

# Under the surface and far apart:

Hidden disagreements in globally  
dispersed teams

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# Introduction to study

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- Globalisation, nationalism and lockdowns
- Idea of '**hidden discord**'
- Research question:
  - *How does hidden discord **impact** on the effectiveness of globally dispersed teams?*
- Also wanted to understand **conditions** where it flourishes, **types** of hidden discord, and how it can be mitigated, **managed** and utilised
- Critical incident methodology

# Challenges to globally dispersed teams

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*"I frequently fail to realise that I need to be writing much simpler English, make things much clearer than I sometimes do" (Elliot)*

Patterns of communication

*"Everything's sort of a step removed from us as well because we're very far away, and have no control of the situation" (Zachary)*

Virtual team context

*"You send some information, ask for responding but there's no responding" (Daoming)*

Power and contestation

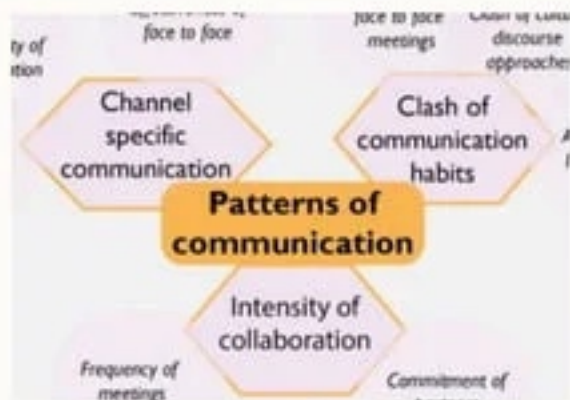
# Virtual team context



- **Dispersal:** the more virtual a team is the larger decrease in performance in terms of task completion (Schweitzer and Duxbury, 2010)
- **Language and culture:** splits in teams can occur by language diversity (Hinds et al, 2014) and language proficiency (Vigier and Spencer-Oatey, 2018), but only activated when triggered by an event such as a power struggle
- **Tolerance:** linguistically diverse teams often display tolerance for language difference expressed through accommodation (Henderson, 2005)

# Patterns of communication

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- **Channel specific communication:** some media support conveyance of new information (information transmission) and convergence on shared meaning (information processing) (Dennis et al, 2008)
- **Clash of com habits:** speech rituals vary by native language spoken and clashes in habits can leave people confused, uncomfortable and embarrassed (Henderson, 2005)
- **Collaboration:** a shared identity, aligned interests and congruent practices can result in fruitful cross-national collaboration (Orlikowski, 2002; Earley and Mosakowski, 2000)

# Power and contestation



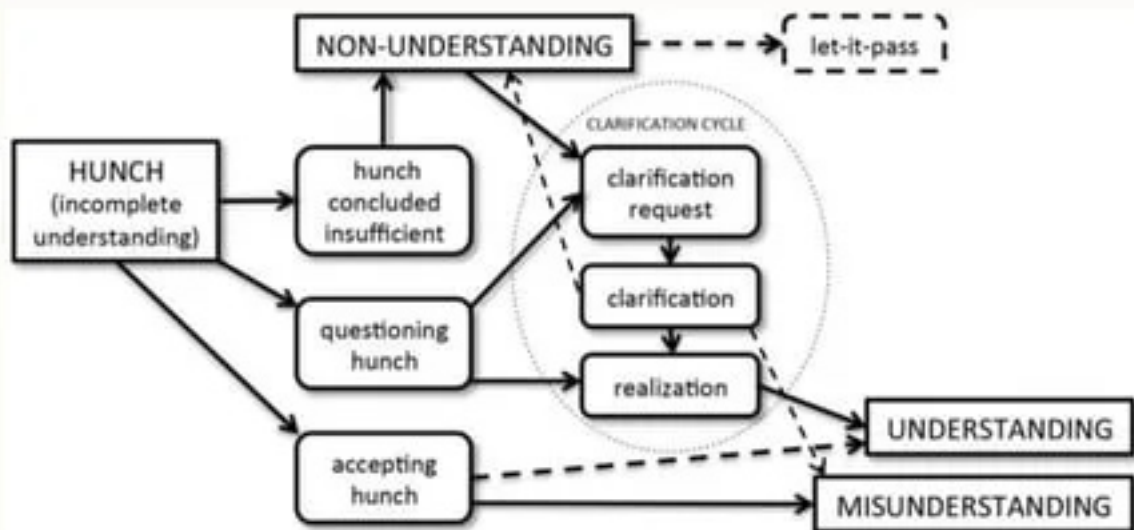
- **Basic disagreements:** team members have different starting positions
- **Organisational contestation:** Conflict can occur when personal ties in a virtual team become antagonistic, especially in collaborations (Lee and Panteli, 2010)
- **Disempowerment:** Team relations are highly sensitive to power relations (Tenzer and Pudenko, 2017), for instance language proficiency is a source of power (Tenzer and Pudenko, 2017)



## Typology of hidden discord

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- Hidden discord describes situations when there is an intersubjective deficit in a team regarding opinions or understandings
- So a misunderstanding or disagreement which is hidden (purposefully or not)



What's a misunderstanding?



## Misunderstandings

Unrealised  
misunderstandings

Contained  
misunderstandings

Damaging  
misunderstandings

## Typology of hidden discord

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# Types of misunderstandings



## Unrealised misunderstandings

Proportion of misunderstandings: 16%



## Damaging misunderstandings

Proportion of misunderstandings: 33%



## Contained misunderstandings

Proportion of misunderstandings: 50%

### Stages of misunderstanding

A: Communication that led to misunderstanding

B: Realisation of misunderstanding

C: Aftermath of realisation

# Example of unrealised misunderstanding

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- Translation of a document
  - *"we had a project concerning terms in fires and fire and medical rescue. And we work together with two universities, one in Greece and one in Slovakia and they thought they were perfect. But at the end... all the translation[s] they came up [with], they were not very known and [not] very useful for people in the fields"* (Clovis interview)



**Unrealised misunderstandings**

Proportion of misunderstandings: 16%

## Stages of misunderstanding

A: Communication that led to misunderstanding

B: Realisation of misunderstanding

C: Aftermath of realisation

# Example of damaging misunderstanding

- Marketing strategy
  - "[I]n the face-to-face meeting, [Maria] produced something that was totally irrelevant.... [That] actually ended up in pretty much a shouting match. The [Project Manager] was shouting at [Maria], much to the dismay of pretty much everyone. It was quite violent" (Rosa interview)



## Damaging misunderstandings

Proportion of misunderstandings: 33%

### Stages of misunderstanding

A: Communication that led to misunderstanding

B: Realisation of misunderstanding

C: Aftermath of realisation

# Example of contained misunderstanding

- Mistaken identity
- *"[the project manager] sent out a message commenting negatively something that had happened. And I understood it was a comment on me. So I reacted very defensive. But in fact it was aimed at someone else... We clarified it was not at me. But it was, you know, not easy"* (Bianca interview).



**Contained misunderstandings**

Proportion of misunderstandings: 50%

## **Stages of misunderstanding**

A: Communication that led to misunderstanding

B: Realisation of misunderstanding

C: Aftermath of realisation

# Why were these misunderstandings happening?

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- Immediate triggers:
  1. Poor initial communications
  2. Lack of clarification cycles
    - Reluctance to admit uncertainty
- Underlying conditions
  1. Difficulties managing distance
  2. Linguistic/communication skill
  3. Disempowerment

## Misunderstandings

Unrealised misunderstandings

Contained misunderstandings

Damaging misunderstandings

## Typology of hidden discord

### Hidden disagreements

Clashes of assumptions

Undiscussed disagreements

Repressed conflicts



# Types of hidden disagreements

Partially-known opinion

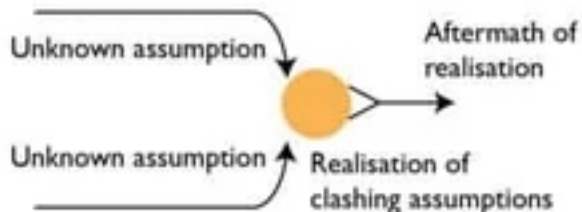


Partially-known opinion



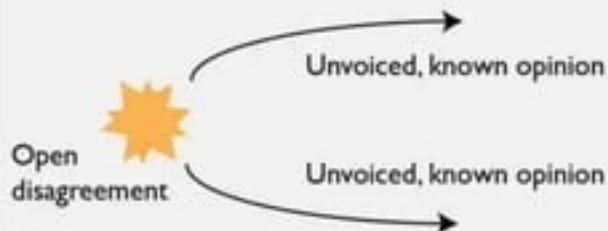
## Undiscussed disagreement

Proportion of hidden disagreements: 36%



## Clash of assumptions

Proportion of hidden disagreements: 36%

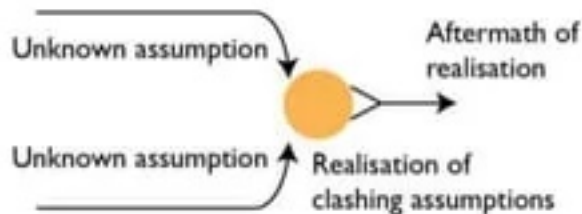


## Repressed conflict

Proportion of hidden disagreements: 28%

# Example of clash of assumptions

- Conflict over a partner's role
  - *"In this case these things for me became a nightmare, yeah, because we were using the same words with different meanings. And I remember this happened many times at the beginning of the project"* (Anna interview)



## Clash of assumptions

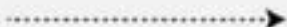
Proportion of hidden disagreements: 36%

# Example of undiscussed disagreement

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- Disagreement over a leadership role
  - *"So everybody saw me as the big boss.... Whereas, in my mind, I mean, frankly, my expectation was that [the project manager] was going to run it.... He could have perfectly done it, but it didn't work.... He totally did not communicate clearly at all. No, I had to-- I think that partly maybe he was embarrassed.... I don't think we resolved it, to be honest, entirely. I mean, resolved it in the sense that I took over. I feel terribly resentful, obviously" (Beatrice interview)*

Partially-known opinion



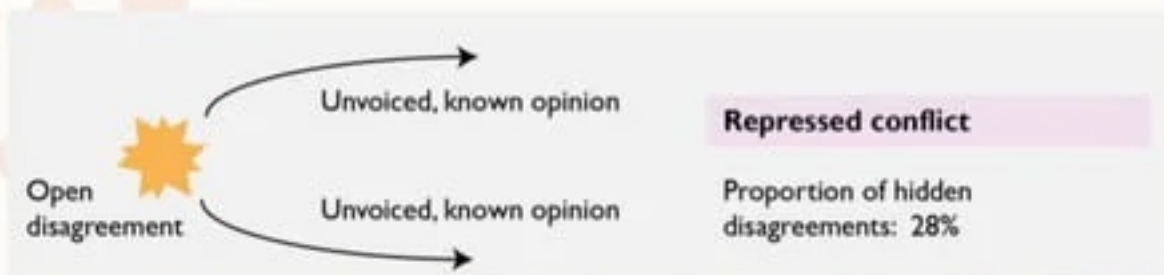
Partially-known opinion

**Undiscussed disagreement**

Proportion of hidden  
disagreements: 36%

# Example of repressed conflict

- Conflict over a partner's role
  - *"[W]e were always against them.... I guess from [the Project Director's] perspective, it was very annoying also, because we were always pointing our finger against them, so at a certain point, she said, "Please, let us relax a bit. It's not possible to go on like this." And so we had to stop" (Bianca)*



# Why were these hidden disagreements happening?

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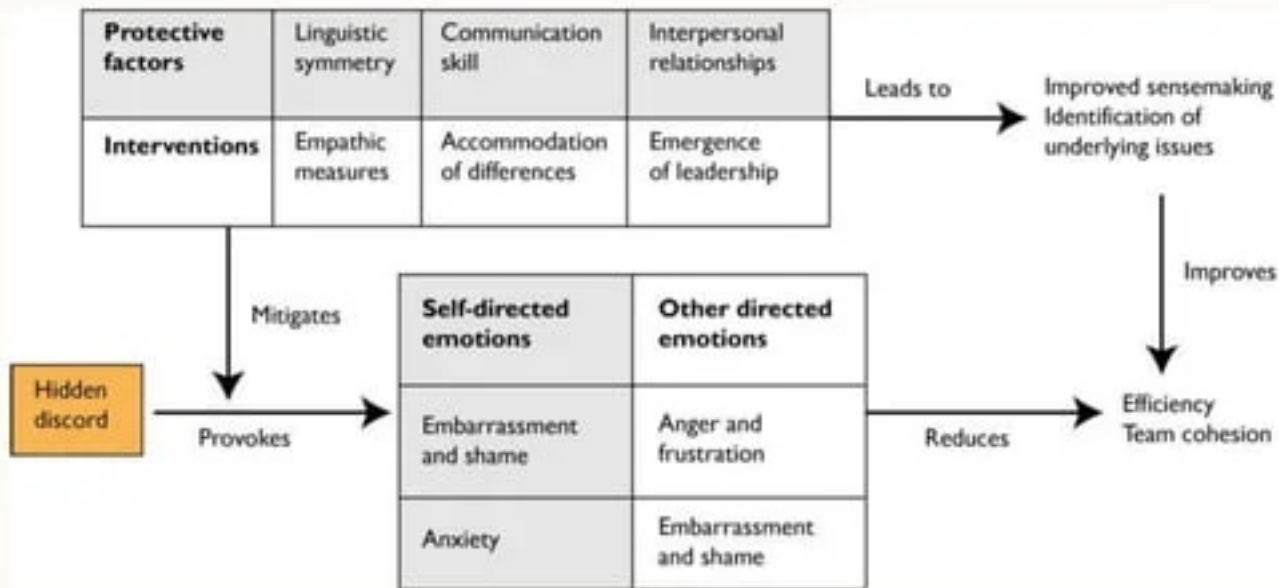
- Immediate triggers:
  1. Lack of discussion
  2. Lack of clarification cycles
    - Reluctance to increase friction
- Underlying conditions
  1. Clash of communication habits and culture gaps
  2. Weak interpersonal relationships
  3. Organisational contestation

# Impact of hidden discord

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- Emotional impact – shame, anxiety and anger
- Inefficiency
- Different pathways depending on management
  - Sensemaking → Address underlying issues
  - Unable to compromise → Splits in team
  - Possible to loop back towards sensemaking

# Managing hidden discord





# What I've learnt

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- When remote, it is **more difficult to enter clarification cycles** and so more misunderstandings occur
- Tendency to 'split' in response to incidents – reject the bad object, scapegoat, form a core group or distrust cultural outsiders
- All incidents can be helpful if engaged to understand and address underlying issues
- Importance of **multiple perspectives** when analysing disagreements and misunderstandings

Any questions?

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# Group discussions

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- Have you noticed more under-surface dynamics (such as hidden disagreements or misunderstandings) in your teams since lockdowns?
- What do you put this down to?
- How have you dealt with these?