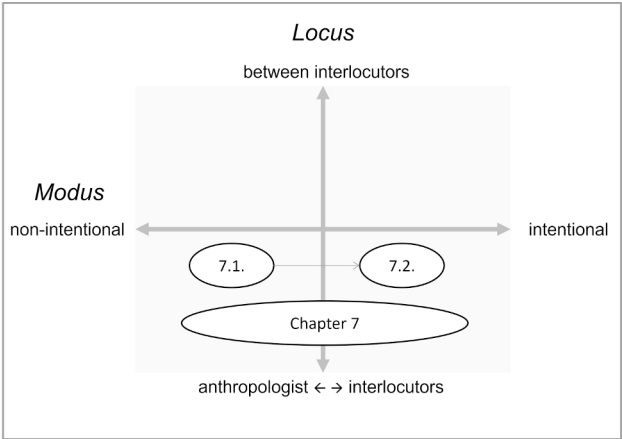# 8. Collaboration as a Working Misunderstanding

Before focusing on the working misunderstandings between interlocutors, I will discuss in this chapter a working misunderstanding of the *locus* anthropologist ↔ interlocutors; that is, between Advice Company's employees and myself. The working misunderstanding centred on disparate notions of "collaboration" in the context of project work, and it remained undetected and working for the first phase of my fieldwork. I will illustrate how the working misunderstanding shifted from the initially unintentional *modus* to an intentional one, through which I shaped my actions to comply with employees' understanding of "collaboration" (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Chapter allocation on the L/M quadrant

8.1.   Discovering "collaboration"

The advice most frequently given in the Discover Advice Company training for new employees, which I attended very early in my fieldwork, was that employees should practise "boundaryless behaviour" in the office and "share information openly and freely across the organisation". Along with this advice came a few collaboration activation games, such as passing a sugar cube along a line of team members with chopsticks, in order to emphasise the importance of each team member to the success of the entire task (Section 3.4.2).

Indeed, the physical set-up of the main office stands in congruence with these messages, with its very stringent realisation of an open plan office with no walls or individual cabins for managers. All employees have exactly the same desks, regardless of their designation, and several semi-open chat corners or glass-walled meeting rooms provide interactive workspaces. The office space is very similar to the settings described in popular management books that are thought to facilitate a "culture of collaboration" (Rosen 2007: 116), and its open nature reinforces the notion of the organisation as a single system with values of transparency and egalitarianism. As shown in Section 4.5.1, the quotes of employees who saw the main office as a place for interacting and co-ordinating work also correspond with this notion, notwithstanding the other perceptions of pressure, distraction and fear that were voiced in connection with the main office's atmosphere.

These facts seemed to affirm my understanding of collaboration, which I thought was based on ideas of mutual knowledge exchange and common access to information. In my notion of collaboration, the central aim was therefore achieving the maximum amount of shared knowledge across collaborating parties within the organisation, as this would allow for the most beneficial work results (Squires and Van De Vanter 2013: 298). This understanding might have been partially related to my work experience as an IT professional managing software implementation, as my aim in this role was exactly to maximise the availability of information across organisations. Current discourses on collaboration in information systems research (ISR) place the topic in the context of cloud data storage technologies and collaboration software innovations (Kogan and Muller 2006, Li et al. 2012, Shah 2014).

During the early weeks of my research, as I accompanied the employees of several client consulting teams, I observed how the team members worked closely together on a task – sometimes literally, with two or three colleagues sitting together at the same desk, discussing and jointly developing presen-

tations, documents and emails that would be sent to clients. They frequently sought advice from each other, and called across to the next line of desks if the colleague they needed to speak to was not sitting next to them. The inter-action was marked by such high communication density and multi-tasking that the intensity of collaboration seemed to provoke questions about poten-tial compromises on the individual's productivity (Heerwagen et al. 2004: 511). This relates back to the seemingly contradictory perception of the office at-mosphere as one that both fostered coordination and distracted employees from "real work" (5.4.1).

In my next fieldwork phase, six weeks later, I accompanied colleagues on the project coordination teams, who had the task of supporting the client consultants by organising the work tasks that would be carried out by the freelancer teams[1]. When I asked the employees how they managed the differ-ent client projects that were handed to them from the consulting teams, my interlocutors patiently explained to me the various documents from which they drew the project information and in which formats they stored updates in shared databases to be reviewed by the other teams. To ensure compliance with the compulsory activities in the mandated sequence of the project man-agement process, most colleagues maintained elaborate lists of 20 to 25 "to dos" for each of the projects they managed. All of these "to dos" centred on the exchange of project-related information or status updates on the project's progress, and this corresponded to the "boundaryless behaviour" requested by the managers in the initial training sessions. Furthermore, these actions seemed to confirm my ideas of collaboration, which encompassed the aim of achieving the maximum amount of information sharing along the project development process. I remained fully engaged, collecting very detailed data about the various technicalities of the project process and where each piece of information was stored. I did not perceive any dissonance between my notion of collaboration and the observed praxis in the office; nor did I realise that a working misunderstanding about collaboration was at play – the misunder-standing was apparently working very well.

It would remain working for a few weeks longer, until I accompanied Naveed, who happened to work on a project that I identified – after some time – as one that had been initiated by a client in the consulting team dur-ing my stint there. It had taken me almost half the day to realise that it was the

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1   For reasons of identity protection I remain vague here about the nature of the work tasks carried out by the freelancer teams.

same project, due to the different information Naveed seemed to have about it relative to the information I had picked up from the first team. While the consulting team member had given me an elaborate account of the strategic intent and type of advice the client was looking for, Naveed fed me a summary version of it, focusing on the key data needed for the consulting team. The existence of an information gap between the consulting team and the project coordinators became most apparent in relation to timelines: Naveed seemed to have no information about the date by which the client expected the project to be finished and presented, but I recalled that such a date had been agreed over email. Naveed had only been given a deadline for delivering the tasks he was responsible for. For a while I wondered if I had simply done a poor job of taking notes on the facts of the project, mixing up clients' names or the relevant databases and tools used for collaboration. Despite assuring myself that this was not the case, I still assumed my notion of collaboration to be valid. I remained fully focused on discovering how the information on the project given to the first team could have been reduced and changed across only a 15-metre stretch of desks, despite standardised processes, databases and "to do" lists.

A few hours later I heard and saw Naveed give his main contact at the street office, who coordinated the freelancers' tasks, a much shorter project completion deadline than the one he was actually working towards. This was the moment I realised that there were diverging understandings of collaboration at play between myself and my interlocutors. As I continued to move throughout the different teams and departments that were contributing to the client project, I encountered similar patterns of knowledge management and control. When I later traced the individual work steps along a client project, I realised that only the senior consulting team members were directly involved in meetings and client communication; this corresponded to the perceived hierarchy in the office. All other teams in the project development process were instead briefed by the previous team and were provided deadlines for completing their tasks.

The notions of collaboration in this division aligned with manoeuvring the project information (or parts of it) to achieve the goal of successful project delivery without escalation. The individual teams and their actors were not part of one organisational system, but differentiated sub-systems that selected only particular aspects of information about the project that they determined important for the receiving sub-system. This resulted in a multi-tiered working misunderstanding in the form of a "bargaining game" around delivery

dates, as Asif called it. Chapter 9 addresses these "date games" between employees.

The working misunderstanding between myself and the employees in the organisation was, however, that my notion of collaboration assumed transparent and equal access to the project's information within the same social system. This notion was supported by the "officially communicated" idea of collaboration by the organisation's leadership team in the new joiner's training and reinforced by the open plan office set-up. However, the everyday working praxis fostered the emergence of individual teams along the project development process. Consequently, the observed communication processes showed a selection of information from the hierarchically higher team (i.e. that which was closer to the client) on what the next team should know, such as team-specific project deadlines. However, the selection of understanding of this information by the next team sometimes differed from what the initial team expected: the next team factored in this pre-selection of information and reproduced the information within their own sub-system as "Yes, that's the date we [were] given, but they anyhow planned some buffer, so the real deadline must be later". On the practical side, this approach to collaboration led to a rather unexpected situation during fieldwork: by moving between the different teams in this multi-sited corporate setting, I frequently gained significantly more knowledge about the individual projects than the employees had themselves. This opened up a number of considerations relating to knowledge management during the fieldwork with respect to the intentional working misunderstanding.

8.2.   From a non-intentional to an intentional working misunderstanding

Once I discovered the diverging notion of collaboration between myself and my interlocutors through the multi-sited fieldwork approach, the situation demanded that I take a decision on how I would interact with them in the context of project collaboration. If I were to openly share my knowledge about the various projects, I might bring the carefully crafted collaboration system to a point of unravelling. The alternative was to play on the ambiguities at hand, just as my interlocutors did, to keep the misunderstanding working. As outlined in the next section, I took the latter approach and shifted from a non-intentional to an intentional modus of working misunderstanding.

As many of my interlocutors were perfectly aware of the strategic information concealment between the teams and played their role, so too did I play mine in "the other side's drama" (Reed 2006: 158) by not sharing my knowledge of the project. While the early phase of my analysis of collaboration patterns clearly involved a non-intentional working misunderstanding between myself and the interlocutors, the situation changed as soon as I gained more insight into the working practices of project collaboration that shaped each team's strategic information selection. From that point onwards, I was able to realise the ambiguities at play regarding the circulating project information and I managed my own knowledge carefully in order to tune my utterances and questions to the knowledge levels of my interlocutors. Through my actions, I actively and intentionally kept the misunderstanding working.

I did not directly voice my understanding of collaboration in contrast to the lived praxis of my interlocutors. I can only speculate on the reflections of my interlocutors on this, as I did not create a dissonance in their expected behaviour – at least, if I did, it did not become salient enough for them to raise it in discussion. It was only during the final research phase, when I followed the project execution process and frequently changed desks, that Kashish leaned over to me in a conspiratorial manner and uttered with a low voice: „I know you probably shouldn't tell me, but I saw you sitting with Neha [the project manager] this morning, so you must have talked about project GREEN. Well, at least tell me if it's on track, I fear something is boiling up there..."

Hence I was not the only person in the organisation playing this role. Kashish was also quite aware that I had understood the notion of collaboration at play in this organisation and shaped my behaviour accordingly. The way he posed his question further suggests that he was equally aware that he was violating the rules of the game by drawing on my knowledge in order to get information that had not been selected for him by the other team. Acting according to my own understanding of collaboration would have meant telling my interlocutor that I had accompanied Neha that morning during her numerous phone calls to the freelancer team leads about the status of their work. I would have also mentioned that one of them had announced the risk of a potential delay of several days, which Neha had decided not to pass on to the consulting team, as she was positive it would be fixed with a bit of overtime work. Instead, I uttered something indifferent about many projects at play right now, each with their own progress levels and challenges. It was a response that fit the working practice and, consequently, Kashish did not repeat

his question but instead focused on an urgent client request that demanded his full attention for the rest of the day.

With my growing insight into the misunderstanding, I learned to map the boundaries of knowledge exchange and the distribution of information across the organisation. I also learned which parts of my own information about a specific project I had to "switch off" in which team, in order to not impede the set-up shaped by my interlocutor's concept of collaboration. Further, I learned when to be vague about my project knowledge when accompanying interlocutors from various teams, even though my own understanding of collaboration proposed a different behaviour. I had moved into the intentional *modus* of misunderstanding in order to keep the misunderstanding working.

8.3.   Working (with) a misunderstanding

Given my pre-disposition stemming from my professional background as a Western IT specialist with a deep-rooted commitment to information provision based on egalitarian ideas of knowledge-sharing, it is not a pure coincidence that I found my understanding of collaboration mirrored in the organisation's official idea of collaboration. This congruence enabled the misunderstanding to persist unidentified over several weeks of intensive fieldwork. The working aspect of the misunderstanding lays in the fact that I was able to apply my notion of collaboration in terms of knowledge sharing for the initial phase of the fieldwork without encountering dissonance to the observed practice: I accompanied my interlocutors to briefing meetings and conference calls and eagerly absorbed their explanations of the various databases recording a project's information. With that level of insight, my idea of collaboration seemed to fit the working practices. Consequently, I collected data on how the employees in and across the various teams shared project information, and via which communication channels and functions.

Only after being in the organisation for a longer time was I able to relate an interlocutor's information on a specific project to the knowledge I gained about the very same project from another team. Gaining sufficient insight into *what* was communicated for project collaboration delineated my "point of unravelling" (Reed 2006) – the moment I realised the incongruence between my notion of collaboration and my interlocutors' execution of it. Until that moment, the working misunderstanding could be allocated within the quadrant typology under the *locus* anthropologist ↔ interlocutors and the non-

intentional *modus*. After the point of unravelling, however, my case study experienced a shift towards an intentional *modus* of working misunderstanding. In this later phase of fieldwork I consciously shaped my behaviour according to the ambiguities relating to project knowledge, in order to comply with my interlocutors' notions and practices of collaboration. Therefore, the misunderstanding can be positioned in the blank spot of the quadrant – in the category of intentional working misunderstandings between an anthropologist and interlocutors.

8.4.   Concluding remarks on collaboration as a working misunderstanding

In brief, I can contrast my conception of collaboration as an egalitarian, open-access approach with the understanding of my interlocutors as a strategic, fit-to-purpose concept. My conception was rooted in a view of organisations as systems that are internally differentiated by segmentation and equitable emergent sub-systems. In this view, the selection mechanisms of information are consequently less restrictive. Collaboration in my interlocutors' sense, however, was based on interaction in a hierarchically differentiated system with a functional selection of information.

In spite of these factually diverging notions, the interaction between me and my interlocutors was possible without encountering dissonance, and we were able to discuss various screens within project documentation databases and other tools used for their work. Information about the project collaboration practices at the organisation allowed me to recontextualise the situation (Gershon 2005: 103) in order to make it meaningful within the realms of my own concept of collaboration. This "parallel encoding" (Sahlins 1982) enabled an undisturbed continuity of interaction with my interlocutors due to the working misunderstanding. It remained undiscovered as long as my insight into the other system was limited to the visibility of *how* information was being exchanged (which matched my expectations).

This seemingly marginalised category is analytically interesting insofar as it is marked by the boundary (La Cecla 2002: 103) between the anthropologist's understanding of a concept and interlocutor's views of it. During the fieldwork described in this chapter, I was convinced of my own perception of collaboration as an egalitarian interaction. Today, more than two years after returning from the field, I am beginning to question whether my ideas of

collaboration might constitute an idealised understanding of the term. Retrospectively, I cannot swear that my own communication strategies during my time as a project manager in the industry were significantly dissimilar to those of my interlocutors at Advice Company. I will analyse these strategies – "date games" – more closely in the next chapter.