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## **Complaining about others at work**

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### Abstract

The paper investigates the interactional work required in order to launch a complaint about non-present third parties in discussions between employees and their manager. The study shows how the complaint recipient (the manager) creates opportunities for the complainer (the employee) to complain and how the recipient and complainer collaboratively facilitate entry into complaining by means of building joint epistemic access and affective stance towards the complainable. Focusing on the institutional context of performance appraisal interviews, the study further indicates that the legitimation of complaining is collaboratively treated as a managerial task. We utilize English translations of Finnish and Danish data.  
(100 words/100)

**Keywords:** complaining, joint understanding, epistemics, affective stance, institutional interaction

Complaints are highly moral in nature, and responses to complaints are impacted by the participants' orientation to underlying moral issues (Drew, 1998; Holt, 2012). Thus, complaining is a delicate activity, for in complaining, the complainer brings to the fore a negative assessment, the fairness of which is judged in the complaint response. This way, the complainer also reveals his or her disposition towards the complainable matter or person (Edwards, 2005; Whitehead, 2013.) The moral nature of complaints becomes visible, in that, they are co-constructed in nature (Monzoni, 2008; Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009). The complainer ensures the recipient's participation before explicitly complaining so that the complaint recipient may sometimes be the first to utter the actual complaint (Drew & Walker, 2009).

Complaints thus need careful collaboration in order for them to be recognized in interaction. In this study, we analyse how one party, the complaint recipient, creates opportunities for another party, the complainer, to complain, and how the complainer uses these opportunities to negotiate entry into complaining (see Schegloff, 2005). We use the term *complaint facilitation* for this collaborative accomplishment of entering into complaining. With *complaint initiation* we refer to the initial action that starts the sequence. We show how the participants accomplish the joint understanding of entering into complaining about third parties by evoking their shared epistemic access about central aspects of the complaint as well as giving and reciprocating cues about their affective stance about the matter.

### **Complaints in interaction**

A number of studies have dealt with complaints in interaction and contributed to our understanding of the structure of complaints and their interactional tasks (Drew, 1998; Heinemann & Traverso, 2009; Holt, 2012). Complaints have been defined as the expression of

negative feelings about a specific issue (Drew & Holt, 1988). This issue, the so-called complainable, is central, in that, another person (co-present or non-present), institution or the like can be held responsible for it (Heinemann & Traverso, 2009). A recurrent feature of complaints is that they project an affiliative response from the co-participant (Drew & Walker, 2009; Traverso, 2009; Holt, 2012) and, therefore, they often form a basis for building alliances.

Three main aspects have been identified as constitutive of complaints: the complainer, the complaint recipient and the complainable (Drew & Holt, 1988; Whitehead, 2013). The complainer is the one launching the complaint, and the complaint recipient is the co-present participant to whom the complaint is being addressed. The complainable is the aspect of focus, which is framed in a negative way; in regards to responsibility, it consists of two sides: the one who is responsible for having caused the complaint and the one who is responsible for solving it. In the first case, the complaint recipient is held directly responsible for the complainable and orients to this accountability accordingly (Dersley & Wootton, 2000; Monzoni, 2009). In the case of the complainable lying outside the complaint recipient's responsibility, something regularly referred to as "third party" or "absent party" complaints, issues of accountability and responsibility ought to be carefully negotiated (Heinemann, 2009; Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009). The current study focuses on such third party complaints.

Whereas much research on complaints has been conducted on everyday interaction (Drew, 1998; Drew & Holt, 1988; Drew & Walker, 2009; Laforest, 2009; Sacks, 1992, pp. 636–638; Schegloff, 2005; Traverso, 2009), a number of studies have dealt with complaints in institutional settings. Central to these studies is the fact that specific institutional settings impact the roles and identities of the participants involved. These studies therefore highlight the fact that context and role constellation are focal in how complaints are initiated, constructed and pursued. A study of home help visits (Heinemann, 2009) showed that complaints are

variously oriented, including the different responses to them, depending on whether the complainer is the home help provider or the home help user. Whitehead (2013) shows how categorical racial work is accomplished by means of complaint sequences in radio-phone-ins. Further, Ruusuvuori & Lindfors (2009) demonstrate how complaints in healthcare settings differ from those in everyday settings, in that, they often make relevant actions other than affiliation with the complainer (see also Feo & LeCouteur, 2017). This line of research dealing with the context-sensitivity of both the complaint initiation and the complaint development will be pursued further in the current paper.

Several studies have pointed to epistemics as fundamental for talk in interaction, in general (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Raymond & Heritage, 2006), and to the close relation between epistemics and moral work, in particular (Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011). In institutional talk, the morality of epistemic work is central to the emergence of interactional asymmetries (Asmuß, 2013). This becomes apparent when participants' different orientations to social and/or institutional norms impact the way in which specific work tasks are accomplished.

Furthermore, the maintenance of an appropriate level of affiliation in institutional encounters has been addressed in various studies (Jefferson & Lee, 1992; Ruusuvuori, 2005). Affiliating often entails showing a similar affective stance as that of the co-present speaker (Stivers et al., 2011, p. 21). Negative observations, such as complaints, embody an affective aspect and make relevant an affiliative response. This state of affairs needs to be managed in an institutional setting. By affective stance, we refer to the vocal and non-vocal resources with which affect is displayed. These resources entail, for example, smiling (Kaukomaa, Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori 2013) laughing (Vöge, 2010; Shaw, Hepburn, & Potter, 2013) and facial expression (Ruusuvuori & Peräkylä, 2009; Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2012).

In this paper, we examine employees' complaints about non-present third parties in a specific institutional setting, namely, performance appraisal interviews (PAIs). PAIs are yearly, dyadic, questionnaire-based meetings between a manager and an employee (Beardwell & Claydon, 2010). Apart from performance measurement, they are organizational practices in and through which employees can voice individual and organizational concerns, and managers may obtain important information about employee well-being (e.g. Asmuß, 2015).

We found third-party complaints in this institutional setting specifically interesting, as the asymmetry between the manager and the employee may emphasize the delicacy of complaining: criticizing a co-worker in front of a manager or affiliating with an employee's criticism against another employee may require extra manoeuvring. Furthermore, in complaining about third parties, the manager as the complaint recipient cannot be held directly accountable for the complainable, and therefore, responsibility and accountability issues ought to be carefully negotiated.

These aspects pose specific demands on the activity of complaining about third parties in PAIs, as the following analysis will show.

### **Data and method**

Our data were sourced from a corpus of Danish and Finnish video-recorded PAIs that were collected in collaboration with researchers working with PAIs in Nordic countries. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The images in the paper are line drawings in order to ensure anonymity, and all names and places in the transcripts are pseudonyms. The data consist of 138 PAIs from both private and public organizations (both large and medium sized), amounting to more than 150 hours of data (FI: 125, DK: 13). For the purpose of the current study, we analysed 40 PAIs (FI: 25, DK: 15), 15 of which included complaining against third

parties (FI: 9, DK: 6). We identified 30 (FI: 13, DK: 17) sequences of complaining against third parties.

Fourteen managers and 15 employees from three private and one public organization participated in the interviews. The various organizations had different practices for conducting interviews. All used a pre-filled form, which was specific to the organization in question, as a basis for the interview questions, but in practice, the interviews meandered as if they were less formal encounters. The collection does not aim for representativeness; instead, the sample indicates some recurrent sequential trajectories that we will present and discuss in the following analysis.

For the analysis of the PAI interactions, we use Conversation Analysis (Stivers & Sidnell, 2012) so as to be able to focus on complaining as an interactive accomplishment. As our data consist of video-recordings, we sought to acknowledge the multimodal nature of the interaction by paying attention to the embodied and material resources that the PAI participants used while facilitating complaining (Asmuß, 2015; Mortensen, 2013; Stivers & Sidnell, 2005). (See appendix for the transcription symbols of the multimodal aspects).

### **Analysis**

The analysis is divided into two parts. We will start out showing three complaining sequences in which the managers' initiating questions ranged from more to less focused (on potential problematic issues), thereby affording more or less elaborated entry into complaining. Even though the entry into complaining occurred through a slightly different trajectory in each excerpt, the analysis shows that in each case, the entry was collaboratively accomplished by building shared epistemic access and a shared affective stance towards the complainable issue. The analysis ends with two excerpts that illustrate how collaboration is treated as a necessary



part of entering into complaining. Throughout the analysis, we pay attention to the manager's prominent role in initiating the complaint entry.

Excerpt 1 provides an example where the entry into complaining is facilitated by the manager's focused initiating question, followed by a direct entry into complaining. Just before the excerpt, the participants arrived at a sequence closure. In this and the following excerpts, M is the manager, E is the employee.

### Excerpt (1) (FI/C5 "careless way of working")

Mgaze  
 1 M: No mikä muu [(0.5) puhuttaa ja [..\_\_\_\_\_ [harmittaa.  
*Well what else [(0.5) raises conversation and [annoyance.*  
 2 E: [.hhh [No vähän  
 [.hhh [Well a bit  
 Egaze down [... left, away from M

Mgaze  
 03 E: \_\_\_\_\_  
 semmonen tota ähhh (0.2) mul on vähän sellanen (1.0)  
*the kind of like ehhh (0.2) I have bit the kind of (1.0)*

Mgaze  
 04 \_\_\_\_\_  
 mieli että täs on vähän semmosta mhhh  
*feeling that here is a bit the kind of mhhh*

Mgaze  
 05 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (.) no ne johtuu varmaan siitä et  
*(.) well those are probably caused by the thing that*

Mgest [nods  
 Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_ [,,  
 06 on vähän niinku välinpitämä[töntä [touhua,  
 => *there's a bit like careless way of [working,*  
 Egaze ...right.....[\_\_\_\_\_

Mgest [writes  
 Mgaze to papers  
 07 M: [(Njaa ni,) [ (Oh,) ]  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgest writes  
 08 E: Ja se on vähän niinku [joka [ (.) puolella semmosta ettei

- Egaze *And it's a bit like [every [(.) where the kind that there's not*  
 Eggest \_\_\_\_\_ [,,,right  
 [gesturing with both hands
- 09 niinku(1.0) [oo tekemisen meininkiä  
 Egaze *like (1.0) [enough of that spirit of getting things done*  
 ..(left)
- 10 mu[n mielestä tarpeeksi.  
 Egaze *in[ my opinion.*  
 ..[\_\_\_\_\_
- 11 (2.0) ((E gazes at M; M writes))
- 12 E: Ja se on niinku (.) [jopa niinku voi sanoa Vehmaanki  
 Egaze *And it's like (.) [even like you can say in Vehmas factory*  
 \_\_\_\_\_ [,,,left)
- 13 [tehtaalta ni sielläki on vähän se muuttunut semmoseksi  
 Egaze *[so even there it has changed into a bit like into*  
 [..\_\_\_\_\_
- 14 (0.3) et @ei:hän tätä nyt tartte niin tarkkaan ajatella  
 Egaze *(0.3) that @we do:n't really need so closely to think*  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- 15 ja [fmiettiä ett[äf@.  
 Egaze *and [ponder about this so@.*  
 Eggest \_\_\_\_\_ [head move towards M

The complaining activity is initiated by the manager's question: *well what else raises conversation and annoyance?* The question opens up space for talking in general about negative feelings within the work community; it is not targeted specifically at the co-present employee. It invites a negative observation from the employee (line 1). This type of question, which projects negative assessments, can be seen as a way to facilitate talk about problematic issues, such as complaining (see Schegloff, 2005).

A further facilitating factor is that the question is not the first in line; it follows a line of similar questions. The employee's rapid start of response in terminal overlap (line 2) implies that he anticipated the opportunity to report on further problems.

However, even in this type of situation, in which a complaining activity is made directly relevant, we see that the employee demonstrates caution in launching the complaint. He qualifies the complaint with several mitigating expressions such as *a bit* and *like* as well as hesitations and restarts (lines 2–6). Moreover, he first formulates the negative evaluation as his personal feeling: *I have bit the kind of feeling that there's a bit the kind of*. The actual complaint is produced as an account of the employee's negative state of mind: *well those are probably caused by the thing that there's a bit like careless way of working*, the word *those* referring here to his present mindset – his feelings. Furthermore, he marks the start of the self-repair by annoyed-sounding outbreaths (lines 3 and 4). Thus, the employee displays the kind of affective stance afforded in the manager's question. This leads to the launch of the actual complainable, which is the way of working of other employees, described as *bit like careless*. The employee avoids directly blaming other employees and formulates the complaint as a general statement, not focusing on anyone in particular (line 6). The actual complaint is formulated as a declarative, as a statement of fact.

To sum up, in excerpt 1, the manager's question is focused in such a way that it displays a joint understanding that the PAI participants will be dealing with problematic issues. This paves the way for a negative evaluation of a work-related issue. There is a joint point of departure: the manager's question establishes the negative framing of the response and displays epistemic access to a possible complainable. Thus, no further effort is required to evoke a shared knowledge base, and the employee can reveal his negative stance at his first response to the question. The focused question results in a direct entry into complaining. Still, despite the



Egaze *Things may perhaps have changed somewhat, .hhh*  
 \_\_\_\_\_

05 Tuota ↑sää oot [laittanu tavotteeks että sää harjottelisit  
 Erm ↑you have [written as a goal that you'd practice  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_[,,down

Mgest [moves head sideways and back  
 06 luokassa [keskustelu[taitoja?  
 in the class [ discussion skills?  
 Egest [starts smiling

07 E: [£Mjoo:.£  
 [£Mye:s.£  
 [Figure 1



Figure 1

Mgaze towards E at the end of the gap  
 08 (0.5)  
 Egaze smiling, gazing down

Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_[,,papers [..\_\_\_\_\_]  
 09 M: [Mites (0.2) mite[s:: se [onnistuu ton sun poruk[£kas [kanssa£.  
 [How (0.2) ho[w:: does it[ work with that gan[£g of[yours£.  
 Egaze [..\_\_\_\_\_ [,,down  
 Egest [smiling  
 [Figure 2a [Figure 2b



Figure 2a

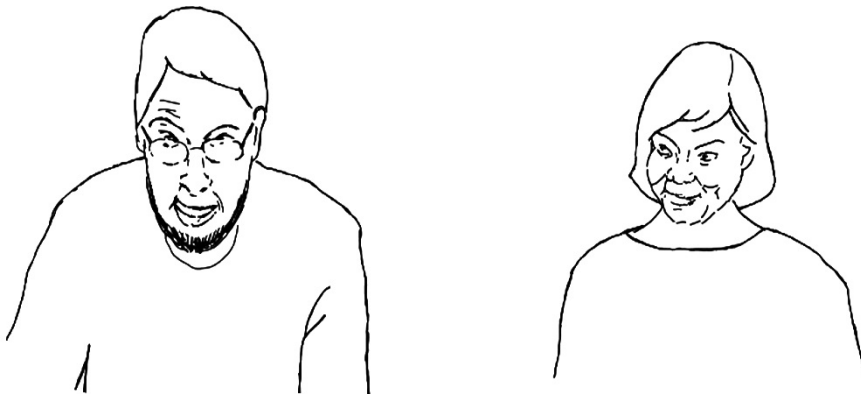


Figure 2b

Mgest smiling  
 Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 10 (0.7)  
 Egest smiling

Mgest smiling  
 Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 11 E: => Kyllä se työtä teet[tää.  
           *It is quite an ef[fort.*  
 12 M: [hhehh  
 Egaze down  
 Egest smiling

Mgest smiling [returning to po face  
 Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 13 E: Et se on (.)[ sillä lailla [(0.8) .hhh EI NIIN HELppoa  
           *So it's (.) [in a way [(0.8) .hhh NOT SO EASY*  
 Egaze ..up  
 Egest smiling

Mgest [M nods twice  
 Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 14 ko mitähh (.) olin [kuvi[tellut.=  
           *as (.) I had[ ima[gined.=*  
 15 M: [nii.  
 Egaze [..\_\_\_\_\_  
 Egest smiling

Mgest continues nodding  
 Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 16 E: =[Tai että aiemmin on [ollu monesti [(0.3) enemmän semmonen  
           *=[Or like before I have[ many times had [(0.3) more the kind of*  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_[,, down  
 Egest smiling [turns chin up twice

- Mgest \_\_\_\_\_ [nods twice  
Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_ [\_\_\_\_\_  
17 fiili[s että vo:i niinku[ käy<sup>ä</sup> asio[ita (0.2)  
*feeli[ng that one ca:n [like ta:lk [about (0.2)*
- Mgest writes  
Mgaze [,,papers  
18 [ke:skustelemalla [mutta tuossa se: kyllä tuottaa edelleenki  
*[things [ but there it really causes*  
Egest [touches nose, rubs nose, stops smiling
- Mgest writing  
19 <vaikeuksia>,  
*<problems> still.*
- Mgest writing  
20 (0.5)
- Mgest writing  
21 E: => Että siellä on (1.5) ↑MUUtamia tyypp<sup>e</sup>jä jotka (0.2) on  
*So there are (1.5) ↑SOme people who (0.2) are*
- Mgest writing [nods  
22 niinku sillai aktiivisia ja ääne[ssä  
*like kind of active and talk*
- Mgest writing  
23 sillai niinku ↑positiivis(h)e[ssa mielessä?  
*kind of like in a ↑posit(h)[ive sense?*  
24 M: [mm-m,
- 25 E: => Sitte on niitä (.) äänekkäitä jotka  
*Then there are those (.) loud ones*
- 26 ↑muuten vaan häirittee,  
*who disturb just for the ↑sake of it,*
- Mgest [nods twice  
Mgaze [\_\_\_\_\_  
27 => Ja sitte[ on palj[o niitä jotka ei niinku[ (0.2) sano<  
*And then[ there a[re ma<sup>n</sup>y who don't like [(0.2) say<*  
Egaze [\_\_\_\_\_  
Mgest [nods twice  
Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
28 oikein mitää[ ja joita on hirveen vaikee saaha mukaan °siihen°.

Egaze really anything and who are really hard to engage in that.

At line 1, the manager refers to what the employee has written on the form, thereafter changing direction and remarking that the situation might have changed since the employee's written response (lines 1-2, 4). Thereafter, he topicalizes the goal that the employee has stated on the form: *you have written as a goal that you'd practice discussion skills in the class?* The manager's assumption about the likelihood that the situation might have changed can be seen as implying that the employee's written goal might not have been reached. Thus, the manager's topicalization opens up a possibility for the employee to divulge potential problems in reaching the goal, paving the way for complaining.

The employee begins to smile from line 6, prior to responding with *£mye:s.£*. She affirms what she has written, but qualifies the affirmation with a turn-initial smile and stretches her response. As the manager's question implies a potential failure to reach the goal that the employee has set for herself, her smile can be interpreted as repelling possible connotations of incompetence by taking a self-ironic stance towards the goal and her success in reaching it (see Figure 1). Kaukomaa et al. (2013) have shown how turn-initial smiles can construct an emotional transition in conversation. Further, Clift (1999) has stated that irony can be used as inviting affiliation in entering potentially sensitive topics, and Edwards (2005) has suggested that laughter and irony provide important response cues to complaint recipients and can be used to strengthen or undermine a complaint's factual basis and seriousness. By adopting a self-ironic stance, the employee is able to index herself as capable of reflecting upon her previous (perhaps overtly ambitious) goal of getting her class to learn discussion skills (see Edwards, 2005).

There is a gap of 0.5 seconds, at the end of which the manager lifts his gaze at the employee and asks: *how does it work with that gan£g of yours£* (line 9, Figures 2a and 2b). He



also starts smiling at the end of his question. The smile is situated at the expression *that gang of yours*, which is indicative of a somewhat less disciplined bunch of pupils, and continues during the subsequent gap. His categorization, which references a negative disposition of the pupils, affords the development of a possible negative evaluation of them. By continuing to smile in response to the employee's smile, the manager also keeps up the stance displayed by the employee in her response at line 7. This way, he also facilitates the delivery of a negative report by the employee.

Following this, the employee utters a negative statement: *it is quite an effort* (line 11). She continues to smile and utters the statement looking down, thus also preserving the ironic stance they have adopted. The manager responds to this with a short laugh token (line 12), thus affiliating with the employee's stance. Thus, at this point, they have reached a shared ironic stance towards the topic. Thereafter, at line 13, the employee initiates a narrative about her difficulties in teaching discussion skills to the class (lines 13-14). At this point, their facial expressions return to neutral, displaying a change of stance from ironic to more serious. The manager's "nii" response at line 15 claims affiliation and recognition of the logic of the employee's point (see Sorjonen 2001, p. 133). At line 21, in response to the manager's display of affiliation and access to the matter at hand, the employee starts negatively assessing two of the three groups in her class (lines 25-28).

Here, the manager has epistemically paved the way for the complaint by implying that he has knowledge about the class and especially about its negative characteristics. Furthermore, both participants have made affective displays, implying the ironic stance they are taking towards the topic of discussion. Thus, the participants have reached a similar affective stance towards the topic of talk, which then affords a common anticipation of a negative assessment developing into a complaint (see also Edwards, 2005).

The following excerpt provides an instance of a more elaborated complaint facilitation. The initiating question topicalizes the situation of other departments, making relevant an evaluation, but offering no hint of the expected valence of the evaluation. Here, the building and display of joint understanding becomes more prominent, which is in contrast to the more focused initiations, where it is built by the manager from the start. Moreover, we see an ongoing orientation towards affective and affiliative aspects as playing a role in progressing into the complainable.

The excerpt starts when the manager initiates a new topic by posing a wh-question (Fox & Thompson, 2010) about other departments – *How then about other departments* (line 1) – which makes an extended response turn relevant. The construction of the initiation question, *How then about*, implies a relation to the prior-discussed topic. However, neither does it indicate any potential delicacy relating to the topic raised nor does it specify an item or person that could be worth talking about.

### Excerpt (3) (DK/17 “to get furious”)

Mgaze [down at papers  
 01 M: [Hva' så med andre afdeling[er?  
 [How then about other departme[nts?  
 02 E: [Andre afdelinger.  
 [Other departments.  
 Egaze [down at papers  
 03 M: Ja.=  
 Yes.=  
 04 E: =Generelt godt. .Hhhh synes jeg.  
 =Generally good. .Hhhh I think.  
 05 M: Generelt godt.  
 Generally good.  
 06 E: J:\*a\* det mi::- generelle::\*det mit (.) generelle billede.=  
 Y:\*e\*s this is my::- genera::\*I this is my (.) general picture.=  
 07 E: =altså jeg ha::\*r\* lige sådan lidt det de:r  
 =well I ha::\*v\*e like a little bit about this

08 E: æ Blommeballe det har der har været så meget i .HHH igennem  
 uh Blommeballe this has there has been so much f .HHH for

Mgaze [ ... ]

09 E: æhm [månederne o' ]årene.  
 uhm [months and ]years.

Egaze [ ... ]

10 (.)

Mgaze [ \_\_\_\_\_ ] , , , down on papers

11 E: [at at [de:r=l- de:r lidt æ\*: \* (.) mt æ de:t [forkert  
 [that that [ there is=l-there is litte u\*: \* (.) mt uh it [is wrong

Egaze [ \_\_\_\_\_ ] , , , to left

Mgaze [ ... ]

12 E: at si::ge [.hh (.) [dårligt, men de:r sådan et=  
 to sa::y [.hh (.) [bad but there is such an=

Mgaze [ , , , down

Mgest [puts papers down, gets ready for filing

13 E: =[kunstigt (.) [æ: (.) forhold.  
 =[artificial (.) [ u: (.) relationship.

Egaze [ ... ]

14 (0.6)

Mgest [writes

15 E: [fordi at .hhh at i modsætning til alle mulige andre  
 [because .hhh in contrast to many other people

Egaze [ , , , down

16 E: så er jeg meget klar på hvor langt je\*: \*g  
 I am very clear about how far I\*: \*

17 E: [går (.) i forhold til [Peter.  
 [go (.) in relation to [Peter.

Egaze [ ... ]

18 (0.2)

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

19 M: Mhm.  
 Mhm.

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgest takes notes

20 (0.8)

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgest [M puts down pencil, leans backw., rubs eyes

21 M: .h[h

22 E: => [Og du har jo selv været med (.) til en af  
 And you have PRT yourself been present at one of  
 [And you have been present yourself (.) at one of

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

[Figure 3

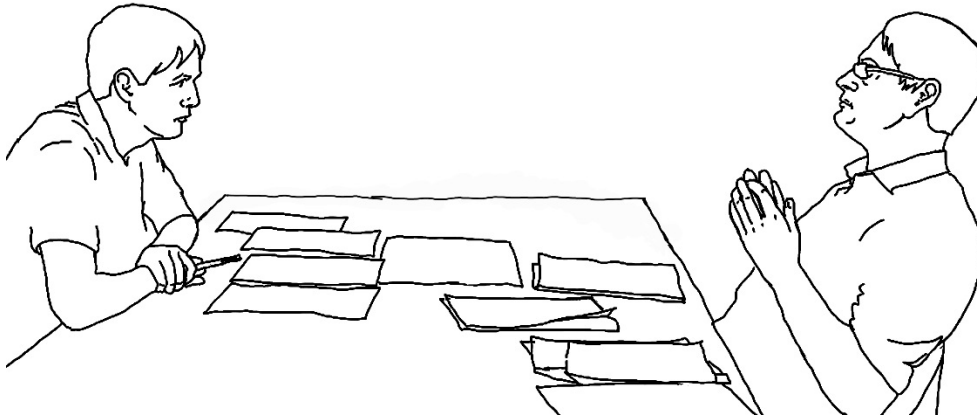


Figure 3

23 E: => de sé<sup>u</sup>ancer hvor det var  
*these gatherings where it was like*  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_ [...\_\_\_\_\_]

24 E: => sådan han var lige ved at [lette på låget igen.  
*such he was just about to lift up the=lid again.*  
*he was just about to [get furious again.*  
 ((use of idiomatic expression: to lift up the lid))  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgest [smile

25 M: hhhh[hm  
 hhhh[hm

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

In response to the non-focused question posed by the manager, the employee constructs an elaborated complaint sequence and starts by repeating the central part of the question, *other departments*, as a request for confirmation (line 2), which is minimally acknowledged by the manager (line 3). In line 4, the employee provides a direct answer to the question by producing an assessment: *generally good*. While this assessment is positive, it also specifies a limitation, in that, it only holds true in regards to the general level, thus indicating that there might be

problems on a more specific level. This assessment is followed by an increment in the form of an epistemic marker, *I think*, pointing to the subjective and individual nature of his assessment. That way, no joint understanding of the complaint is built, but the space for a negative evaluation is projected. In line 5, the manager produces a post-expansion, *generally good*, with a turn-final intonation marking no more to come, thus further pursuing an evaluation by the employee (Schegloff, 2007). That way, the manager displays that he has understood the information provided; however, he does not display an affiliative stance towards the assessment. The repeat posits *generally good* as a topic to be further elaborated by the employee.

In response, the employee acknowledges the manager's receipt of information in line 5 and expands by pointing to the fact that this is the general picture, insinuating that there might be more specific, more critical aspects. This expansion entails a creaky voice, hesitation markers and restarts, all indicative of a potential socially problematic action. Latching onto the prior, the employee then continues with a first, rather subtle complaint (lines 7–9). Here, he starts with a problem-projecting particle, *well*, followed by a framing of what is to come as something less important: *I have like a little bit*. The employee then points to a specific geographical location of the organization, *Blommeballe*, and indicates that there are problems. By referring to a location that they both know of, the employee works on establishing a basis for joint understanding. Following the mention of *Blommeballe*, the manager and the employee establish mutual gaze. At this point, the manager does not display any knowledge about the problem raised. In response, the employee produces a continuation of his prior turn, *that*, where he points to a problematic relationship between this location and the employee's department. He does so by first framing this issue as not bad and then turning it into something potentially problematic: *It is wrong to say bad, but there is such an artificial relationship*. This

information is provided as news, but at this point, there is no uptake from the manager.

Consequently, the employee continues with an account of the complaint, saying *because* after a 0.6 pause. Here, he identifies the actual problem, not as being a geographical location, but of a specific person working in that location, *Peter* (line 17). The manager's responsive actions are minimal acknowledgement tokens and the filling of information on the questionnaire (Mikkola & Lehtinen, 2014), which indicates aligning, not affiliative actions, and there is no display of complaint recognition (lines 18–20). At this point, the employee can either suspend the move to a complaining activity, due to the lack of clear affiliative actions by the manager, or he can pursue it further.

He does the latter by marking what follows as a continuation of the prior with *og* (line 22). While he does so, the manager stops filling out the information, puts his pen down, leans backwards and rubs his eyes. He thus communicates his undivided readiness to listen. In response to the manager's display of full attention, the employee appeals to joint understanding by starting his utterance, marking what is to come as something that they have joint epistemic access to *and you have been present yourself* (line 22). Here, the employee is referring to a single joint experience, but at the same time, he indicates that the inadequate behaviour of the co-worker has recurred *again*. When launching the complaint proper, the employee upgrades her negative telling by making use of an idiomatic expression ('lift up the lid') as a way to describe the co-worker's irritable and inadequate temper (Drew & Holt, 1988). The manager verbally acknowledges this, though minimally, as he does so with a smile on his face. Thus, he displays a supportive affective stance towards the complaint raised by the employee and accepts their equal epistemic status.

To sum up, we have seen that in a more elaborated complaint facilitation, the manager produces a less focused complaint initiation. As a result, the pursuit of joint understanding

becomes more prominent, and the participants collaboratively facilitate the entry into the complaining sequence by means of joint epistemic access and shared affective stance. This elaborated entry into the complaining activity indicates the social delicacy and the morally laden nature of the ongoing activity.

The preceding three excerpts showed a continuum of managers' initiations that afforded the employee's evaluation of some non-present third party and this party's activities. The initiations can focus directly on negative aspects (excerpt 1), as joint understanding about entering into complaining was prominent from the initiation. They can pave the way for complaining through implications, such as suggesting certain categories for third parties that bear a negative connotation (excerpt 2), or they can simply open space for evaluation by a neutral topicalization (excerpt 3). With the more focused initiations, less work on establishing joint understanding was necessary to enter into complaining, and with the more elaborated ones, the participants invested more resources into building a joint understanding about entering into complaining. The resources used in building this joint understanding were the display of shared epistemic access and affective stance.

In the remainder of the analysis, we examine two excerpts illustrating that collaboration is essential for entering into a complaining activity. In the first excerpt, the lack of employee collaboration leads to the manager pursuing complaining by moving from less focused to more focused initiations. In the second excerpt, we can see how the manager's lack of collaborating leads to the suspension of the complaining activity.

In the following excerpt, in the course of pursuing complaining, we see the manager moving from an open initiation to a more focused initiation, indicating the specific institutionality of the talk, as one of the prominent goals for a manager in a PAI is to identify potential problematic areas that impact an employee's performance and well-being. Here, the

manager and employee talk about the challenges faced by the latter due to some re-structuring in the organisation, which has resulted in new collaborations. The employee has been transferred to another team, and the new team leader, Annika, is responsible for the company's branding process, the person in focus in the excerpt. When the manager launches a new topic, *What about the area of branding*, in line 1, he does so in an unfocused way, topicalizing a specific work area without identifying any trouble sources. Throughout the sequence, the manager is in the course of spreading butter on a roll.

#### Excerpt (4) (DK/2 “overly ambitious”)

Mgaze [down on roll  
Mgest [M spreads butter on roll  
01 M: [Hvad me:d området æh branding >og så videre?<  
[*What about the area of uh branding >and so on?<*  
Egaze [down on table  
02 (0.2)  
03 M: [.hmt har I kunnet finde ud af det?  
[*.hmt have you (PL) been able to solve this issue?*  
Egaze [...\_\_\_\_\_]  
04 (.)  
Mgaze [...\_\_\_\_\_]  
05 M: [Fordi- (.) [jeg ka' huske=æhm (0.3) [sådan li:ge (0.4)  
[*Because (.) [I can remember=uhm (0.3) [like right (0.4)*  
Egaze [,,, [...\_\_\_\_\_]  
Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_[down on roll  
06 M: i starten [der var det sådan noget [hva'=er hvad er  
*in the beginning there it was like [what=is it what=is it*  
Egaze \_\_\_\_\_[,,,]  
07 M: Annika hun gør hva'=er hvad er vi skal gøre, o' (0.2)  
*Annika she does what=is what is it we shall do and (0.2)*  
08 M: .h er Annika nu ikke i gang med noget det vi (.) normalt  
*.h is Annika now not dealing with someth. that we (.) normally*  
Mgaze [...\_\_\_\_\_]  
09 M: skal gøre.=Ikke fordi, [de havde ikke ø:: [kræfter til at gøre  
*deal with.=Not because, [they did not have u:: energy to deal*  
Egest [nods several times  
Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_[down on roll  
10 M: det.=Men du kender godt [det der (.) .hhhh den der så=øh



- with it.=But you (SG) know well [that there (.) .hhh this like=uh
- 11 (0.5)
- Mgaze [...\_\_\_\_\_
- 12 M: er [der nogen,  
is [there anyone,
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_
- 13 E: .hh [alt[så::: )  
.hh [li:::ke
- 14 M: [(>Bliver der [ta-<)  
[>Is there being [taken<
- Egaze [...\_\_\_\_\_[,,,
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_
- 15 M: [Bliver der taget noget fra os [i forhold til;  
[Is anything about to be taken from us in relation to
- Egaze [...\_\_\_\_\_
- Mgaze [\_\_\_\_\_ [down on roll
- 16 [(0.5)+ [(0.7)
- Egaze [\_\_\_\_\_ [,,, \_\_\_\_\_
- Egest [nods slightly
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_ [,,, down on roll
- 17 E: .hmtH[hh
- 18 M: [.h Har du mærket noget?  
[.h Have you (SG) noticed anything?
- 19 [(1.0)
- Egaze [right tow. window
- Mgaze [...\_\_\_\_\_ [down on roll
- 20 E: [.hmt altså jeg synes [det- det går sådan lidt [op og ned;(.) me'  
.hmt well I think [it goes a little [up and down; (.) with  
Egaze [...\_\_\_\_\_
- 21 med det >ka' man sige<.[=Lige den[gang uhm,  
with it >so to say<. [=Right whe[n uhm
- 22 M: [ja  
[yes
- Egaze \_\_\_\_\_ [,,,
- ((11 lines omitted, where the employee elaborates that the new branding manager, Annika, actually fully lived up to the expectations in terms of contributing efficiently to the team. During this report, the manager responds with acknowledgement tokens, indicating his acceptance of and support for the report))
- Mgaze ...\_\_\_\_\_
- 34 E: =og så ku' jeg så komme ind i: nogle projekter og så'n noget.=  
=and finally I could become part of some projects and the like.=
- Egaze ...\_\_\_\_\_
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_
- 35 M: =Ja. Altså ku' du komme ind [(ad porten) når=  
=Yes. So you (SG) could come in [(the door) when=  
36 E: [Ja.

[Yes.]

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_

37 M: =[nu der sku arbej(h)des.  
 =[work needed to be do(h)ne.

38 E: [Ja ja.  
 [Yes yes

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgaze [,,, down at table

Mgest [smiles

39 E: [Så[dan et eller andet.  
 [So[*mething like that.*

40 M: [Ja.  
 [Yes.

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

[Figure 4



Figure 4

41 M: [Ja.  
 [Yes.

Egaze [,,,

42 (0.5)

Mgaze [.....]

43 E: =>.hh Nu synes jeg [jamnn- jeg har [fornemmelsen på at a' hun m-  
 .hh Now believe I PRT I have [feeling=the in that that she p-  
 .hh Now I believe I have [the impression that she p-

Egaze [.....]

Mgaze [,,,

44 E: => måske: alligevel .hh tager (.) [>munden lidt for fuld<.=  
 perhaps anyway takes [mouth=the little too full.  
 perhaps anyway is somewhat (.) [>overly ambitious<.=

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

In line 1, the manager produces a less focused wh-question, not indicating any evaluative stance towards the topic. The employee does not respond to the question, and he does not establish eye contact with the manager. After a minimal gap, the manager, in line 3, poses a polar question, which topicalizes neither a specific event nor a specific organisational member to be talked about. Nevertheless, this question can be seen as inviting a complaining activity, as the focus on solving something, *Have you been able to solve this*, presupposes that something has not been functioning properly, thus implying that a negative experience lies behind (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). In response, there is again no uptake by the employee. The manager then provides a multi-unit turn, whereby the complaint facilitation becomes increasingly focused. He does so by first identifying a potential cause for the trouble in the form of a specific person *Annika* (line 7). He also frames the experience as a shared one by using the personal pronoun *we* (lines 7, 8), thus appealing to joint epistemic access to the matter at hand. However, the employee does not take over and continues to look down at the table, while the manager shifts between spreading butter on his roll, looking down at it and gazing at the employee. We can thus see a mutual disengagement of the participants in the ongoing interaction. In line 10, the manager starts a new TCU with the turn initiation *But you know very well*, which explicitly frames the telling as something that builds on joint epistemic access, in that, the manager has access to the employee's state of knowledge. At a TRP, the employee starts with what could be an attempt to take over *Altså*, but she suspends the action in line 14 when the manager takes over by posing another polar question. The beginning of the question is recycled once it is clear of the overlap in line 15. In line 16, the employee nods slightly and produces a possible turn initiation in the form of an inbreath. In line 18, the manager poses another polar question, this time inquiring directly about the employee's own experience, *have you noticed anything*, which is clearly complaint implicative. In lines 20 and

21, the employee responds in a way that indicates delicacy, producing a turn consisting of a subjective marker (*I think*), restarts, formulaic features (*so to say*) and mitigations. She first presents non-problematic issues (lines 20–34). In line 35, the manager acknowledges this and produces a formulation of the prior, which is designed to be confirmed. He does so by inserting laughter at the end of his utterance (Shaw et al., 2013). The employee joins this display of affective stance by smiling in her affiliative response action in lines 38 and 39. After having established shared epistemic and affective stance, the employee finally produces a complainable: *she perhaps still is somewhat overly ambitious* (lines 43-44). The complainable entails a number of features identified as common ingredients of complainability: it is delivered in the form of an idiomatic expression (Drew & Holt, 1988), and it entails the format “too x” (Schegloff, 2005).

Summing up the analysis of the excerpt, we see that the manager moves from a less to more focused complaint initiation in order to pursue a complaining activity. That way, the manager increases the relevancy of a complaint as the next possible action. This might be an indication of the specific institutional task considered fundamental for PAIs, which is to identify problematic work-related issues. While moving from less to more focused complaint initiations, the participants carefully and collaboratively negotiate joint understanding and a shared affective stance, before finally entering into complaining.

In the following example, we can see another instance of the centrality of collaboration in entering into complaining. Here, the employee pursues the complaining activity, but the manager does not display complaint recognition, and the complaining is suspended; instead, a mutual topic shift is accomplished.

In excerpt (5), the employee is in the course of reporting about his work tasks over the last year.

**Excerpt (5) (DK/5 “less outreaching”)**

Mgaze [down on table

01 M: [Jah.  
[Yesh.

Egaze [down on table

02 E: Mthh:: og så har vi medvirket til koordinering af  
*And then we have contributed to the coordination of*

03 (tillægsstyring) og råvare<indkøb og em>ballage og  
*(allowance management) and råw=material=purchase and packaging and*

Mgaze [...]
   
04 så videre. h æ:::\*h altså jeg ha\*r\* (.) [ik'  
*so on. h u:::\* actually I ha\*ve\* (.) [not*

Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_[,,,
   
05 [været [særlig meget [ind over det.  
*[been especially [involved.*

Egaze [\_\_\_\_\_  
[Figure 5

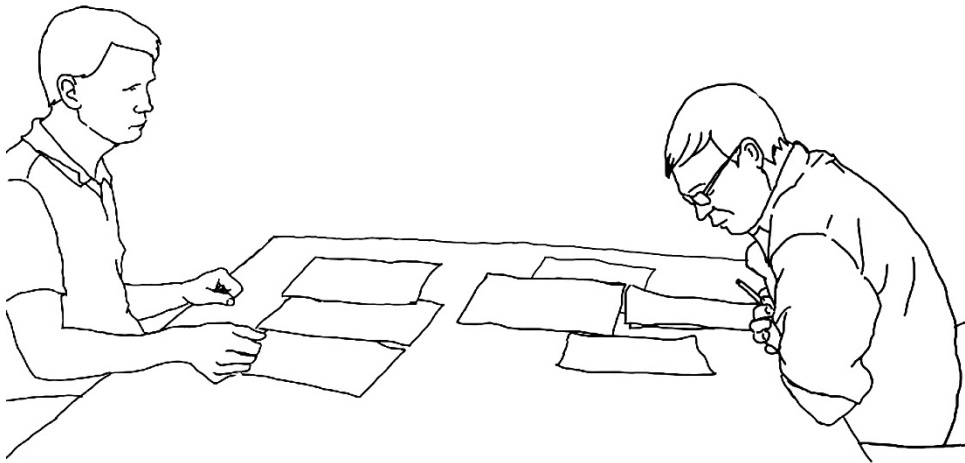


Figure 5

06 (.)

Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

07 E: Æ::: det skal j:eg [erkende.=Det har ikke haft min fokus.  
*U:::h this I: have [to admit.=This has not been my focus.*

Egaze [,,,

08 (.)

09 E: ø::[::] ]: der har været nogle konkrete situationer hvor  
*u::[::] ]: there have been some specific situations where*

10 M: [Mhm.]  
[Mhm.]

- Mgaze [.....]  
 11 E: jeg både har snakket med .hh Peter [Mogensen (.) som jo  
 I both have talked to .hh Peter [Mogensen who PRT  
 I have both talked to .hh Peter [Mogensen (.) who actually
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 12 E: er sød og dejlig proaktiv og så nogle andre  
 is friendly and nicely proactive and then some other
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_[down  
 Mgest [nods  
 13 E: situationer hvor jeg har været [opsøgende i [forhold til (.) .h  
 situations where I have been [outreaching in [relation to (.) .h  
 Egaze [.....]
- 14E: => æ\*\*\* [til æ\*\*\* Christian Møller som er (.) [er mindre  
 u\*\*\* [to [\*\*\* Christian Møller who is (.) [less  
 Egaze [,,,  
 Egest [((turns page))
- Mgest [nods slightly  
 15 => [opsøgende i den sammenhæng.  
 [outreaching in this matter.
- 16 (0.2)
- 17 M: Mhm;  
 Mhm
- 18 [(2.5)  
 Egest [E reorganizes paper documents
- Mgaze [.....]  
 Mgest [moves back in chair  
 19 E: [Så har v[i-  
 [So we ha[ve  
 20 M: [Jeg tror vi-, jäh[h?  
 [I believe we, yesh[h?  
 21 E: [Jähhh?  
 [Yes?  
 Egaze [.....]
- 22 (0.3)
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 23 M: Vil du have flere?  
 Do you have more to add?  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_
- 24 (.)
- Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 25 M: Så vil jeg supplere efterfølgende.  
 Then I will ad[d my points afterwards.  
 26 E: [( )  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

Mgaze \_\_\_\_\_  
 27 E: Ja. (.) Det er fint.  
           Yes. (.) *This is fine.*  
 Egaze \_\_\_\_\_

In this excerpt, the employee initiates the complaining activity by reporting on his current work tasks. He starts pointing to a specific task that he has not put much effort into (lines 1–5). The report is clearly framed as the manager not having access to the information provided by the employee. At the following TRP, the manager withdraws mutual gaze and looks down at his documents, not taking the opportunity to acknowledge or assess the information provided. In line 7, the employee takes over and provides an account explaining why he has not done so. As he speaks, he looks down at his notes, continuing to do so at the following TRP. The manager does not respond, and in turn, the employee continues with more information about this work task. He points out that he has talked with other people who were more involved in this specific work task. Here, he begins to praise one colleague (line 12), who he describes as *friendly and proactive*. Through the use of the epistemic marker, *jo*, this description is framed as no-news to the manager (Heinemann et al., 2011). This is followed by a negatively framed report, a potential complainable, about another colleague (lines 12–15). The employee starts with self-praise, indicating that he takes initiative to get information about the work task *I have been outreaching* (line 13). In specifying the person in relation to whom he has been taking this initiative, his talk becomes hesitant, with pauses and restarts (lines 13-14). After having mentioned the co-worker's name, he continues by negatively characterising him as *less outreaching* (lines 14-15). This negative assessment of a co-worker's behaviour can form the basis of a complaint. However, the employee does not appeal to a shared epistemic stance, and there is no display of affective stance by the manager in order to support the subtle indication of a complaining activity. Instead, the manager responds with a slight nod and a minimal acknowledgement token. The employee then starts reorganising his document, which formed

the basis of his report. This indicates that instead of pursuing the complaint implicativeness of the employee's negative assessment of a co-worker, both participants now orient to advancing the ongoing topic. This moving forward in the list of work tasks is a clear indication of the current topic being closed and the complaining activity being collaboratively suspended.

Summing up, collaboratively building joint understanding seems essential for entering into the delicate activity of complaining. To build joint understanding, the aspects of shared epistemic access and shared affective stance are central. In case these aspects are not accomplished, the move into the complaining activity is suspended, and instead, other interactional projects are initiated. In all cases, the manager had a prominent role in initiating and/or legitimizing the entry into complaining. This brings to the fore the specific characteristics of the institutional asymmetry of PAIs.

### **Findings and discussion**

The analyses showed that entering into complaining about a non-present third party in PAIs entails closely coordinated collaboration between managers and employees, as they need to build joint understanding regarding the appropriateness of launching a complaint. We saw three instances of a continuum, whereby the managers made more or less focused initiations that afforded an entry into complaining. The type of initiation had consequences for the progression of moving into the complaining activity, in that, the more focused initiations led more directly into complaining, whereas with the less focused initiations, the move into complaining required additional elaboration in order to enable the building of joint understanding (excerpts 1–3). In the cases of non-existent collaboration (excerpt 4-5), entry into complaining was not achieved. The analyses also found that participants regularly drew upon assumed shared knowledge and a shared affective stance in the form of, for instance, facial expressions and laughter as resources



aimed at managing the delicacy of moving into complaining. It was also noteworthy that even in more focused initiations, the complaining activity was still regularly treated as socially delicate, which showed, for example, through the use of hesitation markers, restarts and mitigating devices.

Drew and Walker (2009) have shown that complaints are often co-constructed: they start as implications of a negative stance towards a target and are developed into clear-cut complaining sequences in collaboration with the complaint recipient. In our study, we succeeded in further illuminating this process. What we have added here is the focus on building shared knowledge and a shared affective stance as essential in this process. More or less focused initiations afford different trajectories of building shared knowledge in entering into complaining activity. The more focused initiations by the manager contained a shared piece of information concerning the valence of the evaluation that is made relevant (excerpt 1) or the complained about the third party (excerpts 2 and 3), this way, offering a starting point for joint epistemic understanding of the activity and/or the target. Building joint affective stance before the actual complaint is launched is achieved through various vocal and embodied resources. Here, we have shown how such affective cues work to pave the way for the reciprocation of the stance displayed, affording affiliation with the complaint.

In terms of the specific institutional context examined, it is important to emphasize the central role of equalizing epistemic asymmetries in complaint production and recognition. Through focused initiations that afford the building of joint understanding to enter into complaining, the managers level out the possible institutional asymmetry concerning knowledge about the work environment. Through initiations in which they, on the hand, display some knowledge and, on the other hand, show their position as less knowledgeable, while positing the employee as the participant who knows more, they even out the institutional

asymmetry. Furthermore, by asking the employee to deliver information about negative issues, the managers legitimize the employees' morally accountable activity of complaining. Thus, managers may use the institutionally asymmetrical relationship between managers and employees as a resource for building shared knowledge in the process of complaint facilitation.

One institutional task of PAIs is to bring to the fore and discuss potential problems within an employee's work environment. In this sense, a complaining activity in PAIs should be institutionally legitimate. This is observable in the various ways in which the managers' initiations paved the way for the collaborative process of entering into complaining. Furthermore, in the case where the complaining activity was initiated by the employee (excerpt 5), we saw a lack of collaboration as well as mutual disengagement, and the complaint was not pursued by the manager. This might indicate that in this particular institutional context, the legitimation of complaining was treated as a managerial task.

We also saw that, in moving into complaining, both participants were oriented towards social norms concerning the delicacy of complaining. The complainers were cautious about not giving an impression about themselves as having a general disposition to negative interpretations (Edwards, 2005), while the complaint recipients avoided offering direct evaluations of the complainable and, instead, used resources such as irony and implicitly negative categorizations. This observation is in line with previous findings about the interdependency of social and institutional norms within PAIs (Asmuß, 2013).

In line with previous studies (e.g. Drew, 1988; Holt, 2012), our analysis shows the moral nature of complaining. The participants display their orientation to the social delicacy of complaining in their carefully designed entry into the complaining activity. For the PAI setting, this becomes especially central, in that, in revealing their disposition towards a complainable matter or person, complainers and complaint recipients have to deal with issues

of both loyalty and responsibility. When the complaint is about colleagues, managers need to balance between demonstrating loyalty to the complainer versus the non-present employee, while employees also need to maintain some loyalty towards their colleagues in order not to appear as difficult co-workers themselves. When the complainable are stakeholders other than colleagues, managers risk taking over an issue that is under the complainers' direct responsibility (as in the teacher complaining about her students), while employees need to avoid showing incompetence in managing their duties. As shown in this study, these moral issues might already be traceable to the facilitation and the carefully designed entry into the complaint sequence.

When discussing the findings, we need to pay attention to their possible context-sensitivity. In other institutional contexts, the moral nature of complaining and the display of shared epistemic and affective stance might work differently. Therefore, further research is needed across different institutional contexts in order to get a better understanding of the role of epistemics and affective stance in accomplishing complaint facilitation. In terms of accountability and responsibility, it would be relevant to investigate interaction formats other than those of a two-party nature in order to ascertain how these issues are organized.

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