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## **Conflict as it happens: affective elements in a conflicted conversation between a consultant and clients**

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### **Abstract**

Although emotions are relevant for conflicts and conflicted interactions, the role of emotions in organizational conflicts has remained understudied. This case study aimed to shed light on conflicted interactions within organizations, looking at the role of nonverbal affective elements in the interactions. Bringing together organizational “becoming” and embodiment approaches, the study focused on a conflict which emerged during a multi-actor consulting conversation. To our knowledge, no previous organizational research has provided a detailed description of a conflicted interaction “as it happened” between clients and a consultant. The episode in question was analyzed via a micro-level discursive method which focused specifically on the participants’ use of prosodic and nonverbal behaviors in conveying emotions. Changes in prosody were found to have an

important role in how the conflict between a consultant and an employee client emerged and was handled. The employee's criticism, targeted at the consultant, was intertwined with wider disappointment connected to an ongoing initiative for change in the organization. This led to a conversational "trap" within which the interlocutors were unable to proceed until the affective aspect of the conflict had been addressed. Nonverbal and prosodic means had a central role in creating legitimate space for the employees' feelings: they helped to validate the feelings and thus led the interlocutors to act in a more constructive manner in their handling of the conflicted situation. Multi-modal analysis proved capable of illuminating the felt, sensed, and affective elements of interactions in conflict situations. Implications for conflict handling and consulting practices are suggested.

Keywords: conflict, consultant-client relationship, process consulting, discursive approach, embodiment, nonverbal, prosody

### **Conflict as it happens: affective elements in a conflicted conversation between a consultant and clients**

This paper addresses an issue that frequently arises in the field of management consultancy. It aims to shed light on conflicted interactions within organizations, looking in particular at the role of non-verbal affective elements in conversations.

Conflict occurs frequently in organizational life. It is a relational phenomenon that is often loaded with strong emotions and emotional tensions. As defined by Kolb and Putnam (1992, p. 312), conflict is manifested "when there are real or perceived differences that arise in specific organizational circumstances and that engender emotion as a consequence." Traditionally, conflict has had a bad reputation (Jehn, 1997), although emphasis has also been placed on the beneficial sides of conflicts and conflicted interactions, which can include "clearing the air" and bringing about a deeper understanding of the topics and persons involved (Deutsch, 1991).

During conflicted interactions, and as a consequence of them, people often feel offended and insulted. The emotions most often associated with workplace conflicts are anger and frustration, which may be triggered, for example, by words which label a person negatively, or which are used to tell her/him what to do, or not do (Schroth *et al.*, 2005). Although strong feelings are relevant to conflicts and conflicted interactions, the role of emotions within these remains largely understudied (Nair, 2008). In particular, few studies have encompassed the embodied aspects of social interactions, while at the same time focusing on the potential for individual and organizational growth within conflict dynamics.

Consultants who are called into organizations often become involved in initiatives for large-scale change, plus efforts to implement these changes. They may then face conflicts derived from the ensuing complications, including also problems within verbal interactions during the actual consultation. Thus, we suggest that consulting processes can offer good opportunities for studying (i) how organizational conflicts arise in management consultancy contexts, and (ii) how the participants in consultancy conversations deal with these conflicts in practice. Here it should be noted that “managing expectations and emotions” has been suggested as one of the key roles of a business consultant (Lundberg and Young, 2001); however, only a few empirical studies have focused on emotions within consultancy processes (e.g. Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006; *Sturdy et al.*, 2008).

In this paper we aim to address this understudied aspect. In so doing, we draw on the organizational “becoming” approach (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), which sees an organization as something that emerges in and through interaction, habitual practice, and discourse. According to this view, an organization is performed and (re)produced in daily interaction between organizational members. This further implies that organizations can be seen as “emotional arenas,” within which emotions – like other organizational elements – can be negotiated by members and shaped by social norms and structures (Fineman, 2008). It has been suggested that in the course of such negotiations, an affective culture is formed, within which guidelines are developed on how emotions are to be

experienced, expressed, received, and regulated (Alvesson, 2002; Smollan and Sayers, 2009). In depicting organizations “as they happen” (Schatzki, 2006), it is useful to turn to “microscopic” discursive practices (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), in which meanings are negotiated by multiple actors (Thomas et al., 2011).

In pursuing this line of inquiry, the present paper also draws on the recent embodied and “affective turn” in the social sciences (Cromby, 2012; Shotter, 2012). In addition to verbal communication, we focus on nonverbal behaviors, considering how these are used in expressing and receiving emotions, as well as in conveying understanding, disagreement, and stance (e.g. Ruusuvaori and Peräkylä, 2009). Thus, the aim of the study reported here was *to integrate an embodiment perspective with the organizational “becoming” approach*, the expectation being that this would allow a deeper understanding of the microscopic discursive practices that may be involved in conflicted interactions. With this in view, we focused on a single, multi-actor conversational episode within one process consulting case. In this brief episode, an important organizational conflict became visible and was managed collaboratively by the participants. Our analysis focused on the verbal and nonverbal elements of the interaction within the episode, seeking thus to contribute to an understanding of the role of these elements in conflicted interactions. We assumed that nonverbal behaviors would have a specific role, not only in how emotions are displayed, but also in how a conflict is dealt with by the participants, as it progresses.

### **The process consulting model and the client-consultant relationship**

We here present observations on one consulting case, within which an organizational consultant followed a *process consultation* (PC) model (Schein, 1969, 1999) as his working method. This approach has been developed as a tool for bringing organizational members into a process within which important organizational problems can be collaboratively examined from diverse perspectives. The broader aim is to help the client organization so that it learns how to solve the

organizational problems it encounters, and to handle conflicts, taking action on its own account. However, while academic interest in management consulting has increased over the past twenty years, few studies have focused on actual process consulting practices (Lambrechts *et al.*, 2009), and those that have been conducted have been limited mainly to case studies (e.g. Lalonde and Adler, 2015).

The consultant-client relationship has itself been the focus of numerous studies, from both the so called “pro-consulting” perspective (e.g. Schein, 1997), and from a more critical perspective, with the latter demonstrating the recursive, complex, and sometimes even manipulative nature of the consultant-client relationship (e.g. Berglund and Werr, 2000; Werr and Styhre, 2013). Some studies have highlighted the management consulting processes from the consultant’s perspective (e.g. Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006), while others have put a greater emphasis on the client’s perspective (Mohe, 2005). The role of the consultant has been described as one of a “moderator of organizational discourse” (Baitsch and Heideloff, 1997, 218); also as an intervenor in the organizational storytelling system (Boje, 1991; Johansson, 2003), or as an actor who gives voice to the everyday experiences of organizational members (Hawk *et al.*, 1995). Some studies have focused on the role of active client participation in change processes (Chao, 2005; Kykyri *et al.*, 2010). Recently, there has also been increasing interest in consulting processes from an interaction perspective, encompassing a more equal interest in both the clients’ and the consultants’ perspectives; the aim here would be to illuminate the interactional patterns which are relevant for client-consultant relationships (e.g. Fincham, 2003; Kykyri *et al.*, 2007). However, there has been a scarcity of the kind of “live” materials that would permit micro-analytic approaches to consulting conversations.

**The affective turn: focusing on the nonverbal behaviors involved in emotional interactions**

A focus on embodied aspects of social interaction started to emerge during the late 1990s, as an extension to the earlier discursive turn, which for its part had highlighted the importance of language not only in conveying but also in constructing meanings. Thus, in the field of organization studies, organizational change had been defined within the discursive approach (Grant *et al.*, 2005) as socially constructed and negotiated in situated conversational settings, within which momentary changes are constantly and locally created and co-created during interaction (Hosking, 2004). This approach was successful in showing the importance of language in the processes in question. Nevertheless, the discursive approach in the social sciences was also criticized for focusing merely on language. It was seen as neglecting the concrete and material consequences of initiatives for change as they affect the people caught up in them, and further, as disregarding the felt and bodily aspects of a given social interaction (Cromby, 1999). The affective turn was influenced by such criticisms, and researchers within this emerging strand started to look more closely at the felt and embodied aspects of interactions, seeking to incorporate them within analyses of verbal interactions and language. Despite this, as noted by Lyons and Cromby (2010, p. 2), “the body in social psychology remains relatively undertheorized and underexplored.”

In the study reported here, we utilized psychological knowledge on affective interactions in group settings. Emotional experiences are conveyed within social interactions through, for example, facial expressions and changes in speech prosody. These could include a happy or neutral tone of voice which changes into an angry one, or a change in facial expression, such as a “happy face” turning into one expressing surprise and disappointment; they could also involve strong emotional behaviors such as laughter and crying. The affective dimensions of interactions are not merely private individual experiences; in fact, the felt and affective dimensions also have communicational and relational value, when these are displayed within a social interaction through verbal and/or nonverbal means.

Social interaction is multi-modal, consisting of both verbal and nonverbal modalities. Although nonverbal means of social interaction are often deployed automatically, without conscious monitoring or choice, they may also be (partly) controlled and used in a more deliberate manner. Whether under conscious control or not, these affective dimensions are communicative acts; hence they bring about important consequences in social interactions, and in the relationships within which the interactions occur. This means that, for example, bodily movements convey a person's internal states or emotions (Wallbott, 1998). It further implies that simultaneous bodily movements and similar postures may signal increased affiliation (Hove and Risen, 2009) and increased collaboration (Valdesolo *et al.*, 2010) with the person whose behaviors are mimicked. On this basis, behavioral mimicry (i.e. time-synchronized similar nonverbal behaviors) has been suggested as a nonconscious strategy that people use to affiliate (or not affiliate) to others (Lakin and Chartrand, 2003). During storytelling, vocal continuers (such as *mm*) confirm alignment with the telling, while visual tokens (such as nods) are used to show affiliation with the teller's stance (Stivers, 2008). Since the deployment of these nonverbal features is observable, they can be analyzed systematically (Coan and Gottman, 2007; Mauss and Robinson, 2009). Indeed, we would argue that it is both feasible and necessary to take into account the affective and embodied aspects of interactions when one is studying organizational conflicts, and also when one is seeking to manage these in a constructive manner.

### **The aim of the present study**

In the present study, we focused on a workplace context which is often complicated by conflicts, namely the implementation of an organizational initiative for change. We aimed to apply a detailed micro-level analysis to one particular conversational episode, within which a relational conflict emerged between a consultant and a member of the client organization. Within this episode, one of the participant employees, in front of the entire participating group, voiced his criticism of the



consultant's assignment. His criticism then became intertwined in a complex manner with his deep disappointment with the entire organizational initiative, and the way in which it had been implemented. Thus, during this particular conversational episode, a wider organizational conflict became visible to the consultant and to the participating group.

We wished to focus on the affective elements of the social interaction via a micro-level analysis of the nonverbal behaviors and verbal interactions of the participants within the selected video-recorded conversational episode. By providing a detailed description of this particular interaction, we aimed to contribute to an understanding of (i) the roles served by the affective elements in the emergence of a relational conflict, and (ii) the interlocutors' efforts to handle the conflict. To our knowledge, there has not been any previous analysis of a relational conflict "as it happens" at such a level of detail.

### **Data and methods**

The data for this study were gathered in a research project entitled [text removed to preserve anonymity of the review process]The consulting case included in this study took place in a large Finnish industrial firm which had recently replaced a traditional functional organization structure with a process organization model. In implementing this change, the firm sought to gain a competitive advantage in changing markets by offering clients greater and better value. During the implementation, employees had been given information about the change initiative, including the rationale behind it. In accordance with the new process organization model, the R&D operations in various local units had been merged within a new Knowledge Centre, which was itself integrated within the organization's (recently created) Customer Service Process. The local R&D units in the factories had previously enjoyed a relatively independent role. However, in the new organization, actors within the Customer Services Process (sales and product experts) were given authority over the R&D professionals. The employees in the former R&D unit had strongly resisted this change;

indeed, many employees had felt offended by the change, which they saw as devaluing their independent positions as professionals.

The second author of this paper, an experienced consultant familiar with PC methods, was commissioned to facilitate discussions between the organizational members. In a pre-contract negotiation with the consultant, the manager of the R&D professionals indicated that her employees were so upset about the initiative for change (which involved new roles, procedures, and instructions), that they were no longer able to perform their tasks. The aim of the consulting process was to bring together all the members of the new Customer Services Process as participants in an Organizational Development (OD) event, within which their anxieties, questions, and criticisms could be voiced, and discussed in a manner that would advance future collaboration between all the participants. In total, 23 organizational members (the R&D and Customer Services employees and the R&D manager, plus the three top managers of the company) participated in the consulting conversations that took place during the two OD events held (each lasting two days).

The consulting process is outlined in Figure 1.

[add Figure 1. about here]

Figure 1. The entire consulting process (above the time line), plus the location of the selected extracts (below the time line).

The data as a whole consisted of over 30 hours of video-recorded consulting conversations, covering all the face-to-face interactions between the consultant and the members of the client organization. All the participants agreed to the video-recording of the conversations, and gave their written consent for the use of the recordings in research. The video-recorded conversations were

transcribed verbatim, using detailed notations to indicate interactional features (see Appendix 1). The original Finnish-language recordings and transcriptions were used in the analyses. The original transcripts are available on request from the first author. To secure analytical transparency, the English translations of the extracts used in this paper are intended to be as authentic as possible. For this reason, we have not “polished” the transcripts, offering instead clarifications and interpretations when there seemed to be a need to do so. There were also problems in the translation due to the differing grammatical structures of Finnish and English, and the fact that in everyday conversations people tend to talk in an unstructured way. A native English-language proofreader has assisted us in trying to resolve the ambiguities as best we could.

The OD events consisted of large-group sessions within which various consulting methods were used, including visualization of the changing organization, small-group assignments, and shorter conversations involving all the participants. From the large group sessions, we identified several emotionally loaded conversational episodes involving employee criticism targeted at the ongoing change initiative (for detailed analyses of some of these episodes, see [text removed to preserve anonymity of the review process]). Employees were angry at how they had been treated, suspicious of whether they would become heard and respected, and worried about how the process would continue. In most of these episodes, employees’ emotional expressions were not commented on directly. Indeed, these were either overlooked or undermined by the managers, who tended to respond the employees’ criticisms by communicating their managerial view of the ongoing change – presenting it as a long process that would require more time. Thus, according to the management, there was no need to worry. In some emotionally loaded episodes, the employees also voiced criticism of the consultant and his methods.

For the purposes of the present study, we selected one conversational episode from the second multi-party OD event for further analysis (for the chronological placement of the episodes within the consulting process, see Figure 1). This episode was selected (i) because it was representative of

emotionally tensioned interactions in the overall consultation process, and (ii) because it offered an interesting and unique opportunity to see how a conflicted interaction between the consultant and an employee suddenly started to emerge. This happened unexpectedly, in the middle of the active processing of a topic selected collaboratively by the participants. At this point, a fairly mundane discussion of the instructions for a small group assignment became complicated through becoming intertwined with a wider organizational conflict, one that encompassed the core problems underlying the entire consulting assignment.

The selected episode was noted as being rich in both verbal and nonverbal means of interaction; it encompassed how the conflicted interaction started and developed, and further, how the interlocutors (the consultant, the employee, and the whole group, comprising 23 participants in total) participated in the interaction, and attempted to address the tensioned situation.

We applied a detailed, micro-analytic discursive approach to the verbal contents of the interactions, and also to the nonverbal and prosodic features which occurred within the selected episode. The discursive analysis was informed by ideas from discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992), and conversational analysis (Sacks *et al.*, 1974; Silverman and Peräkylä, 1990). In particular, the analysis utilized methods for observing and analyzing emotions (Coan and Gottman, 2007; Peräkylä and Sorjonen, 2012) in interaction. Contextual information about this particular conversational setting was utilized, in order to give meaning to the analyzed interactions. For the reader, this contextual information is presented in the Results section.

Since the data were video-recorded with one camera only, not all of the participants' facial expressions and gestures were visible. To include nuanced ways of showing affective involvement in the conversation, specific attention was therefore given to *prosody*, i.e. the musical elements of speech, which involve variations in intonation, timbre, and the color of the voice, plus modulations via tempo and pause; all of these are involved in what a stretch of speech "sounds like" to the listener. Prosodic features of speech are used for several purposes in adult interaction, including

grammatical signals, the organization of turn-taking, repairs to one's utterances, markers of astonishment, asking questions, and taking stances while talking and listening. In addition to this, prosodic features are central elements in expressing, receiving, and regulating emotions in social interaction (Banse and Scherer, 1996; Szczepek Reed, 2011). In fact, it has been observed that people respond more quickly to vocal emotions than to emotions displayed via visual means or specific emotion words (Pell *et al.*, 2015). It is thus possible to observe that someone is discontented, irritated, or angry merely by paying attention to prosody, even if the specific verbal content referring to these emotions is absent.

## **Results**

In what follows, we present four extracts (1a–1d below) from the large-group session; during these, all 23 participants were present, and the seats were arranged in a U-formation. Our analysis demonstrated how, during the turn-by-turn verbal and nonverbal interactions between the employee client and the consultant, an organizational conflict suddenly became visible. This was connected to the employee's critical comment, targeted at the consultant's method. The criticism expressed by the employee was then responded to by the consultant and the other participants. As shown by our analysis, a conversational "trap" emerged, i.e. a conflicted loop wherein the interlocutors kept on repeating the same arguments, with no smooth progress in the conversation.

In a previous conversation, the consultant had negotiated with the entire participating group, seeking to create a shared agenda for the two-day OD event. Together, they had agreed that an important issue would be how to help the participants in defining their working roles more clearly within the changing organization. In pursuit of this shared aim, the consultant formulated an assignment, aimed at helping the participants to identify issues which would be useful in clarifying their roles. The consultant suggested that the participants should think about two different situations, within which they had found their professional role at work to be either clear or unclear.

To continue the exercise, he proposed that participants should form pairs, then conduct interviews concerning mutual experiences of these clear and unclear settings. The aim in this was to identify issues which had been helpful in defining a clear role, and also what might underlie the role confusion experienced in unsatisfactory situations. After both participants within each pair had taken the role of interviewer, all the pairs were supposed to share with each other their observations on helpful and obstructive issues related to the clarity of their roles.

After a lengthy description of the assignment, the consultant turned to one participant, Gary, who was sitting opposite him. It is possible that the consultant picked on Gary by chance. On the other hand, there could also have been other reasons behind this choice, since Gary worked as a senior expert in R&D, i.e. a unit within which the employees had generally resisted the ongoing initiative (more than the employees within Customer Services). Thus, it could have been that the consultant specifically wished to turn to a person who represented the “resistant” segment of the organization, in order to check whether this planned assignment, as introduced by the consultant, could serve the R&D people’s needs.

In Extract 1a, Gary responds to the consultant’s inquiry:

**Extract 1a:**

C            how would this kind of assignment appear to you what do you ((points to Gary))  
              think about it (.) would it {the suggested assignment} make sense to you  
  
(4)

G            personal- personally speaking it appears to be rather difficult ((leaning back, arms  
              crossed on his chest, moving his legs about, finally crossing them))  
  
              ((laughter in the group))

C            say a bit more clearly what was (.) what it is {in this assignment} that you feel  
              difficult ((G looks at C, smiles, then looks puzzled))  
  
(2)

G well °suddenly to come up with (1) a clear (4) two different issues°

Gary seems surprised at the consultant's question, which is visible in his restless body movements. His posture (leaning backwards, arms crossed on his chest) displays withdrawal (Coan and Gottman, 2007) and foreshadows possible disagreement. After a 4-second pause, which in itself indicates a problem in the flow of the conversation, Gary takes a turn and comments critically on the assignment by saying that personally, he finds it "rather difficult," which might mean that the assignment does not "make sense" to him. After Gary's turn, there is laughter in the group, which indicates tension in the interaction.

The consultant's next turn focuses on Gary's perceived criticism, and he invites a more specific description of it by asking Gary to indicate "what it is" in the assignment that "you feel difficult." Gary looks at the consultant and smiles at him, then looks puzzled. After a 2-second pause, Gary gives a hesitant response to the consultant's invitation. Almost whispering, Gary indicates the sudden request to find two "different issues." Silences and silent prosody in speech are common in situations where either the position of the speaker or the content of the speech is uncertain or delicate (Johannesen, 1974). Within Gary's turn, the silent elements seem to indicate uncertainty concerning how to respond to the consultant's request to be more specific in his criticism. Gary's hesitation might also signal some delicate issue or perspective involved in his criticism.

After Gary's response, the consultant takes a turn:

**Extract 1b:**

C two different ↑situations one situation within which your role is clear and another  
[within which

Rosemary [so a situation which has occurred at some point ((C turns to Rosemary))

Gary [in practice they are not like ((with an irritated voice))]

C yes ((looking at R)) {a situation which} has happened and let's say within the last six

months (.) one situation within which there has been a clear ((gesturing with his hand)) and perhaps also ((points to his chest with his hand)) a kind of feeling that ((gesturing rhythmically with his hand)) that now {it's as if} my role is as clear as crystal so that now I know what I am expected to do in my role in Customer Services

Rosemary specifically in Customer Services

C yeah in Customer Services since we are now developing the Customer Services Process so well I will now specify {the assignment} once more (.) think ((gestures with his hand)) about the last six months. (.) and find a ↑situation (.) within the Customer Services Process a ↑situation in which you have felt your own role clear (.) in this process (.) what ↑happened then. (.) what did you do yourself to make it (.) to get your role clearer or how did the others help you in this and ↑secondly what is the kind of situation within which you were a bit confused or unsure about what you were supposed to do or how should I prioritize my time and think about {this} kind of situation (.) how does this situation develop or or what (.) or ↑how does this kind of situation emerge when you have a somewhat unclear (1) °role° (1)

In his turn, the consultant seems to orient himself according to the assumption that his instruction had been unclear, since he clarifies it by detailing the main idea, which is to find two “different situations” from the last six months, one of which would represent clarity in the participants’ perception of their roles. Within a partly overlapping turn, another participant, Rosemary (occupying an employee position), asks the consultant whether he means a situation which has happened already. Simultaneously, Gary starts an overlapping turn with Rosemary. In an irritated voice, Gary says “in practice they are not like.” Thus, Gary is trying to continue to voice



his criticism, but his turn is interrupted when the consultant overlooks it by turning to Rosemary and responding to her. The consultant continues by repeating his earlier instructions. Here he uses a good many illustrating gestures which highlight rhythmically the most important words in his turn. The consultant's conversational actions indicate that his focus is still on clarifying his instruction, which he does in a very energetic manner.

From a close examination of how Gary's criticism is responded to by the consultant, it is clear that Gary's criticism forms an interactional challenge for him. While the consultant has himself been active in inviting Gary's opinion about the assignment, it seems that Gary's response, and specifically the latter response in an irritated tone of voice (Extract 1b), is not what the consultant has expected. Probably, the consultant has expected a more approving response to the suggested assignment, or at least a more specific question on some details of the instruction. This can be seen in how the consultant ignores Gary's turn by turning to Rosemary, and by responding to her inquiry in a detailed manner.

Next, the consultant addresses the entire group, announcing that he will detail the guidelines of the assignment again. He then continues, repeating the instructions for the third time. He talks clearly and uses various prosodic features, such as emphasis and a higher intonation at the start of the words; he also gestures to highlight the most important parts of the instruction. These non-verbal and prosodic features display enthusiasm, which could serve the role of motivating the participants to the suggested assignment.

The consultant's activity in repeating and clarifying his original instruction all over again seems to point to a conversational problem which has started to emerge. As we interpret it, the consultant is facing obvious difficulties in continuing the conversation in such a way that the planned assignment can get started.

Toward the end of the consultant's turn, there are several silences, and the consultant uses an almost-whispering voice when he articulates the word "role." These prosodic features indicate the

delicate nature of the interaction, and they seem to foreshadow a stretch in which the consultant will turn again to Gary and his criticism. This is what actually happens in Extract 1c:

**Extract 1c:**

C does this sound ((points to Gary)) any (1) °clearer° ((moves his hand near to his mouth)) (1)

G I dunno but if the situation has been generally like slowly taking some shape and there has there have not been such clear guidelines and now you put to us a demand ((sounding irritated)) that we should like say and like (.) ↑clearly be able to lift ourselves ((points upwards)) up ((squeaky voice)) to reflect and evaluate the last six months' situation so that we should pick up one clear ((pointing up)) and one unclear situation so that {it's} just as if the situation could be taken under control ((moving his hands wider from each other)) the situation which has for the last six months (.) at least for me been more or less (.) like a fog ((waving his hands, lowers his voice)) a kind of situation within which it has been hard to say okay I'll pick up this one ((gestures with his hand))

Daniel {= Director, Customer Services} Gary tell us about these situations which have been less like a fog ((Gary looks at Daniel, arms crossed on his chest, raises his shoulders, grins, looks down))

C so this ↑this [is well

G [well I dunno ((raises his shoulders)) (.) I think that well ((sounds irritated, Mary turns to G, looking at him)) this was like (.) this felt like a pretty

demanding {task} in the sense that if you like (.) like as an outsider one should look at {the situation in such a way} that let's take some clear ((moves his head sharply)) situation and some unclear ((moves his head sharply)) and then let's analyze it why this one was clear ((pointing in one direction)) and why this other situation was unclear ((points in a different direction, Mary turns away from Gary, looks up and smiles)) so (.) I dunno ((puts hands on his lap, then crosses his arms on his chest)) (1) ((raises his shoulders, arms crossed on his chest))

The consultant points to Gary and asks him whether the assignment now (i.e. after a more detailed instruction given by the consultant) appears to be any clearer. During his turn, the consultant raises his hand and puts it near to his mouth, which indicates tension. Again, the consultant uses a very low volume voice, and there are pauses within his turn, which can be seen as displays of delicacy. As we interpret it, these prosodic features serve the function of calming down the intense tone of the conversation. Gary takes a turn by saying "I dunno but," thus indicating that the problem might not be merely the clarity of the consultant's instruction. Gary then continues with a vivid description of his experience of the organizational situation over the last six months. He now voices a more specific criticism by accusing the consultant of demanding too much in a situation which, according to Gary, has been "more or less (.) like a fog." Thus, in his turn, Gary constructs a more specific criticism toward the consultant (who is demanding something that Gary perceives as impossible), and also a broader but vaguer criticism of the ongoing initiative in the organization. He now actively uses a rich variety of prosodic features, as the consultant did earlier. To illustrate his point, Gary uses emphasis and high intonation, plus gestures. Moreover, he changes the timbre and the color of his voice in conveying irritation concerning the consultant's assignment.

Suddenly Daniel, the director of the Customer Services Process, takes a turn, suggesting that Gary could mention those situations that have been "less like fog." As we interpret it, Daniel offers his managerial support to the consultant, in suggesting that the consultant's assignment could be

conducted by focusing on some clear situations. Thus, Daniel's uninvited turn can be seen as a response to Gary's criticism of the change initiative *per se*, insofar as Daniel implies that not all the everyday experiences are unclear. Indeed, Daniel's turn could be interpreted as an attempt to define how his subordinate ought to think and feel about the initiative in question. Gary turns to Daniel, looks at him, raises his shoulders, grins, and looks down. His nonverbal behavior communicates irritation (Coan and Gottman, 2007). Gary's response here indicates that he strongly disagrees, and that he may regard Daniel's turn as a rebuke for his criticism of the consultant.

The consultant tries to take a turn, but is interrupted by Gary, who repeats his earlier words "I dunno," and raises his shoulders again. Then, with irritation in his voice, he continues his turn. Here, he indicates that he views the consultant's assignment as demanding, in that it requires an "outsider" stance to be taken, i.e. the ability to observe oneself from an outsider position in order to identify what is clear and what is unclear, and the ability to analyze why this is so. Gary moves his head sharply while he articulates the words "clear" and "unclear." These movements also cause sharp accents on these words, which Gary soon repeats, now accompanied by hand movements. The main message in Gary's turn seems to be that the consultant's assignment constitutes an impossible task for anyone who experiences the entire organizational initiative as complicated and unclear, and perhaps also unwelcome.

Mary, the manager of the R&D unit (who is sitting next to Gary) has been looking at Gary and sharing a similar posture with him, thus displaying in her nonverbal behavior that she is affiliating with his story. Now, Mary turns away from Gary, looking up with a smile on her face. Gary ends his turn by saying again "I dunno," putting his hands on his lap, then crossing his arms on his chest, and raising his shoulders again. In his bodily behavior, Gary displays his opposition to the assignment proposed by the consultant.

The nonverbal behavior of Mary (a middle manager) is of special interest here. As the manager of the R&D unit, Mary is likely to have been in close touch with her employees' critical

perspectives regarding the ongoing initiative and its implementation. This is reflected in her nonverbal behavior, which displays her connectedness with the employee's experiences. There are several possible interpretations of Mary's nonverbal behavior at the end of Gary's turn. If we look at Gary's response (he stops talking), it is possible that Gary sees Mary's turning away as a sign that Mary no longer joins in with what he is saying. On the other hand, Mary's behavior can be interpreted as an indication that she has become amused by the conversational setting, and by the way in which the consultant is being caught out by an aspect of organizational reality which Mary is (all too well) aware of.

As we interpret it, some highly relevant issues are now being revealed to the consultant; these reflect the core problems of the organizational initiative, and its consequences for the ability of the employees to act in constructive manner. It also appears that there could be problems related to how the employees' feelings are given or denied space, or are viewed as legitimate in conversations concerning the organizational initiative.

After Gary's turn, the consultant takes a turn. He addresses his speech to the entire group, and, for the fourth time, starts to explain and to clarify the planned assignment:

**Extract 1d:**

C well I like ((raises his hand, turns away from Gary to the participants on his right side, addressing his talk to them, lowering the volume, with the pitch range and speed of his speech decreasing)) think this assignment as rather in a way that well our daily work consists of separate ↑moments ((Mary is nodding)) in a way that some specific episode or chain of actions (.) could well be like a good unit for observation (.) ((accelerated rhythm)) if one talks about these six months in a general manner that (.) maybe ↑this could also ((slower rhythm) be done if it feels difficult to find these separate moments well you can think about this setting in a more general manner (.) but I think that I would like to encourage you to well well (.) try to find a situation (.)

try to find a specific situation in which your role is clear (.) and try to find a situation in which it {the role} was not so clear (.) and well (1)

P? ( ) ((an unidentified participant says something, which is inaudible))

G then again when it {the role} is clear (.) in relation to what is it clear ((sharp voice, leaning his head backwards))

C your role (.) in the Customer Service Process (.) °clear or unclear in relation to this° (3) ((looking around to see all the participants))

C how does this sound to you Tommy

Tommy yes I think I'll probably find something  
((laughter in group))

C well uuh (.) what about you Stephen (.) do you think

Stephen yeah yes (.) yes there is always something

C Tina wha- what do you think about it

Tina yeah something ((puts her hand near to her mouth))

C and the task of the interviewer the participant with whom you'll do this assignment (.) her task is to help you to notice these kinds of issues (.) and then if you well if you feel that I {= "you," taking the voice of the client} do not find ((louder)) any specific situation whether it is clear or unclear well you'll just pick up ↑some episode or what issue you want to take up yourself as an example of ((louder voice)) that that's the way ((compassionate tone of voice)) my work is at the moment (.) and that's the way my life has been like during these six months ((quieter)) (1) but well let's see if you will find two different situations in relation to how clear your role has been within the Customer Services Process

The consultant talks with a slower rhythm and a steadier voice (i.e. there are fewer prosodic changes in his talk than there were in his previous turns). In this particular situation, after Gary's irritated turn, this kind of a prosodic change may have the function of calming down the heated conversational situation. The consultant now, very carefully, clarifies his idea of inviting participants to look at their everyday work, which he says is a collection of separate episodes or moments. Mary (middle management) is now nodding, which can be seen as a signal that Mary will join in with the consultant's plan.

In the middle of the consultant's turn, as if it is a sudden discovery, he says, "maybe this could also be done if it feels difficult to find these separate moments well you can think about this setting in a more general manner," suggesting that it would be possible to adapt his instruction. However, he then returns to his original instruction, saying "but I would like to encourage you to find a situation." This careful formulation of the instruction displays the consultant's understanding of the demanding nature of the proposed assignment, but it also invites participants to accept this as a challenge.

After the consultant's invitation, Gary takes a turn. Leaning back, in a sharp and irritated tone of voice he asks about the criteria for defining a clear role. The consultant now responds immediately to Gary, by saying "your role (.) in the Customer Services Process (.) °clear or unclear in relation to this°." The almost whispering voice at the end of the consultant's turn marks this part of the instruction as somewhat delicate. It appears that the consultant is unsure how Gary (who still appears to be irritated) will respond to it. During the three-second pause, the consultant looks at the participants, turning his head slowly, as if pondering how to proceed. Now, he addresses Tommy (an employee), asking what he thinks about the assignment. Tommy responds immediately and confirms that he will "find something." The consultant continues by asking two other employees, Stephen and Tina, about how they see the assignment. Both affiliate with Tommy in their responses, thus displaying agreement regarding the consultant's assignment (or at least reluctance to resist it).

Next, the consultant takes a turn, focusing on the role of the interviewer in the planned assignment. He then returns to the problematic issue addressed by Gary, concerning the selection of episodes to be focused on during the interview assignment. The consultant offers an alternative way of tailoring the assignment, saying “you’ll just pick up ↑some episode or what issue you want to take up yourself as an example.” Again, there are clear prosodic changes within the consultant’s turn. The parts of his instruction which could be modified are said in a louder voice, and there is a compassionate tone in his voice when he starts to talk about “that’s how my work is at the moment and that’s the way my life has been like during these six months.”

After the episode above (Extracts 1a–1d), the conversation about the suggested assignment continued for a while. The participants asked some detailed questions about the instructions. Neither the conflict between the consultant and Gary nor the wider organizational conflict were explicitly addressed, even though both had been implicitly presented during the episode. It appeared that the interlocutors were able to move forward, and that the discussion was no longer stuck on whether the planned assignment was impossible or not in this particular organizational situation. Finally, about ten minutes later, the participants moved on to working in pairs, and started the planned interviews. Gary, too, participated in the interview assignment.

As we interpret it, by modifying his instructions, the consultant responded to Gary’s criticism on both a practical and an emotional level. On a practical level, the consultant offered an option to do the suggested assignment in a different manner. On an emotional level, the consultant showed – mainly via changed prosody – an affiliative, validating response to Gary’s emotional expression. Taken together, these two responses opened up a discursive space for employees to voice their concerns and share their feelings. This helped the interlocutors to escape from a loop which (despite being highly illustrative of the organizational situation) was not constructive, since it effectively prevented processing of the topic in question, namely how to clarify the participants’ roles in a changing organization.



## **Discussion**

The present study focused on an organizational conflict “as it happened.” Thus, the researchers deemed it necessary to provide a detailed description of how both verbal and nonverbal means of interaction were involved in (i) the emergence of a conflict, and (ii) the manner of dealing with the conflict by the interlocutors in the course of a multi-actor consultancy conversation. It was envisaged that such an endeavor could contribute to an understanding of the role of nonverbal behaviors in conflicted interactions.

In the selected episode, a conflicted interaction between a client and the consultant started with the client’s openly articulated criticism towards the consultant’s methods. This problem contained within it basic elements of a central organizational problem, in which the employees failed to follow the instructions given by the management. The employee’s critical remarks to the consultant, implying criticism of his work, were thus intertwined with his own (and potentially, some other employees’) critical view of the organizational initiative, and of the ways in which the management had been implementing it.

The multi-method observational approach used in this study appeared to be effective in capturing the relevant interactions in a comprehensive manner. As shown in the analysis, important elements and nuances pertaining to the intertwined criticisms were displayed mainly through prosodic changes, such as the volume, color, and timbre of the voice, and also changes in the speaker’s bodily behavior, including facial expressions, movements, and gestures.

We found that changes in prosody had an important role in how the employee client displayed his criticism. The prosodic features appeared to intensify the conflictual interaction between the consultant and the employee. By contrast, changes in the consultant’s prosody, such as slowing the rhythm of his speech and lowering his voice, were involved in calming down the tensioned

interaction. By means of prosodic changes, such as a compassionate tone in his voice, the consultant also validated the employee's unhappiness about the uncertainties in the organizational situation.

From time to time the participants also displayed their affiliation to other interlocutors indirectly, and through nonverbal means, such as the adoption of or departure from a similar posture. It is noteworthy that nonverbal behaviors often foreshadowed and intensified verbal displays of disagreement and criticism, thus stretching the temporal boundaries of these displays. This finding is in accordance with the study by Ruusuvaori and Peräkylä (2008) on the role of facial expressions in storytelling.

In fact, our overall findings are in line with a number of studies on psychotherapy interactions. Thus, Lapidés (2011) found that during the emotionally tensed moments of a relational conflict, clients in couple therapy attend primarily to prosody, and also to body posture, gesture, and facial expressions. For their part, Kykyri *et al.* (2017) showed that “soft prosody” (i.e. the participants' use of pauses, a low volume, slow rhythm, and soft intonation) is an important conversational tool for showing affiliation, bringing about mutual attunement, and facilitating therapeutic processing and change. Even though it is true that there are notable differences between therapeutic and consulting conversations (in that therapy conversations are by nature more focused on emotions than are consulting conversations), the conversational tools relevant to therapy interactions appear to be relevant also to consulting contexts. This is especially the case in consultations that involve emotionally loaded and conflicted situations, as exemplified in the present study. For the most part, the consultant's prosody was vigorous and energetic when he was attempting to motivate the participants, and to explain the tasks he was setting. By contrast, when the conversation became conflicted, he seemed to be seeking to calm the situation, while at the same time validating employees' emotional experiences by using softer prosodic features.

An important observation in the present study relates to the *conversational trap* that developed between the consultant and the employee who manifested criticism. Even though it is likely that the

consultant had sensed nonverbal and emotional elements in the critical participant's talk, his conversational turns indicated that for a considerable time, he mainly oriented himself to the participant's criticism by treating it as if it was only about the clarity of the instructions. Apparently, this hindered the consultant from hearing the reasons behind the participant's criticism, which included strong feelings of being confused by an unwanted initiative. The consultant's temporary failure to perceive this led him to keep pursuing his own agenda. As we interpret it, this contributed to the employee becoming fixated on his critical stance. As a consequence, a conflicted interactional trap developed, in which the consultant kept on repeating his instructions, and the employee kept repeating his criticism.

It was only after the consultant finally noticed and responded to the affective aspect of the employee's criticism that this conversational trap was dismantled, and the interlocutors were able to proceed. This happened after the director's uninvited turn, which could be interpreted as questioning the critical employee's feelings regarding the situation. Through the director's turn, a possible problem in the affective culture of the organization became visible. For the consultant, this formed a delicate situational task: he was required to respond to the employees' dissatisfaction by acknowledging it, but in a manner which would not put into question the overall change initiative, or the management's right to implement it. Our analysis indicates that in trying to tackle this challenge, the consultant used verbal and nonverbal means for somewhat different purposes. Verbal means were mainly used when the consultant modified his instructions, i.e. in referring to a part of the setting which he was personally responsible for. On the other hand, highly nuanced nonverbal behaviors were manifested in his attempts to address a more delicate part of the problem, namely how to validate Gary's (and possibly other employees') feelings after the managers who were present at the meeting had failed to do this.

The finding of a conversational trap calls for critical consideration of consulting practices within conflicted situations, of the kind that often occur within contested organizational initiatives.

These kinds of self-reinforcing patterns are typical in conflicted and confusing situations, but they may be fairly difficult to identify in the live, ongoing stream of organizational practices (Arnaud, 1998). It appears that they might be better observed by becoming alert to *interactional patterns involving repeated chains of actions* (as in the present case, which exhibits a client's refusal to engage in actions suggested by the consultant, and the consultant's repeated instructions to the participants). A possible way to manage such an interactional loop would be to make these patterns visible, inviting reflexivity, in order to make sense of the emerging pattern (Oliver, 2005). In the episode studied, one option could have been to ask the managers who were in attendance whether they had experienced difficulties similar to the one the consultant had just faced. In the multi-actor setting of this case, such a move could have helped the employees to identify a similar kind of pattern in their relationship with the management. An overall understanding of such interactional logics as they operate within the system could help all those involved to make conscious choices regarding their own moves; they might thus be able to take adaptive actions to deal with a tricky and conflicted situation in a constructive manner (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013).

The intertwined criticism performed by the employee was in itself an interesting finding. It demonstrated how a direct client reclamation can become an important arena for clients (employees), within which they can voice their emotions, concerns, and possible criticism regarding an initiative for change. This resonates with recent discussions on the need to look at the role and activity of consumers in co-producing and co-consuming management ideas. As Heuskinveld *et al.* (2011, 142) have pointed out, "a production perspective effectively puts the implementation of new ideas in terms of a hierarchical relation of producers as initiators with consumers located as more or less creative followers." This is unfortunate: after all, if the role of "end-users" is overlooked, it leaves important areas of organizational behavior unexplored, and can cause both ethical and practical problems in the implementation of management ideas.

Our findings suggest that it may be extremely important to notice the kind of “intertwining” criticism observed in this study. This is particularly the case when the conflicting interests of management and employees complicate the provision of consultancy work, or of some other business-to-business service. In these settings, a consultant needs to take into consideration both the employer’s and the employees’ perspectives and, to some extent, seek to meet the expectations of both. He/she should at least seek to bring about wide client participation, which will be required if the consulting work is to be performed adequately.

We have sought in this paper to present the data and analyses in a transparent manner, thus enabling readers to evaluate our findings. It should, of course, be noted that our findings are based on a single case study. Hence, there is a need for further research with more cases to obtain more generalizable results. In connecting two areas of research, namely the organizational “becoming” and the embodiment approaches, we believe that the study has provided new interdisciplinary insights and paved the way for further studies. Research of this kind is time-consuming; nevertheless, it turned out to be feasible, and it proved to be capable of illuminating an understudied area, namely the role of emotional aspects in conflicted interactions.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of this study highlight the overall need for both practitioners and researchers to focus on the felt, sensed, and affective elements of interactions in conflict situations. In the present study, the handling of an emotionally loaded conflict occurred partly via nonverbal means, without attempts on the part of the participants to address the conflict verbally. A number of nonverbal behaviors and prosodic changes could be observed. These appeared to foreshadow and – as the interaction progressed – intensify verbal displays of disagreement and criticism.

One of the main findings of the present study was that nonverbal and prosodic means had a central role in creating legitimate space for employees’ feelings by validating these feelings. This,

in turn, helped the interlocutors to act in a more constructive manner in their handling of the conflicted situation. This finding is relevant for practitioners working in circumstances which are prone to conflicts. Of relevance here is a qualitative interview study on organizational change conducted by Smollan and Sayers (2009). The researchers observed that people became more engaged with the change when their feelings concerning the processes of change were acknowledged, and treated with respect.

In organizational settings the social norms are oriented towards factual matters rather than to emotions; hence, it can be difficult to address emotions directly, especially in multi-actor settings (Fineman, 2008; Lundberg and Young, 2001; *Sturdy et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, if emotions are not processed within workplace interactions, one can expect their avoidance to lead to problems, including escalating conflicts, reduced wellbeing, and ultimately, reduced productivity. By sensing and observing both one's own and other participants' nonverbal behaviors, one can gain information concerning participants' stance towards issues and procedures. Just as importantly, one may be able to grasp more or less immediately their emotional orientation towards the matter in hand. Sometimes a nonverbal response, validating the interlocutor as someone who is entitled to her/his feelings, can be sufficient to provide what Lundberg and Young (2001) have called for in advocating "emotional help" in consultancy.

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## Appendix 1: Transcript notation

Symbol	Meaning
yes (1) me too	Figures in rounded brackets represent inter- and mid-turn silences, hand-timed in seconds.
yes (.) me too	The period in rounded brackets represents “micro-pauses” of less than 0.2 seconds.
((wiping tears))	Double rounded brackets contain relevant contextual and nonverbal information added by the transcribers.
I think- I think so	A single dash following a word or letter(s) indicates an abrupt cut-off in the flow of speech (stammering).
↑official	Upward-pointing arrows indicate rising intonation.
<u>underlining</u>	Underlining indicates emphasis.
[and well on the whole	Overlapping utterances are marked by single square brackets.
°and it feels bad°	A degree sign indicates significantly lower volume than in the surrounding speech.
{working roles}	Text within braces is added by the transcribers to clarify the meaning within the conversational turn (these words were not used by the speaker).