Article

Discourse Studies
2014, Vol. 16(1) 3–24
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DOI: 10.1177/1461445613508891
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Exploring distributed leadership: Solving disagreements and negotiating consensus in a 'leaderless' team

Seongsook Choi and Stephanie Schnurr
University of Warwick, UK

Abstract

This article explores how leadership is done in a 'leaderless' team. Drawing on a corpus of more than 120 hours of audio-recorded meetings of different interdisciplinary research groups and using a discourse analytic framework and tools, we examine how leadership is enacted in a team that does not have an assigned leader or chair. Our specific focus is the discursive processes through which team members conjointly solve disagreements and negotiate consensus – which are two activities associated with leadership. More specifically, we analyse how meaning is collaboratively constructed and how team members arrive at a solution in those instances where there is some kind of disagreement, or even conflict, among team members. This discourse analytic study thus contributes to leadership research in two ways: i) by exploring some of the discursive processes through which leadership is actually performed in a 'leaderless team'; and ii) by looking at a largely under-researched leadership constellation, namely distributed leadership. We thereby illustrate some of the benefits that discourse analytical approaches offer to an understanding of the specific processes that are involved in the complexities of leadership performance.

Keywords

Critical perspective, disagreement, discourse analysis, discursive leadership, distributed leadership, leadership performance

Corresponding author:
Seongsook Choi, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.
Email: s.choi@warwick.ac.uk

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Introduction

Moving away from traditional perceptions that view leadership as a one-way top–down influence process, we follow more recent 'critical perspectives', which conceptualize leadership as a collaborative process involving several people, regardless of their formal position or hierarchical standing within their organization. We explore one of these critical perspectives on leadership, namely the notion of *distributed leadership*.

Distributed leadership describes those constellations in which teams lead their work 'collectively and independently of formal leaders' (Vine et al., 2008: 341). In other words, these teams do not have an assigned leader or chair.[1] Rather, the various activities and processes typically associated with leadership (such as decision-making, negotiating and reaching consensus) are conjointly performed by the team members, who are often on the same hierarchical level within an organization (see also Day et al., 2004; Gronn, 2002; Nielsen, 2004). While distributed leadership is often found in school contexts, where administrative work tends to be shared among different teams (Grace, 1995; Spillane et al., 2000), in this article we explore distributed leadership in the fortnightly team meetings of an interdisciplinary research group in a university setting. Meetings have been described as 'prime sites where organizational roles and relations are manifested' (Svennevig, 2012: 3). They are thus central sites where leadership (as well as other roles and relationships) is enacted and negotiated (e.g. Asmuβ and Oshima, 2012). This team, which we describe below in more detail, does not have an assigned leader or chair who would lead through these meetings. Rather, although there are status differences among the team members, the leadership role and responsibilities are shared more or less equally among individuals, and everyone seems to be responsible for the successful outcome of these regular gatherings.

In exploring this non-traditional leadership constellation, we take a discourse analytical approach and focus on the discursive processes through which team members conjointly solve disagreements and negotiate consensus – two activities that have been associated with leadership (e.g. Holmes, 2000). More specifically, we explore how meaning is collaboratively constructed and how team members arrive at a solution in those instances where there is some kind of disagreement or even conflict. These instances are particularly interesting for observation as we would normally expect some kind of leadership to take place. So the principal question we address is: How is leadership realized in instances of disagreement and conflict in a team that does not have an assigned leader or chair?

In answering this question, this study contributes to leadership research i) by exploring some of the discursive processes through which leadership is actually performed in 'leaderless' teams; and ii) by looking at a largely under-researched leadership constellation, namely distributed leadership. We thereby illustrate some of the benefits that discourse analytical approaches offer to an understanding of the specific processes involved in the performance of leadership. In particular, if we follow recent research and view leadership as a collaborative process rather than as an attribute assigned to individuals (e.g. Day et al., 2004; Gronn, 2002; Heenan and Bennis, 1999; Jackson and Parry, 2008), discourse analytical frameworks and processes (as applied in this study) can be seen to provide useful tools for approaching and analysing the complexities of leadership.

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Discursive approaches to leadership

Our research is firmly placed within the tradition of discursive leadership, which conceptualizes leadership as emerging and 'as a co-constructed and iterative phenomenon, that is socially accomplished through linguistic interaction' (Tourish, 2007: 1733). This relatively new approach often positions itself in opposition to traditional leadership psychology (e.g. Chen, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007). While leadership psychology is mostly concerned with the perceptions and self-reflections of leaders, discursive leadership focuses on language *in use* and explores the specific process through which leadership is actually communicated and accomplished in (and through) discourse (e.g. Schnurr and Chan, 2011). Based on the assumption that discourse is a crucial channel through which leadership is enacted, research in the tradition of discursive leadership draws on tools and methods developed by discourse analytic approaches (such as conversation analysis (CA); e.g. Clifton, 2006; Svennevig, 2008) to analyse the concrete processes through which leadership is realized at the micro-level of interaction. Thus, rather than attempting 'to capture the experience of leadership by forming and statistically analyzing a host of cognitive, affective, and conative variables and their casual connections' (Fairhurst, 2007: 15), with the aim of establishing 'grand theories of leadership' (Clifton, 2006: 203), more recent research aims to achieve 'a better understanding of the everyday practices of talk that constitute leadership and a deeper knowledge of how leaders use language to craft ''reality''' and to construct meaning (Clifton, 2006: 203). It appears that discourse analytical approaches are particularly suitable for this kind of endeavour since they provide interesting new perspectives and insights into the complexities of leadership performance at the micro-level of interaction (e.g. Baxter, 2010; Clifton, 2006; Holmes et al., 2011; Schnurr, 2009b; Schnurr and Chan, 2011; Svennevig, 2008; Wodak et al., 2011).

But what *is* leadership? Acknowledging the central role of discourse in performing the various leadership processes, leadership is *not* defined 'in terms of traits, behaviours, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships, and occupation of an administrative position' (Yukl, 2002: 3), but is rather viewed as a performance or an activity that is often conjointly enacted among various participants (Heifertz, 1998; Hosking, 1997; Northouse, 1997). We take this conceptualization of leadership as our starting point in this study and aim to explore the ways through which leadership processes are conjointly enacted among interlocutors. This joint negotiation and enactment, we believe, is particularly obvious in distributed leadership constellations, that is, in those instances where teams have no officially designated person responsible for executing leadership activities.

In line with so-called critical perspectives on leadership which 'challenge the traditional orthodoxies of leadership and following' by questioning 'the hegemonic view that leaders are the people in charge and followers are the people who are influenced' (Jackson and Parry, 2008: 83), we conceptualize 'the relations and practices of leaders and followers as mutually constituting and co-produced' (Collinson, 2005: 1419; see also Schnurr and Chan, 2011). As a consequence, researchers have begun to pay more attention to the processes and skills involved in performing leadership which may not only reside in formally designated leaders, but which may be shared among various people on different levels of the organizational hierarchy (Jackson and Parry, 2008: 89; see also Collinson,

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2005). One advantage of focusing on leadership processes, rather than on individuals, is that such a more dynamic approach is more likely to capture the various processes that fall under the umbrella term of leader*ship* (Gronn, 2002: 423). Our focus in this article is one of the many processes through which leadership is enacted and displayed, namely negotiating disagreements.

Conceptualizing disagreements

Although there is an abundance of research on disagreements in different contexts, including workplaces (Angouri, 2012; Holmes and Marra, 2004; Kangasharju, 2002; Schnurr and Chan, 2011), there seems to be no consensus among researchers on how to define disagreements. We follow Clayman (2002: 1385), who describes disagreements as consisting of 'an oppositional transaction between two primary participants'. As our analysis later illustrates, this definition is sufficiently broad to capture a variety of disagreement phenomena, while at the same time being specific enough to be applied to concrete examples in our data. In order to further distinguish between different kinds of disagreements we also adapt Pomerantz's (1984) distinction between strong and weak disagreements. She maintains that '[a] strong disagreement is one in which a conversant utters an evaluation which is directly contrastive with the prior evaluation' and consists of turns which contain 'exclusively disagreement components' and no 'agreement components' (Pomerantz, 1984: 74). Weak disagreements, on the other hand, are characterized by 'partial agreements/partial disagreements' (Pomerantz, 1984: 65).

This distinction between strong and weak disagreements has also been applied by subsequent researchers who observed that strong disagreements are relatively common between family members, close friends and people who know each other very well (e.g. Habib, 2008; Tannen, 2002), while weak disagreements occur more frequently in contexts where interlocutors are not very familiar with each other, or when maintaining neutralism is required. In these scenarios disagreements are typically mitigated by a range of attenuating discourse strategies (e.g. Jacobs, 2002; Myers, 1998). In the workplace context, the use of more or less strong or weak disagreements depends, among other factors, on the norms that characterize the discursive practices of the specific team or community of practice (Wenger, 1998) under investigation (e.g. Angouri, 2012; Marra, 2012). Thus, while Holmes and Marra (2004) found hardly any strong disagreements in their workplace data, Angouri (2012) and Schnurr and Chan (2011) describe workplaces where unmitigated disagreements do frequently occur.

Disagreements may be realized in diverse ways – both verbally and non-verbally. Some of the more common discourse strategies that interlocutors regularly draw on when uttering strong disagreements include interruption, louder voice, talking faster than usually and the use of the disagreement token *no*, while weak disagreements often involve silence, hedges and some kind of repair initiation (see also Schnurr and Chan, 2011). As our analysis shows, disagreements are often constructed and negotiated among interlocutors over several turns, and in many cases several of these disagreement strategies are used in combination.

Although uttering disagreements has been described as being 'by its very nature [. . .] a face-threatening act that jeopardizes the solidarity between speaker and addressee'

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(Rees-Miller, 2000: 1089), it is important to recognize that disagreements are not necessarily always dispreferred (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Rees-Miller, 2000; Tannen, 2002). Rather, the specific context in which they are uttered, including the discursive norms and practices that characterize interlocutors' relationship, plays a crucial role in understanding the form and function of disagreements (e.g. Marra, 2012).

The processes involved in solving disagreements and negotiating consensus are of particular interest to us in our analysis of distributed leadership because they have been described as leadership activities (e.g. Holmes, 2000; Holmes and Marra, 2004; Wodak et al., 2011). For example, in a study of leadership in a range of New Zealand workplaces, Holmes and Marra (2004) identify and describe four distinctive strategies that the leaders in their data regularly draw on when managing disagreements and conflicts in their team meetings: conflict avoidance, conflict diversion, conflict resolution using negotiation, and conflict resolution using authority. And while the authors argue that the choice of the most appropriate strategy depends on a wide range of contextual factors (including interaction type, community of practice/workplace culture, seriousness of the issue and leadership style), their analysis focuses on traditional top–down leadership constellations in teams where the chair, the overall project leader or the most senior person in the meeting is performing leadership activities. In this study, however, we explore some of the ways in which disagreements are constructed and negotiated in a team that does not have a designated chair. In particular, since previous research has established that it is often 'the leader' or most senior or powerful person in a team who plays a crucial role in these activities, we are interested in exploring how disagreements are negotiated in a 'leaderless' team and how this team moves towards a solution or consensus without relying on a leader.

Data and methodology

The data analysed in this study are taken from a corpus of over 120 audio-recorded meetings of interdisciplinary scientific research project meetings ranging from large collaborative funded projects, with at least six participants in each meeting, to interdisciplinary PhD supervision meetings consisting of two supervisors and a student. The data have been collected since March 2011 and this corpus is part of a collection that will continue to grow as we follow a number of research projects to completion. The disciplines represented in these meetings are mathematics, statistics, bioinformatics, medicine and biology. Depending on the type and nature of the meetings, they last from one to eight hours. In this article, we draw on transcribed data from one of the regular meetings of a team involved in a three-year research project, and we also refer to insights gained from semi-structured interviews with participants.

To collect the data, two audio recorders were set up in the room before the start of a meeting and the researcher sat in an unobtrusive corner during the recording. The recorders were left running until the participants started leaving the room. Observations relating to the seating arrangement and atypical occurrences such as acts or gestures that were not usually found in previous meetings were included in comprehensive field notes taken during and after the meetings. Participants did not usually interact with the observer, especially during the meeting, though sometimes participants engaged in some

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light banter with the observer before or after meetings. The recordings are transcribed and anonymized according to the CA standards established by Jefferson (2004), but conventional orthography is used wherever possible and the transcription of laughter is more crudely represented than is standard in CA (please see the Appendix for transcription conventions).

The team

Following Djordjilovic's (2012: 113) distinction, the group of people who have participated in this study can be characterized as a team since they 'share accountability for the produced action', as we illustrate later. Team members are all from the same university but based in different departments. They are carrying out a research project on behaviours of certain plant genes. There are six members in this project: two postdoctoral researchers in biology (Mary) and mathematics (Sarah); three co-investigators from mathematics (Dan, a professor), statistics (Bee, an associate professor) and bio-informatics (Scott, an associate professor). The principal investigator (Ylva, an associate professor) is a biologist. The team meets every two weeks and some of the team members also meet regularly every other week. What is particularly interesting about this team from our perspective is the fact that it does not have an explicitly nominated or named leader or chair for their regular meetings. This aspect of the team's dynamics has an impact on how consensus is reached and how decisions are being made – especially in those instances where there is disagreement among team members. As our analyses illustrate, the status of participants within the project and in the wider institutional context is not as relevant as their respective expertise when it comes to negotiating and solving disagreements. Thus, rather than relying on a leader to perform these activities, decisions tend to result from team discussions and are often ratified by the respective disciplinary leader. During these team meetings there is no explicit agenda, nor are minutes taken formally. Based on the definition provided earlier, we would thus describe the leadership constellation in this group as distributed leadership as members share the various leadership responsibilities and activities.

In order to account for the different forms of distributed leadership, Gronn (2002) has developed a taxonomy which includes four different types, namely co-performance–intuitive working relations, co-performance–institutionalized practices, collective performance–intuitive working relations and collective performance-institutionalized practices. According to this taxonomy, the team in our study could be described as co-performance–intuitive working relations. The members of our team are all 'bodily present' during the meetings and they conjointly work together towards achieving their various goals (such as deciding what to include in a joint research paper they are currently working on) (Gronn, 2002: 434). Since the team members have been working together for almost two years, they have developed what Gronn (2002: 430) describes as 'intuitive understandings'. And rather than one individual taking over a leadership role, our analysis illustrates that the various leadership activities are conjointly performed by the group. As a consequence, '[i]t is the working partnership as a focal unit which is attributed with leadership by colleagues' (Gronn, 2002: 430), and the team members themselves are also aware of their collaborative approach to actually doing leadership, as

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was pointed out in one of the interviews with participants after the data collection: 'anybody can be a leader as long as they have a good reasoning, a verifiable reasoning, and the reasoning is actually serving the right objective'.

Analysis

We have chosen three examples here which are representative of the ways in which team members typically negotiate disagreements and work towards reaching a consensus. The extracts are taken from the same meeting to show that different individuals take on a leadership role at different points during the meeting, and to illustrate how various leadership activities are conjointly enacted among team members.

The first example illustrates how disagreements between two of the senior members of the team, Dan and Bee, are typically negotiated and how a consensus is reached.

Example 1

Context: Team members discuss which figures are to be included in a research paper they are currently working on.

1	Scott	(xxx) where you have two dimensions and
2		[the (xxx) plot
3	Dan	[It doesn't make any sense.
4	Ylva	(xxx) figure you showed the other day with (xxx)
5	Bee	That makes sense.
6	Scott	Well it's shown in the data.
7	Sarah	Yeah I can do that.
8	Bee	No the scatter plot makes (.) makes sense.
9	Ylva	[(xxx)
10	Bee	Yeah
11	Dan	The scatter plot's ok it's the circle that doesn't make sense.
12	Bee	No the circle does make sense too.
13	Dan	No it doesn't.
14	Bee	Yes it does.
15	Sarah	((soft)) [laughs]
16	Dan	You can write an infinite number of circles (xxx) there's ninety
17		five percent inside it and five percent outside.
18	Ylva	But the the the this probability's [(xxx)
19	Bee	But anyway we can leave the circle [out it doesn't matter.
20	Dan	Yeah you can show the plot if you want.

This sequence evolves from a relatively explicit and aggravated disagreement between the team members Dan and Bee.[2] According to the distinction proposed by Pomerantz (1984), most of the disagreements in this example can be characterized as strong since they are in direct contrast to the previous speaker's utterances and contain no agreement components.

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As is typical for his interactional style, Dan utters a direct and on-record criticism of the ways in which some results are visually presented in the team's paper: '*It doesn't make any sense*' (line 3). Other team members, most notably Ylva, Bee and Scott, then start defending the current visualization of the results (lines 4–10). Particularly noteworthy about this sequence is Bee's relatively explicit disagreement of Dan's critical comment; using almost exactly Dan's words Bee clearly contradicts Dan's opinion: that '*makes sense*' (lines 3 and 8). And by repeating this and using the disagreement particle '*No*' in line 8 (see Laforest, 2002), without providing any further explanations or employing any mitigation strategies, Bee's disagreement with Dan is very direct and potentially face threatening. And while Scott's subsequent use of the particle '*Well*' (line 6) and Sarah's mediating suggestion ('*Yeah I can do that*' (line 7)) seem to mitigate their disagreement with Dan (while at the same time supporting Bee's original point), Bee's insistence in line 8 (which is characterized by the disagreement token '*No*', a short pause and a repetition of the disagreement phrase ('*makes sense*')), reactivates the disagreement and eventually gets Dan to provide some explanations for his evaluation.

Interestingly, rather than getting upset by the potentially face-threatening directness of his colleague Bee, Dan starts to explain his problems with the visualization of the results in the paper by partly agreeing with the current version but making suggestions for further adjustments (e.g. line 11). He thereby considerably mitigates his initial (strong) disagreement and turns it into a weak disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984). This then leads to another very direct and apparently confrontational exchange between Dan and Bee in which both explicitly disagree with each other without providing any reasons or explanations (lines 11–14). In line 12 Bee uses the disagreement marker '*No*' plus an affirmative to disagree with Dan. This strong disagreement is further strengthened by the utterance final '*too*'. Dan's very explicit disagreement in the next line mirrors Bee's utterance initial '*No*', and Bee's relatively succinct response, in turn, mirrors the syntactic structure of Dan's disagreement. It seems that at this point in the discussion interlocutors are stuck and since none of them seems willing to move away from their standpoint, a solution does not seem likely. It is perhaps Sarah's laughter at this apparent deadlock (line 15) which provides a welcome break and which releases some of the tension that has built up in the previous utterances (Glenn, 2003).

This is followed by an attempt by Dan to raise a proposal for a solution of the disagreement by trying to explain his view (lines 16 and 17). And although his explanations are initially met with disagreement from Ylva (in the form of a 'but' statement (line 18)), Bee's subsequent comment '*But anyway we can leave the circle out it doesn't matter*' (line 19) moves the discussion towards its solution. She thus manages to bypass the disagreement by making the question of the circle's inclusion irrelevant. She thereby brings this discussion to an end by stating that '*it doesn't matter*' (line 19), which also implicitly reminds participants to focus on more essential aspects (of the paper). Dan's subsequent comment seems to indicate that he has understood her concern: his utterance '*Yeah you can show the plot if you want*' (line 20) looks like a compromise on which the whole team could settle, namely to include the plot but leave out the circle. With this comment he also seems to ratify Bee's decision. At this point the disagreement seems to have been solved and participants move on to discuss something else.

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This excerpt is a good illustration of how distributed leadership is actually performed at the micro-level of interaction. Rather than relying on a chair or leader to solve the disagreement and find a solution to the problem, various team members, most notably Dan and Bee, contribute to this process. Like the leaders in Holmes and Marra's (2004) study, team members work through a disagreement and find a solution. However, what is particularly interesting about this example is that the solution is proposed and accepted by the disagreeing parties themselves rather than being imposed upon them by a chair or leader. More specifically, the disagreement in this example seems to come to an end after everyone has had a chance to disagree (albeit without much substantial discussion of their reasons) and when participants seem to be running out of steam. Bee's leadership role thus emerges relatively spontaneously and is manifested in bringing the discussion to a close and making a decision (line 19) – both of which are behaviours that have been ascribed to leadership (Holmes, 2000; Marra et al., 2006; Wodak et al., 2011).

This way of dealing with disagreements, we would argue, is a reflection of the fact that the team does not have an officially assigned chair or leader. Thus, it is precisely because there is no one individual assigned to ensure that the meeting progresses smoothly and that a consensus is reached, that managing these disagreements effectively becomes a team responsibility. This is also shown in the next example.

Example 2

Context: Same meeting as above. Team members continue to discuss which plots are to be included in their paper.

1 Sarah [I'm not sure if this (plot) makes sense now.
2 Dan [It's just comparing one (x)two identical experiment.
3 Bee NO
4 Ylva No Dan, stop it stop it. Look. [laughs]
5 Bee NO IT ISN'T!
6 All [laughs]
7 Bee It-that part is showing that the two experiments are correlated
8 so when when-
9 Dan So thank goodness for that [laughs]
10 Bee So when one goes up so the other goes up.
11 Dan [laughs] thank goodness for that!
12 Ylva Yeah but it's not what you think!
13 Dan Ok.
[23 turns omitted]
14 Sarah I I I- for me this figure doesn't make as much sense to me now
15 if we don't use the circle approach. Because are we not splitting
16 our differential expression time points anymore right? So
17 [these points don't really make the same sense.
18 Ylva [Mm
19 Dan Yeah they don't which correspond to the (xxx)
[19 turns omitted in which Dan admits that he likes some of the plots but makes some suggestions as to how to improve their visual representation]

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Ylva But I think I think the other plot, the box plot sho:w the consistency between th:e two experiments. >And actually < even though you think it's not important it is er.
Dan Oh come on [when in a serious paper do you see (.) an experiment=
Ylva [(it's a serious) point
Dan =itself
Ylva actually (.) well in biology you have to do this [ALL THE TIME
Dan [OF course you do! But it's not part of the main- the main argument of the paper.
Ylva NO IT'S NOT they don't like it since it's peripheral information
Dan Yeah I know [I'm not arguing against that.
Ylva [But I still think that we're going to be:
Dan No [I'm not going to argue against that.
Sarah [But-
Dan No but I think this sort of thing this got a lot more interesting information.
Sarah It's just a correlation of [(xxx) figure.]
Ylva [No. Agreed.] Agreed.
Dan So I think er Sarah should think about how to that into a the figure and put it in the paper.
Sarah [Yes.
Dan [Showing so that you can see that >you know< you got genes where they're all are all five even some when they're not that very much
Sarah Mm
Dan Cuz I think it's whe-that's really it's where I thought (.) I've learnt quite a lot from that. I think that's quite interesting. (4.0)
Dan I think the other plots are only be interesting if they really had any correlation then we will have something interesting [laughs]
Sarah Yeah it would be quite bad
Dan That would be something interesting.
Ylva [(xxx)
Sarah [Then we can do it this way.
[22 turns omitted]
Dan Yeah I wouldn't mind (that) too much.
Bee [Mm
Dan [You got (xxx) next to each other so that's fine.
Bee Yeah. Yeah.
Sarah It's just a matter of showing that they're consistently greater than the time point zero.
Dan Mm
Bee Mm
Sarah And you get the last (xxx).
Dan Mm
Ylva Yeah

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64 Dan   Yeah that's ok I don't think that's a problem. I-I- That's very
65       informative I think (.) because it gets over the idea that if
66       we get all six even if we (xxx) small thing
67       [(xxx) small probability of
68 Sarah [Yeah that's (.) spot on time job
69 Dan   (xxx)
70 Ylva  Mmhm
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Although there is a lot to say about this example, we focus here on just some particularly interesting aspects about the ways in which team members negotiate disagreement and reach consensus. The extract begins with Dan challenging the line of argument of a paper that Sarah has written for the whole team in which she compares two experiments with each other. Dan's challenge (line 2) is heavily contradicted by the other team members, most notably Bee and Ylva who both disagree with Dan very explicitly (lines 3–5). Their strong disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984) are characterized by the explicit disagreement marker '*NO*' without providing any further explanations (Bee in lines 3 and 5), the imperative '*stop it*' (Ylva in line 4), and the explicit disagreement phrase '*NO IT ISN'T*' with each word being stressed (Bee in line 5). Although such behaviour could easily be interpreted as challenging and face-threatening by an outsider, this open display of disagreement and resistance towards Dan's challenge seems rather good-humoured and resembles a little show the team puts on for their amusement: the tone of delivery indicates that the ways in which they criticize Dan for (yet again) questioning the team's consensus are humorous but with a critical edge. The joint laughter (in line 6) also signals this and further mitigates the potential face-threat of the previous explicit disagreements and challenges (Schnurr, 2009b). The humorous yet challenging tone in which the discussion continues (lines 7–13) further supports such an interpretation, as do the ways in which Dan mocks Bee's attempts to explain the differences between the two experiments (lines 7 and 8, 10): his humorous response '*thank goodness for that!*' is accompanied by laughter (lines 9 and 11). Ylva plays along with this humour by teasing Dan in line 12 '*Yeah but it's not what you think!*'. By using teasing here, she manages to convey a critical message in a playful yet serious way (Alberts, 1992; Eisenberg, 1986; Hay, 2001; Schnurr, 2009a). Eventually Dan seems to agree as his minimal response '*OK*' indicates (line 13). The discussion, however, is not yet over.

After some further discussions not shown here, Sarah, Dan and Ylva engage in a more serious exchange about some of the issues relating to the overall argument and presentation of a specific research in the paper (lines 14–22). Again, a disagreement emerges between Dan and Ylva (lines 22 and 23). Dan's utterance (line 23) is rather challenging – in particular his utterance-initial '*Oh come on*', the question form and the lexical choice '*serious*'. In her reply Ylva justifies her view, for example by insisting that '*it's a serious point*' (line 24) and by referring to normative practices in her discipline (biology) (line 26). The descriptor '*ALL THE TIME*', which is emphasized (line 26) and which thus underlines Ylva's previous argument, is overlapped by Dan who uses a 'yes but' structure (Myers, 1998) to partly agree with her '*OF course you do*' (line 27) before elaborating on his disagreement (line 28). Ylva then agrees with Dan's assessment by repeating

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almost verbatim part of Dan's previous explanations '*NO IT'S NOT*' (line 29) and by providing more explanations to which Dan then also agrees '*Yeah I know*' (line 30). At this stage Dan admits that he is '*not arguing against that*' (line 30). Ylva then overlaps with Dan's utterance, repeating her earlier disagreement as signalled by the utterance-initial '*But*' and '*still*' (line 31). Although Dan's reply starts with the disagreement marker '*No*' (line 32), he then agrees with Ylva by repeating his previous utterance. At this point Sarah attempts to join the discussion again with what appears to be another objection ('*But*', line 33) but gets interrupted by Dan who further elaborates on the reasons for his view point (lines 34–35). Sarah's subsequent comment which seems to reconcile Dan and Ylva's previously opposing views (line 36) is explicitly agreed to by Ylva (line 37) and gets followed up by Dan who outlines future actions that the team will have to undertake as a result of this agreement (lines 38–39).

Over the next few lines Dan provides detailed explanations and instructions as to what changes need to be made to the paper which receives agreement from Sarah (as reflected, for example, in her minimal feedback; lines 40 and 43). Dan's conciliatory summary of what he has learned from this figure (lines 44–46) is then followed by a four-second pause; and his subsequent slight criticism of including '*the other plots*' (lines 47–48), which links back to his previous disagreement with Ylva about what to include in the paper, is mitigated by some laughter (line 48). Sarah agrees with him (line 49) and after another agreeing comment by Dan and overlapping with Ylva she eventually formulates a suggestion which seems to function as a decision here: '*Then we can do it this way*' (line 52). This decision which builds on team members' previous contributions is then ratified over the next few turns by those involved in the prior discussion, and is met with general agreement among participants (as signalled, for example, by the frequent minimal agreeing feedback, the repeated use of '*yeah*' and utterance initial '*and*' (rather than '*but*')).

At first glance this sequence looks like an instance of truly conjoint decision-making in which all team members participate. And indeed, most of the team members contribute to the discussion. Yet upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that Dan and Ylva, the two discipline leaders, play a crucial role in the decision reaching process (e.g. they contribute most to the crucial discussion phase in lines 20–35). And Dan's outlining of future actions (lines 38–42), which is another behaviour that is indexed for leadership (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), also considerably moves the discussion forward. However, in the end it is Sarah, the relatively junior postdoctoral research fellow, who performs a leadership role in this excerpt by displaying several behaviours which are indexed for leadership performance. More specifically, her conciliatory comment in line 36 initiates the move towards formulating a solution to the discrepancies among team members. It thus constitutes the turning point in the discussion and steers participants away from what appears to be a deadlock (lines 23–35) towards more content-related arguments brought forward by Dan (lines 38–50). Moreover, with her suggestion '*Then we can do it this way*' a few utterances later (line 52), Sarah establishes common ground among participants and formulates a concrete solution to the problem. Like some of the leaders described in Holmes and Marra's study (2004), Sarah here assists her team members in working through their conflict by effectively pointing out a problem (lines 1 and 14), effectively managing the floor, and spelling out the effect of the solution to the paper (lines 57, 61 and 68). And while it would go too far to claim that she actively manages the conflict, she nevertheless plays a crucial role in establishing consensus and coming

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to an agreement, and with her reassuring and reconciliatory behaviour after a decision has been formulated (line 52 onwards) she also ensures that the other participants are happy with that decision. And judging by participants' responses, Sarah's leadership activities are successful. In particular, Ylva and Dan both agree with Sarah's solution and by ratifying it they at the same time ratify her leadership role.

Sarah's emergent leadership role thus seems to be formed by the leaderless character of the team. In particular, the observations that several people contribute to the leadership performance, for example by displaying leadership behaviours (e.g. Dan) and by ratifying Sarah's leadership role (e.g. Dan and Ylva), are a reflection of the fact that the team does not have an officially assigned leader. This is also shown in the slightly different roles that Sarah plays in both examples: while her contributions in the first example help mediating between opposing parties, she plays a more active role here by performing a range of leadership behaviours (as described above) and thereby skilfully steering the disagreement towards a solution.

We discuss one more example here to illustrate some of the ways through which leadership is distributed among the members of this team and, more specifically, how leadership roles and activities are shared (although not always in harmony) between several team members.

Example 3

Context: the team discusses how to spend the remaining funding of the project and on what kinds of experiments as the project is coming to an end in 12 months time.

1	Dan	I mean we (.) the thing is we've got limited amounts of money
2		so we should be careful what we spend it on.
[some humour deleted]		
3	Ylva	And you know (.) if we can use it I'd like to use it to I'd like
4		to see if it confirmed some of the predictions.
5	Sarah	Mm
6	Dan	Well we haven't got any predictions.
7	Ylva	Well there will be hopefully something
8	Dan	NO not about a thing or two. It's just not possible↑
9	Ylva	Ok so what would you like to discuss beforehand?
10	Dan	Look I reck- we want to do something new. I mean measuring a bit of
11		afinity is not a new thing it's really bo:ring. Unless we
12		got something we can really see- >we ought to ask< some interesting
13		questions.
14	Ylva	Well we should have discussed that before I bought the project.
15		Before WE bought the project!
16	Dan	Yeah well I was never really keen >on that on that on that< (.)
17		bio(core) stuff. But >you know< it's neither here or there. I was
18		happy to go along with it but don't spend more money on it it's a
19		waste.
20	Ylva	Well I don't intend to but I do want to be able to use what we have
21		done. (2.0)
22	Dan	Well [laughs] *I agree with that* but i-if it's at a cost to the rest
23		of the project it's a disaster.

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24 Ylva It's not:
25 Dan Well ok we've got plenty of money I suppose we can waste some more
26 [but I-
27 Ylva [°What°
28 Dan but let's-I think we need to focus on what's the really interesting
29 question we've got a chance of of er:m >you know< addressing (2.0)
30 Cuz at the moment we've done something that's pretty
31 straightforward right? (2.0) And we want to get >you know< we want
32 to get >tha-sort of< we want to do something >you know< that's kind
33 of (.) a bit more exciting.
34 Ylva I kno:↑w↓
35 (2.0)
36 Dan Well so erm spending more money on measuring affinity is not that.
37 Ylva Ok↑ What do you want to spend your money on then?
38 Dan Well that's wha-that's what I'm trying to discuss. What is the
39 really interesting kind of question that we can do.
40 [Dan makes some concrete suggestions as to what kinds of
experiments should be done, to which Sarah and Mary agree]
41 Dan Can we do something >you know< is there some way we can probe
42 more significantly about↑ >these sort of questions< like where you
43 got so we should get some stuff from (.) Sarah's er:m analysis.
44 about the impor[tance
45 Ylva [structure
46 of things like having these two (evening) elements together.
47 And now what's the experiment to do to try to track that out is-
48 there's another experiment that Rose is doing now we discussed it
49 several times we better agree on it before she actually finishes it
50 so she's actually done quite a bit of it, okay? We don't want to
51 HEAR afterwards that this was [rubbish
52 Mary [(xxx)
53 Ylva Yeah [laughs]
54 Dan It's not whether it's rubbish!
55 Ylva Yeah
56 Dan *It's actually I rather have exciting rubbish than*
57 Ylva Yeah: [laughs]

This excerpt is taken from a longer discussion about how to best spend the remaining research money for the project. Participants are under some pressure at this stage in the project as they need to carefully consider what results they have produced so far and how to ensure a successful completion of the project. The example is a good illustration of how leadership is distributed among the members of this team, with both Dan and Ylva playing a leadership role and performing a range of leadership activities. More specifically, by raising the issue about how to spend the remaining money (line 2), which strictly speaking would have been the responsibility of the project's Principal Investigator Ylva, and by providing some concrete future actions (e.g. lines 41–44) Dan

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takes on a leadership role. On the other hand, by actively managing the disagreement and negotiating a consensus (e.g. lines 9, 38), as well as summarizing discussions (lines 45–51) and outlining future actions (lines 48–51), Ylva also performs leadership activities.

The performance of leadership and the negotiation of this disagreement are particularly complex in this example. After some initial exchanges by various team members, Dan's opposing stance becomes very explicit and strong in line 8 when he uses the disagreement markers '*NO*' and '*not*' with some emphasis, and his judgement '*It's just not possible*' uttered in rising intonation sounds final. At this stage Ylva takes on a leadership role by asking Dan to formulate his concerns (line 9). This strategy of resolution through negotiation is also one of the strategies that the leaders in Holmes and Marra's (2004) study used to negotiate consensus. In explicating his point of view, then, Dan reminds Ylva and the team of what he thinks the overall objective is, namely '*to do something new*' (line 10) and not something that he considers to be '*really bo:ring*' which is a relatively strong unequivocal statement (which is particularly challenging because of the lengthening of the first syllable). Moreover, his choice of words in his subsequent utterances, such as '*stuff'*, '*neither here or there*', and '*waste*' are quite strong and add to the illocutionary force of his disagreement with Ylva: '*don't spend more money*' (lines 16–19).

After Ylva has justified her position by providing some reasons (lines 20–21), there is a short pause before the disagreement continues. Using a 'yes but' structure Dan partly agrees with Ylva before criticizing her again by describing the project as '*a disaster*' in a slightly sarcastic tone of voice (line 23) with which Ylva strongly disagrees (line 24). Dan's subsequent admission (initiated by '*Well ok*'), albeit containing some more challenging elements (e.g. his repetition of '*waste*' in line 25), appears more reconciliatory and more factual and productive. This is also reflected in his use of a rhetoric question and several instances of the other-oriented pragmatic particle '*you know*' which functions here to involve Ylva and possibly to get her on his side. Ylva seems to agree with Dan's judgement as her minimal response indicates. More specifically, the lengthened '*know*' and the rise–fall intonation illustrate her agreement but also possibly some kind of frustration and resignation. Ylva's utterance is then followed by a relatively long pause before Dan briefly summarizes his point again with a particular emphasis on '*not*' but without using any strong words such as '*disaster*' or '*waste*' as in his previous utterances (line 36). Instead, his use of the hesitation marker '*erm*' and the particle '*Well*' at the beginning of his turn considerably mitigate the force of his utterance. At this stage, Ylva explicitly signals that she has understood his concerns ('*Ok*') and she invites him to outline what he would like to spend the money on instead (line 37). This point in the discussion appears to be the turning point at which participants stop explicitly disagreeing with each other and instead move towards finding a solution.

In the following lines Dan outlines some concrete suggestions on how to spend the remaining project money, which finds some agreement by his colleagues Sarah and Mary. Dan's suggestions in lines 41–44, for example, are phrased like a question ('*Can we*') and include the inclusive pronoun '*we*', the pragmatic particle '*you know*' and several references to other team members (i.e. Sarah and Ylva ('*you*')). Through these discursive strategies Dan manages to involve others in the discussion and decision-making process. And Ylva's overlap with Dan (line 45) and her subsequent elaborations indicate

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that this is successful. Eventually, it is Ylva's reference to '*another experiment that Rose is doing now*' (line 48) that reminds the others what they had originally agreed to spend the money on. However, with her contribution she not only summarizes the discussion and outlines possible future actions (which are both leadership activities; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), but with her partly humorous, partly critical comment in lines 50–51, '*We don't want to HEAR afterwards that this was rubbish*', she also criticizes Dan for his earlier comments (about wasting some of the project's money). The good-humoured replies, together with her laughter (lines 53–57), indicate that this was successful and that the atmosphere of the meeting is friendlier and more collegial again. And although a decision is not explicitly formulated at this point as to how exactly the money will be spent, there seems to be an implicit agreement among participants that the money will go to Rose's experiments as originally agreed. Ylva has thus managed to solve the disagreement and the resulting deadlock, and to establish common ground on the basis of which the subsequent more factual and productive discussion will take place.

What is particularly interesting about this example, then, is the observation that the sharing of leadership roles is not always harmonious. It almost seems as if in this example Dan and Ylva are struggling over who gets to do leadership. This is further reflected in their use of pronouns. Throughout the disagreement Dan and Ylva seem to almost strategically switch between '*I*' and '*we*'. While Dan consistently uses the inclusive '*we*' when he initially raises his concerns (with the exception of the utterance initial '*I mean*') (lines 1 and 2), Ylva in her reply starts off by using the inclusive '*we*' before switching to the first person singular '*I*' which she uses for the remainder of her utterance (lines 3 and 4). She thereby takes on a powerful stance and reinforces her official role as the principle investigator of the project which contrasts with Dan's emphasis on including the whole team.

After a minimal feedback by Sarah (line 5), Dan continues the disagreement (line 6) by further challenging Ylva. In particular, although his utterance initial '*well*' can be interpreted as a mitigating delay particle (Myers, 1998; Pomerantz, 1984), his repeated use of the inclusive '*we*' is rather challenging here as it contrasts with Ylva's '*I*' in her previous utterance and reminds her that this is a team project with shared responsibilities. Ylva responds to this by mirroring Dan's utterance (see the utterance initial '*Well*') before defending her own view (line 7). After Dan's reply, which further aggravates the disagreement (line 8), Ylva seems to change her strategy, which is also reflected in her use of pronouns. She now explicitly shifts the focus (and responsibility) to Dan by using the second-person singular pronoun '*you*': '*so what would you like to discuss*' (line 9).

Participants' use of pronouns is also particularly revealing in lines 14 and 15: in replying to Dan's suggestions about the overall objective of the project (lines 10–13), Ylva starts off with the first-person singular pronoun '*I*', thereby again emphasizing her high status as the one in charge (line 14) before self-correcting to the inclusive '*WE*' (line 15). The stress that she puts on '*WE*' could be interpreted as an attempt to remind the others that this is a joint project for which they are all responsible and to create solidarity among team members. Interestingly, in his reply Dan exclusively uses the first-person singular '*I*' when criticizing the project, but he switches back to inclusive '*we*' when describing what the team should be doing (see e.g. lines 25 and 28–33). Dan maintains this focus on the team throughout most of his subsequent utterances. Even when Ylva puts him on the spot by asking '*What do you want to spend your money on then?*' (line 37), he

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predominantly uses '*we*' when making suggestions and outlining future actions (lines 38–44). Interestingly, when Ylva eventually changes her use of pronouns to '*we*' (lines 45–51) this also marks the turning point in the discussion at which participants seem to have reached an implicit agreement (as described earlier).

This relatively long negotiation of the disagreement is thus a reflection of the leadership constellation of this team. The struggle over who gets to decide what to spend the money on may be particularly lengthy because the team does not have an officially assigned chair or leader to whom members could refer for a solution. This situation seems to be further complicated by the fact that Dan and Ylva's status within the project and the wider institutional context are somewhat distorted: while Ylva is the principal investigator of the project (and thus – at least on paper – has the most status and authority, in particular when it comes to making budgetary decisions), Dan is a full professor and thus has more status and authority in the wider institutional context. All these factors potentially impact on the ways in which leadership is shared and performed by the members of this team.

So, what do all these observations mean in terms of leadership performance in a 'leaderless' team? The next section addresses this issue and also draws some more general conclusions about the benefits of discourse analytical approaches to leadership.

Discussion and conclusion

Our analyses of three representative instances of disagreement have shown that the leadership activities in this team are distributed among various team members and different individuals take on a leadership role at different points throughout the meeting. Thus, although this team is 'leaderless' in the sense that it does not have an officially assigned chair or leader, there is a lot of leader*ship* taking place. By looking at some of the processes through which participants negotiate disagreements and work towards a solution, we could identify and describe some of the dynamics that characterize this team's specific ways of doing leadership.

In our data, interlocutors drew on myriad strategies when negotiating disagreements and reaching consensus. They collaboratively worked towards establishing common ground and reaching an agreement, for example, by inviting others to explain and elaborate their concerns and (opposing) view points, by further exploring the source of the disagreement, by attempting to reconcile opposing views, by ratifying each others' suggestions, and by ratifying decisions and outlining future actions. And while some of these strategies were also reported to be used in teams with more traditional hierarchical top–down leadership constellations (such as the ones researched by Holmes and Marra, 2004), what is noteworthy about the specific team under investigation here is the observation that these leadership activities were distributed and often performed conjointly among members. Not only did several team members participate in solving the disagreements, thereby making it a conjoint endeavour, but different individuals took over the responsibility of leading the team through such an exchange at different points in the meeting. In example 1, it was Bee, one of the co-investigators, who played a crucial role in bringing the disagreement to an end; in example 2 it was Sarah, the postdoctoral research fellow and most junior person on the team, and to some extent Dan, the mathematics professor; and in example 3 these activities were shared by Dan and Ylva, the

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two most senior people on the team. And although this collaboration in doing leadership was not always harmonious and did not always lead to an explicitly formulated agreement or decision (as example 3 has shown), team members were nevertheless successful in negotiating a consensus that enabled them to leave the disagreements behind and move their discussion forward.

Another noteworthy observation of our analyses relates to the form of the disagreements. Most of the disagreements could be classified as 'strong' (Pomerantz, 1984) and could thus be assumed to be potentially threatening or challenging to the status quo. However, as interlocutors' responses indicate, these rather explicit and potentially threatening ways of disagreeing with each other seem to be part of the established discursive norms that characterize this particular team or community of practice (see also Angouri, 2012). They are an integral part of the ways in which team members typically communicate with each other, and there was very little evidence to suggest that participants felt offended, for example, by Dan's often challenging and potentially threatening comments. In addition to these normative ways of doing disagreements, the shared overall goal of interlocutors (i.e. the pending completion of the research project) and related time constraints are likely to have had an impact on the severity of interlocutors' disagreements. Thus, explicitly disagreeing with each other in ways that may look like conflict from an outside perspective may actually more appropriately be described as normal or 'politic' behaviour (Watts, 2003) in this team. The same could be said about the ways in which team members – regardless of their level of seniority and status within the wider organization – contribute to the various leadership activities that are involved in steering through these instances of disagreement.

So what can these insights about the ways in which disagreements are being negotiated in this 'leaderless' team tell us about how leadership is performed on the micro-level of interaction? The specific processes involved in negotiating disagreements that we have described in our analyses have illustrated that the leadership in this team is a conjoint effort which is accomplished through a collaboration of all team members. Rather than one individual doing 'the leading', all team members contribute to the various activities involved in this process. Hence, in this team at least, the image of a single (and easily identifiable) leader has to be replaced by the more inclusive picture of a mosaic of leader*ship* activities in which everyone participates.

These observations and interpretations have wider implications for conceptualizations of leadership. In particular, they provide a convincing argument for viewing leadership as a conjoint process and an activity and performance rather than as a static attribute or quality of individuals. Moreover, our observations together with the findings of previous research on leadership discourse provide strong support for the claim that discourse is a central aspect of leadership (e.g. Berson and Avolio, 2004; Fairhurst, 2007; Ford, 2006; Schnurr, 2009b) and that conceptualizing leadership as a discursive performance offers valuable additional insights into how leadership is actually done. Such an emphasis on the discursive practices in and through which leadership is enacted and created, in turn, provides convincing arguments for undertaking discourse analytical studies to better capture the complexities of leadership. More specifically, as our analyses have shown, by drawing on discourse analytical tools and processes to analyse some of the activities that are indexed for leadership (such as negotiating and solving disagreements), it

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becomes possible to identify and describe some of the specific processes through which leadership is actually done in everyday encounters (see also Clifton, 2006). Thus, all of the strategies described above, such as inviting others to explain their concerns and attempting to reconcile opposing views, provide useful windows through which we can see how leadership is performed on the micro-level of interaction.

Such an undertaking also moves the focus away from individuals towards processes and activities, and is thus in line with recent trends in leadership research which are increasingly interested in how leadership is performed (compare discursive leadership), rather than in people's perceptions about leadership (as is often the focus in leadership psychology). And since many of the leadership activities, such as making decisions and reaching consensus, are team efforts rather than activities which individuals single-handedly perform, a discourse analytical approach that identifies and describes some of the strategies involved in these activities seems to provide a promising step forward in the quest of finding an answer to the question of what leadership is and how it is (successfully) accomplished.

Although our study is exploratory and has only looked at how leadership was enacted in one specific team with a particular focus on how team members negotiate disagreements and reach consensus, we hope that the analytical tools and practices that we have used will be taken on by other researchers and will be applied to other contexts. Moreover, we hope that our observations on distributed leadership have shown the importance of researching leadership performance in other than the traditional top–down constellations. Shifting the analytical focus away from individuals towards other leadership constellations is likely to assist us in identifying and understanding some of the specific processes through which leadership is actually done. There is an urgent need to explore more of these other, non-traditional leadership constellations, such as distributed leadership and co-leadership (see Schnurr and Chan, 2011). And a discourse analytical approach, we believe, provides a valuable set of tools and processes to succeed in this worthwhile and necessary undertaking of trying to uncover some of the complexities of leadership performance.

Acknowledgements

This research was only possible because of the generous assistance given to us by a scientific research group. We are really grateful to all members of this group. We would also like to thank Sixian Hah for transcribing parts of the data.

Notes

1. Although the roles of chair and leader are not the same, there is some overlap between the two concepts (see also Svennevig, 2012). For example, the activities involved in chairing a meeting have often been ascribed to leadership performance and are said to index leader identities (e.g. Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009; Marra et al., 2006).
2. Note that although Dan and Bee are married to each other and their personal relationship could be considered as an explanation for these rather explicit disagreements, we would like to emphasize that this kind of explicitly disagreeing with each other and frequent use of strong disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984) is also typical for the interactions between other team members who are in a purely collegial relationship with each other (e.g. Dan and Ylva in examples 2 and 3). Thus, rather than using the intimate relationship between Dan and Bee

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as an explanation, it seems more plausible to argue that this kind of explicitly disagreeing with each other is part of the discursive norms that members of this particular team (or community of practice; Wenger, 1998) have established. This interpretation is further supported in interviews after data collection where several participants described this direct and often seemingly confrontational interactional style as normal for this team.

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Appendix: Transcription notations

:	sound stretching
[ ]	overlapping utterances
(.)	micropause, i.e. shorter than (0.5 seconds)
(2.0)	pauses in seconds
(xxx)	inaudible word
(yes)	unsure transcription
° _ °	speech in low volume
CAPS	relatively high amplitude
(( ))	comments of the transcriber
?	rising terminal intonation
.	falling intonation
!	animated tone
=	latching between utterances
> <	quicker than surrounding talk
[laughs]	laughter
-	abrupt cut-off
underline	speaker's emphasis
Italics	uttered with laughter in voice
↑↓	marked shift into higher and lower pitch

Author biographies

Seongsook Choi is a senior teaching fellow at the University of Warwick, UK. Her current research interests include interdisciplinary discourse focusing specifically on interactions in research meetings, as well as computational and statistical approaches to mapping interactional dynamics.

Stephanie Schnurr is Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, UK. She has published widely on professional discourse with a particular focus on leadership performance and gender, cultural identity, the multiple functions and strategic uses of humour, and (im)politeness. Stephanie is the author of *Leadership Discourse at Work: Interactions of Humour, Gender and Workplace Culture* (2009, Palgrave Macmillan) and *Exploring Professional Communication: Language in Action* (2012, Routledge).

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