way it applied to the dyadic conversations she analysed is not clear, nor is it clear how in-situ relations in a team are co-constructed during troubles talk episodes, as opposed to the other more transactional types of talk a team engages in.
- In addition, we have almost no insights into the development of troubles talk over time and the impact it has on relationships in the long run, as hardly any of the studies on troubles talk take a developmental or longitudinal perspective and systematically trace troubles talk over time.

These issues would seem central in unpacking the somewhat contradictory insights that current research on troubles talk provides. Troubles talk appears to have a huge potential for 'creating team' (Fletcher, 1999) and fostering workplace relations, but exactly how it is carried out seems to be crucial in reaping this positive potential. We thus explore the ways troubles talk is interactionally managed in a team of MBA students, paying special attention to the way relations are constructed in situ during troubles talk. With this we contribute to existing research in a number of different ways:

a) We add empirical insights into the ways troubles talk is conducted in a work context and in a group. We give a detailed account of reoccurring interactional features and the way these impact relations in situ.
b) We identify patterns in the way in-situ relations are constructed in troubles talk. We identify various relational strategies interlocutors use to construct positive relations and with this we shed light on fostering positive relationships more broadly in the workplace.
c) We add insights into how interlocutors manage troubles talk to reap the positive potential of troubles talk and mitigate negative issues.
d) We add insights on the longitudinal impact of troubles talk by investigating whether troubles talk changes over time to become more frequent or more severe, and thus whether the relations co-constructed during troubles talk change over time or remain generally consistent.

3. Methodology

The data for this study stems from nine successive months of fieldwork into the communicative practices of an MBA team. The decision to focus on troubles talk was taken during early data analysis as troubles talk stood out consistently from many of the other team interactions, as it tended to be very animated, often accompanied by humour and a usually friendly atmosphere.

The team reported on here consisted of six members, allocated by course administrators to reflect diversity in gender, nationality, professional background and L1 (see Table 1 for an overview). This was immediately obvious to the team members, who commented explicitly and sometimes humorously on the strategic selection of the membership and the diverse and intercultural identity that this imposed on the team. Culture and diversity were as such salient identity categories in the team. All team members had a minimum of 5 years of working experience in their respective professional fields.

Table 1
Overview of team members.

Name	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Professional background
Akshya	28	Female	India	Marketing
Alden	29	Male	China	Accounting
Bev	25	Female	Nigeria	Oil and gas
Bruno	39	Male	Germany/Italy	Sales
David	27	Male	UK	Oil and gas
Jay	25	Male	India	IT Consultancy

Team relations changed over time but were variable overall. Team members initially met as strangers who were told that they had to work with each other through the entire MBA. Over time some team members formed friendships, spending time outside the teamwork context with each other, while other relationships remained more distant and less friendly. Especially towards the end, some of the relations became more problematic and considerable interactional work was undertaken to avoid open conflict (for details, see Debray, 2020).

The team worked together on four separate projects attached to core modules that were always assessed as a group. Much was therefore at stake for the individual team members, as a low performing team would mean low marks on their most important courses. Three of these assessed projects were consultancy projects for real clients, which is one of the reasons why we treat this as workplace and not educational discourse data. The team usually met in a small meeting room allocated to them in which team members sat around an oval table. The first author audio-recorded the meeting, while observing and taking notes from a seat on the windowsill. This way, minimal disruption was caused to the team members as evidenced by the fact that they often forgot that a researcher was present (Copland and Creese, 2015). Where meetings happened spontaneously after class, team members recorded the meeting themselves and later passed the recording to the first author. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university ethics committee and real names were replaced with pseudonyms. Participant consent was obtained prior to the data collection and after participants were fully informed what the research entailed and were able to ask questions. However, consent was also subject to ongoing negotiation (Miller and Bell, 2012); this was important given the duration of the data collection and the high stakes involved for the participants related to their degree assessment.

Following data collection, 25 h from the total dataset of 88 h of recorded meetings were selected for transcription and analysis. The main criteria for this selection was to create a longitudinal dataset that included meetings from all stages of the teamwork. In addition, we followed several established criteria:

- all team members must be present (so meetings where any member did not attend were excluded)
- only team members must be present (so meetings with clients were not transcribed),
- meetings must feature a good proportion of whole team interactions (i.e. instead of sub-group discussions or working separately on various aspects of the project)
- in addition, we decided to transcribe one project in its entirety to be able to investigate the communication through the various stages of a project (accounting for 10 h of the data).

In the transcribed data a total of 107 episodes of troubles talk were identified in total, including six instances where a team member tried unsuccessfully to initiate a troubles talk episode. The troubles talk instances were identified in accordance with the definition given in Section 2 and were discussed between both authors. The troubles talk corpus overall includes 15,749 tokens, and meetings contain on average five instances of troubles talk. While some meetings include more instances than others, no trend of increase over time was detected. Episodes on average consist of 14 turns (median 10 turns), however some were considerably shorter (one or two turns in the case of non-uptake) and the longest one consists of 102 turns.

Coding was carried out using the proprietary software MAXQDA and was mostly done inductively; however, the review of the literature also informed our approach to the data. This was very useful as it helped in identifying important differences

between this dataset and previous research. For example, one of the expected categories was 'giving advice' as this is frequently discussed in the troubles talk literature, but advice giving was almost completely absent in our data.

The data was coded in a number of different ways including, inter alia, the speech acts performed, topics covered, participation and interlocutor roles, stylistic and structural observations, relational features such as face-saving or face-threatening behaviour, and (dis)alignments. In addition to this, memos were continuously written with code definitions, relations between codes, and general observations about the incidents and the analytical process. Coding the data in this way allowed for a systematic exploration of the data and initial hypotheses could be explored in regard to all troubles talk episodes in the troubles talk corpus and cross-referenced with the whole transcribed dataset (e.g. to identify whether specific features really appeared more frequently in troubles talk than in other interactions). At the same time, episodes were read and repeatedly re-read in their entirety and analytical commentary was recorded in memos to avoid pulling discursive data too far apart through coding procedures, as well as to ensure that data was treated holistically and not only in its coded form. Troubles talk episodes were also consistently compared to identify patterns and identify similarities in interactional features and the way relations were co-constructed. The goal of the analysis was to describe the aspects of troubles talk that led to the construction of positive relations as described in the literature and to understand through which strategies relations were mutually constructed in positive ways, while at the same time managing the more problematic aspects of troubles talk.

Conceptually, the analysis of strategies and relations appeared to be something of a conundrum, as the differentiation between the two is to some extent artificial, given how closely they are intertwined. For instance, an interactional strategy might be to talk about a shared experience, which could be considered to construct the relation as close and positive. The moment this is taken up by the other(s), this enacts the relation as close. For in-situ relations, the uptake of a positive relational strategy marks its enactment and with that also a positive relational outcome. We contend that this does not apply to long-term relationships, where the connection is more complex, but for relations in situ, we take an enactment of trust that is aligned with to be a construction of an at least momentarily trustful relation. Analytically it therefore still makes sense to separate strategies and enactment of in-situ relations, as the uptake, alignment and strength/intensity of enactment still play a big role in the relation that is manifest in the interaction.

4. Talking about troubles in team meetings

Troubles talk played out in fairly clear patterns in our dataset, which made it stand out in various ways when compared to other types of talk the team engaged in, such as brainstorming or decision making. Most notably, during troubles talk team members consistently co-constructed their relationships in specific and recognisable ways that can be described as equal, as close, as secure and trusting, and as featuring positive affect. These in-situ relations were constructed through a set of recurring interactional strategies that in some ways were unique to troubles talk in our dataset. We will discuss each of these four relational descriptors in the next section along with the strategies that served to construct and enact the relations involved, in line with each descriptor.

4.1. Constructing equal relations

Relations were consistently constructed as equal during troubles talk, in marked contrast to many of the team's other interactions. A number of interactional strategies contributed to this, most notably the ways in which the interactional floor was managed, and the ways in which initial troubles tellings were responded to.

4.1.1. Troubles constructions, access to the floor and participation

Extract 1 provides an example of a fairly typical troubles talk sequence, with David introducing a trouble (exam results) with an ambiguous initial telling (Jefferson, 1988).

Extract 1: Project 3, 2nd Meeting:

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
420	Bruno:	Yeah me too (.) I was so upset (.) I was so upset

David prompts a discussion of the exam results, without explicitly positioning them as a trouble (line 409). Nonetheless four members of the team immediately take up exams as a personal trouble and voice their worries of having done badly in a variety of ways (line 410–420). The talk slowly escalates from a more cautious "I feel nervous about that" (Bev, line 410) to: "I failed all" (Bev, line 417), "I screwed up even marketing", (Akshya, line 416), which is Akshya's best subject, to an emotional

admission "I was so upset" (Bruno, line 420). Such an escalating joint narrative is fairly common in our dataset in which interlocutors consistently align with and upgrade the force of the assertions made by their team members. This creates a narrative of at least four team members being equally affected and equally worried about a trouble, despite the fact that grades and academic achievements do vary across the team.

Throughout the interaction the turn-taking and speaker switches are fast-paced, but are not competitive. There are no interruptions or swift topic changes. Instead, everyone has a fairly equal access to the floor and equal opportunity to speak. This very fast but uncompetitive floor management is a frequent feature of troubles talk in our data, as can also be seen in Extract 4 below. Team members align with each other's utterances and the overall tone is supportive, while lacking any form of consoling responses that might disrupt the mutual construction of the exams as a trouble that is equally shared by all.

4.1.2. Reciprocal self disclosures

Most of the utterances in Extract 1 can be categorised as self-disclosures – a feature that stood out prominently across the dataset. Interactionally, self-disclosures carry the risk of damaging the speaker's own face, as by definition personal information must be provided without any assurance of how it will be received. Importantly, however, they also have the potential to connect the speaker more closely to others, not only through sharing relevant personal details but also by increasing understanding and empathy, and potentially even by gaining support for the speaker's troubles. Noting firstly that troubles talk per se is not limited to sharing personal information, and conversely that the total dataset might have included self-disclosures *other* than troubles, it is worth mentioning that the latter was not usually the case, and that self-disclosures were often restricted to the episodes of troubles talk. Thus, troubles talk seems to have allowed team members to self-disclose in a way they did not otherwise in the team. These episodes included frequent self-disclosures relating to state of mind, worries about the future, or negative self-assessments about performance.

At the same time, admitting to a trouble may undermine a speaker's own position. Since not all relationships in the team were positive and issues of power affected team relations (see Debray, 2020), team members may have anticipated that these could be exploited by others. Yet there is not a single incident in the transcribed dataset where this appears to be the case. Instead, self-disclosures tend to be mirrored by reciprocal self-disclosures that save the other's face and also contribute to maintaining an equal power relationship among team members as this positions interlocutors as being equally affected by a trouble.

While in Extract 1 it might be true that no team members wanted to see their results, there are other instances where the truth of a reciprocal self-disclosure can legitimately be questioned based on insights gained ethnographically. Extracts 2 and 3 provide two such examples:

Extract 2:

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

Extract 3:

→	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
→	189	David:	I just wanna pass/ I just wanna pass

In Extract 2, Bruno formulates a trouble (line 84) self-disclosing writing issues by hinting at the large number of corrections his girlfriend made to his assignment while proofreading it. The first reaction to this is loud laughter by the whole team. While this may appear face-threatening at first glance (one could deem a commiserative or supportive response more appropriate), it also constructs Bruno not as someone in need of pity from the team, but rather as someone who is coping and can handle the trouble (Jefferson, 1984). There is no evidence in the data that Bruno gets upset by the laughter or that the team does not care about Bruno's troubles, and the conversation continues in a jocular manner with Bev's self-disclosure in line 88, stating that her husband is turning her assignment into "a red minefield". Bruno – in contrast to Bev – is an L2 speaker of English, who comments openly on his occasional struggles with studying in his L2. While Bev's husband might equally have added a lot of corrections to her assignment, it seems unlikely, however, that their writing problems would be equally serious. As such, the utterance seems primarily to function to maintain or re-establish interlocutor equality and to reassure Bruno.

A similar incident can be seen in Extract 3 in which David reciprocates a self-disclosure by Bruno, namely that he has lowered his expectations regarding his own performance on the course. David mirrors this by stating 'I just wanna pass/I just wanna pass' (line 189). This seems very unlikely, as David is the team member with the highest marks who has also made it patently clear that obtaining a distinction on the degree is important to him. In both cases the reciprocal self-disclosure seems less targeted at exchanging factually correct information regarding a trouble, but instead is geared towards establishing and maintaining equal relations between team members in the face of troubles, even where these troubles are not shared. This

means that team members seem more willing to engage in threats to their own face and "lowering" of their own status than in risking relational equality in these exchanges.

4.2. Constructing secure and trustful relations

This way of doing equality also helps in constructing troubles talk as a safe interactional space. With the (sometimes unmitigated) threats to their own face such as those seen in Extract 2 and Extract 3, speakers enact trust in their team members not to exploit such self-FTAs for their own gain. Interestingly, while there are moments in the meetings where an admission of not knowing something or a similar weakness is exploited, this never happens in regard to a troubles self-disclosure. Face management thus appears as an interesting feature – while frequently threatening their own face, speakers took care to save other speakers' faces even beyond the interaction they were in. This made troubles talk episodes much safer interactions than many other talk activities the team engaged in.

Beyond appearing equal, relations in these interactions are thus also characterised by a high level of trust and the safety that one's face will be protected and that unfavourable admissions can be made. Trust has long been treated as an important marker of positive relationships in psychology (for an overview see: Simpson, 2007) and interpersonal communication research (e.g. Knobloch, 2010; Rogers, 1998), lending evidence to our observation that the relations constructed in troubles talk appear as particularly positive. Trust and psychological safety are also crucial in allowing teams to work effectively with each other (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017) and finding ways to establish and enact trust in a team is important for both individual wellbeing and team outcomes.

4.3. Constructing close relations

During troubles talk relationships were enacted as closer than in many other interactions. Closeness and distance have been variously conceptualised in pragmatics over the years (see Spencer-Oatey, 1996 for a discussion), we understand it here as a somewhat fuzzy sense of having something in common and in being in the same boat. This sense of closeness was established through a wide range of interactional strategies and features, some of them interwoven tightly with other relational aspects such as positive affect or trust.

4.3.1. Shared storytelling

One of the most noticeable features is the way participants jointly construct troubles and troubles narratives allowing them to create shared perspectives on the troubles discussed, but also make sense of their "new" contexts in an MBA:

Extract 4: The troubles talk episode begins after the team's computer freezes, leading to a break at the beginning of the meeting.

56	Jay:	oh God it's happening again (.) just give me a second to sort this stuff out
57		(5.0) [background noise of Jay restarting the computer]
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 is/ ↑what is 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 a:ll 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 Go:d (.) This is ba:d
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

While the meaning of the first few utterances in the episode would be inaccessible to an outsider, the team has little trouble in identifying the reason for David's groaning laugh (line 58), that functions to initiate the episode. While Akshya asks "what happened hhh" in line 59, she is already aligning with David's laughter by adding her own laughter at the end of her utterance. The question thus appears less as a quest for information and more as a facilitating device offering David the floor and space to elaborate on the trouble he is hinting at. Instead of elaborating in detail on the trouble though, David continues with an elliptical utterance in line 61 about wanting to shake an unidentified "him". Such elliptical utterances function to minimise interactional distance as they serve to enact how much common ground is shared between interlocutors (Enfield, 2013). They appear frequently in troubles talk, but less often in more task-oriented interactions, which tend to be more explicit.

In this case no further information as to the identity of "him" is needed, and team members embark on a joint narrative about exam questions, to prepare for which the professor had given a special class (line 66) where he showed the previous year's exam paper (line 73), a paper that was so easy that the team members underestimated the difficulty of the actual exam (lines 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 then goes even further to discuss a projected event of what happened last year after the exams, introducing so-called fantasy humour (Hay, 2001) to the conversation (lines 75 & 79).

What is striking is that despite team members referring to a context that they clearly treat as shared, many details are nonetheless made explicit. Team members are not exchanging new information here; 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 by re-constructing a joint, yet "unfair" experience.

Troubles 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 action as the trouble, thus creating a shared understanding of the situation that had seemingly not existed before.

At the same time the interaction requires careful management especially towards the end after the different aspects of the trouble have been sufficiently elaborated on. After the team laughs at David's fantasy humour (line 80), the talk stalls somewhat until Akshya utters in line 81 "oh God (.) this is bad", making an unspecific but negative assessment. Such assessments (especially when they are fairly general) tend to be contested across the dataset and indeed, Bev disagrees by saying: "no it isn't so long as we" (line 82). This utterance moves the episode towards a closure, as it focuses away from the trouble towards a solution (Jefferson and Lee, 1981). Moves such as these are frequently contested in troubles talk episodes if they are perceived by participants as coming too early in a sequence (Jefferson and Lee, 1981), and indeed Bev is interrupted in line 83 by David who seems not to have finished discussing the topic and continues the episode with an exclamation and then some swearing in line 85. While swearing is quite common in troubles talk, in this instance David actually sounds angry, something team members have stopped short of throughout the episode so far, which has consistently maintained a more humorous tone. Responses to David's utterance appear supportive and continue along a humorous note, but team members also disaffiliate themselves from David's anger by using exclusive pronouns in the utterance: "you're gonna punch someone aren't you? hh" (line 86) and "hhh you need a punching bag" (line 87). They thereby carefully calibrate the talk to maintain a good group mood and a more positive engagement with the trouble, but this also limits the extent of their common ground.

While the trouble that team members are discussing might be seen as a serious problem, the entire first part of the episode (up until line 80) is characterised by laughter: Utterances are frequently accompanied by the producers' laughter (Jefferson, 1984) and in line 58 and line 79 they are received with loud laughter from all team members present. However, the moment that someone, in this case Akshya in line 81, produces a non-humorous negative assessment, it is immediately rejected by another team member.

As such, we see a number of collaborative practices employed in this episode that are characteristic of troubles talk across the dataset, including a shared floor, use of facilitating and supportive questions, frequent alignments, joint narrative construction and shared escalation of a narrative, elliptic utterances, supportive humour, and laughter. But we can also observe a careful calibration of these features that include distancing from too negative assessments on the one hand and from going into problem-solving mode on the other, which might end up threatening positive group mood and the sense of solidarity the team has constructed.

4.3.2. Troubles talk topics

One further important aspect of how relationships are established as close in troubles talk are the topics that are discussed. Table 2 gives an overview of these.

Table 2
Troubles talk topics and frequencies of telling (in parentheses).

Topic—Category	Topic—Subcategories
Being an MBA Student (74)	Time and 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 Task 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 House Burning (1)
Personal Issues (3)	Physical Wellbeing (2); Girlfriend Moving Away (1)
Undefined (6)	Interrupted/Topic Changed before Trouble Became Clear

As can be seen in Table 2, troubles talk consistently covers topics and troubles that are directly related to the team and thus accessible to all group members. The great majority of episodes deal with the experience of *Being an MBA Student* and concern issues around workload and timing, professors, or difficult exams or assignment issues, such as in Extract 1. Closely related to this first category are the two categories *Task* and *Life on Campus*. In *Task* the most frequent topics covered are complaints about the team's clients, while *Life on Campus* includes troubles with accommodation, food and other life-related topics. Topics covered under *Third Party* and *Personal Issues* refer to fellow students known to everyone on the team or experiences directly relevant to the teamwork. Some of these topics appear to be connected (i.e. professors and workload, as it is often the professors responsible for the workload) and in some instances an episode covers more than one trouble, hence the slightly higher number of topics compared with episodes. Categorisation was thus not always clear cut and some of the categories could likely be drawn differently (e.g. *Task* could be seen an aspect of *Being an MBS Student).* We believe that this does not affect our argument here though, which is about the inclusiveness of the topics and their relevance to the team's overall experience.

In addition to being inclusive, the talk allowed the team to discuss and make sense of their surroundings and their "new" life as students, helping them in developing shared perspectives and shared understandings of their context and the work and identities they were performing in it. The talk thus drew on shared topics, but these were used to further establish common ground and shared perspectives.

One could argue that team members were simply dissatisfied with their new surroundings and thus felt the need to discuss them, but ethnographic observation and interviews suggest that the team was not actually dissatisfied with their overall experiences and many of their troubles exchanges tended to deal with professors, exams and workload in a humorous way. It thus appears that these became frequent targets of troubles talk because they were the things that the team had in common, that could be talked about easily and that required shared sense-making (Wright et al., 2000) but also offered the opportunity to make commonalities audible in a team that was purposefully assembled to have superficially little in common.

4.4. Constructing positive affect in relations

The final descriptor we found to play a role in the relations constructed during troubles talk was the amount of positive affect that team members enacted, but potentially also created through the interactional strategies used. While this final point is a challenging aspect to analyse from a linguistic point of view as explicit affective comments are absent in the data, research in social psychology points to the important role that self-disclosures play in increasing positive affect between interlocutors (Collins and Miller, 1994; Dindia, 2014), which troubles talk is rife with.

Another notable feature that occurs in troubles talk, but very rarely outside it, is swearing (once in every 1500 words in the total dataset, but once in every 198 words in the troubles talk corpus). The literature on swearing tends to highlight its positive functions, if not used aggressively; it tends to be seen as providing a relief from frustration, and as enhancing relationships and social cohesion through committing joint transgressions (Baruch et al., 2017). This seems to depend on whether swearing is endorsed by all interlocutors. Yet in an intercultural team, swearing could easily be a case where sociopragmatic principles (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) diverge. In the team under study it seems rather that this was mostly unproblematic, as the following examples show.

Extract 5: 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 fuck's sake
1208 Alden: Uhuhhuh

David exclaims “for fuck's sake” in line 1207. Alden reacts to this with a laugh suggesting surprise and, given that this constitutes a rather informal setting, likely amusement (Fägersten, 2012). This reaction suggests that there is a sociopragmatic principle (“don't swear”) in place to whose breach Alden is responding, yet also that he does not take the breach seriously. The willingness to breach a norm and engage in transgressive behaviour (and the lack of swearing outside of troubles talk clearly suggests that such norms are in place) further adds to establishing relational intimacy, as interlocutors tend to swear not just in any interaction, but with ‘special’ others (Fägersten, 2012). This can also result in jointly committing such breaches, as in Extract 6.

Extract 6: 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, which Bev is announcing in the first turn of the extract.

577 Bev: Solutions!
578 Bruno: Oh shit
579 Jay: Solutio::::ns
580 Bev: Shi:::::t
581 Bruno: Shit! [It's more complicated solutions=
582 Bev: [shit =Solutions is so complicated

Bev announces the outcome of the vote in line 577. Bruno immediately indicates his negative reaction to this decision by stating “oh shit” in line 578. Bev echoes Bruno's swearing (Fägersten, 2012) by repeating “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, almost like a game of ping-pong. Committing transgressions like this – and especially the act of committing them together – constructs their relationship as close enough to break certain rules without negative repercussions and beyond that works to “cement and emphasise team solidarity’ (Daly et al., 2004, p. 955).

5. Discussion

In this paper we have explored the nature of relations constructed during troubles talk together with the strategies that helped to enact these. The in-situ relations in troubles talk can consistently be described as equal, close/intimate, safe and featuring positive affect. While the first of these descriptors coincides with the traditional pragmatic markers P(ower) and D(istance), the latter two have been discussed especially in psychology as important markers of positive relationships (Simpson, 2007; Collins and Miller, 1994; Dindia, 2014). We do not mean to suggest though that the four descriptors outlined here universally describe positive relations – they did so in a work and educational context in which the team members were set up as equals and needed to mutually rely on each other to fulfil their institutional obligations.

These positive relations were constructed through a variety of strategies that are important in the kind of relational practice “that is oriented to constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships” (Holmes and Marra, 2004: 380), an overview of which can be found in Table 3. With this, our paper contributes empirical insights on a comparatively less explored area of interpersonal pragmatics, that of fostering positive relations.

Table 3
Overview of interactional strategies for constructing good relations.

Relational Descriptors	Meso-strategy	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	Creating common ground	Joint storytelling
		Escalating storytelling that frequently sparks fantasy humour
		Topic choice and management
	Creating solidarity	Self-disclosures
	Enacting common ground and intimacy	Elliptical utterances
		Joint laughter
	Creating shared perspectives	Joint construction of something as a trouble
		Careful calibration of the talk to maintain its positive and relationally focused nature
Affect	Joint transgressions	Swearing
		Transgressive troubles tellings
		Establishment/Enhancement of positive group mood
	Increasing liking	Self-disclosures

In addition to adding insights into the type of relational practice that can foster good relations we also add insights on the nature of positive relations in an egalitarian work and education context. In addition to the individual strategies, Table 3 depicts which relational descriptor a strategy primarily (but not exclusively) addresses: for example, reciprocal self-disclosures construct a relationship that is safe and trustful, as threats to a speaker's own face can be committed without being exploited by others. In some cases, the strategies seem to change the relation by virtue of creating common ground or solidarity, both of which we see as belonging to the descriptor 'closeness', but not as fully elaborating it. In these cases, we have highlighted this in the second column of Table 3 as a meso-strategy: that is, a higher-level strategy than an isolated interactional strategy, and a component of what comprises the relevant relational descriptor. Many of these strategies have previously been identified in the literature as positive for relationships; we do not mean to suggest they are all entirely new. However, what is striking about troubles talk is the frequency with which these strategies are enacted differently to the rest of our dataset. Troubles talk thus appears to be a meta-strategy that allows for other strategies to be employed.

Moreover, positive relations were not only constructed through the interactional strategies that team members employed but also through what they avoided doing. We have shown that the talk was often carefully calibrated and that team members frequently maintained a humorous tone and disaffiliated from overly negative assertions (see Extract 4), which might also be one of the reasons we found no evidence that troubles talk became more negative over time in the team we surveyed.

In addition, the team avoided the kind of responses that superficially fit in well with troubles talk but would not foster the type of egalitarian relation that team members were orienting to in these interactions. These include the consistent avoidance of advice giving and commiserative responses that potentially construct some members of the team as more capable or coping better. This is not to say that they did not help each other or explain things to each other, rather that help and explanations were usually solicited explicitly and not during troubles talk episodes. In a sense our findings thus mirror Jefferson and Lee's (1981) finding that resolving a trouble is often not the main focus of a troubles episode. Troubles talk also remained fairly consistent in its frequency and interactional pattern over time. Comparisons of troubles episodes and frequency counts show no increase of frequency or severity of the complaints voiced. It therefore seems that interlocutors were able to manage the negative side effects that troubles tellings potentially have in the workplace (Heck, 2001; Kauffeld and Meyers, 2009) through the way they managed their troubles talk.

How big then was the impact of troubles talk on team relations? While team members mutually constructed relations in troubles talk that appeared close, equal, safe, and featuring affect, this did not always carry over into more task-focused interactions that were regularly characterised by more inequality, distance and sometimes by unmitigated FTAs. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggest that all relationships play out within various relational dialectics (i.e. closeness—-distance), and as such these shifts in how relations are constructed in a given moment characterise all relationships. In our data it seems that the relations constructed in troubles talk consistently rank at one end of these dialectics; positive relations might be abandoned in more task-focused interactions and then re-established in the next troubles talk episode. Thus, while troubles talk did not permanently cement the shift in relations, it allowed the closer, egalitarian, trustful, and affective side of these dialectic tensions to be maintained in the team. Even more, it appears to be a reliable resource the team could draw on to enact these positive relations even following more problematic interactions – and with that, to re-instate positive relations consistently and sometimes strategically. Without troubles talk, the dialectic space in which team relations were constructed would likely have been considerably more narrow and overall more negative.

While culture did not play a huge role in our analysis, we think that the collective recognition by the team of imposed cultural diversity may have played a role in their more socially oriented interactions. We find few other personal or social topics in the dataset that helped construct common ground and shared perspectives, which seems to reflect the team's assumption that they did not have much in common. Troubles talk was thus especially significant as an activity in this team, as it allowed team members to develop common ground and shared perspectives on their experience and their immediate tasks, which was important for their communication overall and often also influenced and facilitated their decision making. The context of Pouthier's (2017) exploration of troubles talk was somewhat similar: a cross-boundary team where team members were rarely all in the same place, worked across various levels of hierarchy and had different professions. There, as in our data, troubles talk emerged as a particularly important way of 'creating team' and an important way all these differences could be bridged. This is in no way to suggest that it might not also play an important role in a so-called monocultural team, but rather to highlight that its status in this context is unique.

6. Conclusion

This paper has added empirical insights on the underexplored relational practices "that [are] oriented to constructing and nurturing good workplace relationships, to establishing and maintaining solidarity between team members" (Holmes and Marra, 2004: 380). We have done this by investigating a specific type of talk – troubles talk – which has often been commented on as positively affecting relations (e.g. Pouthier, 2017; Mewburn, 2011; Boxer, 1993a, b). Through our analysis of the in-situ relations in this talk we developed a set of descriptors that characterise them as close, equal, trustful, and featuring positive affect. These relations were enacted through a number of strategies that constructed relations in this way, even where this was not the typical relational status in the team.

While task-related communication was not the focus of this study, we also contend that these positive relational practices were important for the transactional side of teamwork. Just as Fletcher (1999) has suggested, they were an important part of constructing the background conditions that allowed the team to continue working with each other across an extended

period. In turn, they played a huge role in creating shared perspectives on the team members' work, on people surrounding the team, and on their own experiences and identities.

We can thus say with some confidence that in this team troubles talk did not constitute a problematic workplace behaviour, which in part was due to the way troubles talk played out in the team, where members disaffiliated quickly from overtly negative assessments or displays of actual anger. This also meant that troubles talk remained consistent over time, with neither an increase in the quantity nor the severity of the telling being detected in our data.

Troubles talk thus emerges as an important strategy for fostering positive relations in itself, while it also allows many other strategies that have been found to foster positive relationships to be used, such as transgressive storytelling (Coupland and Jaworski, 2003) or swearing (Daly et al., 2004), which otherwise appear much less frequently in our data. We do not believe, however, that troubles talk is unique in this; more research is needed to identify further strategies and types of talk that help foster positive relationships in (diverse) workplaces. Given the amount of time people spend at work and the serious implications of being dissatisfied with their workplace relations, which we outlined at the start, we see this as an important site of future research and an important contribution linguistics can make to improving employee relations.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix

Table A1
Transcription key.

Symbol	Meaning
/	Intonation unit boundary
[	Overlapping talk
.	Falling intonation
↑	Rising pitch
↓	Lowered pitch
?	Rising intonation
:	Lengthened sound
(.)	Short pause, below 1 s
=	Unit of talk follows another with no discernible interval
[….]	Section of talk omitted
CAPS	Louder voice
((laughter))	Several/all team members jointly laugh
Hh	Individual laughter
(xxx)	Utterance/words not understood

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