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Big talk, Small talk.
A crucial but neglected knowledge management activity

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Introduction

Knowledge, whatever knowledge is, is a concept too loose, ambiguous, rich, and pointing in too many directions simultaneously to be neatly organized, coordinated, and controlled (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001). It thus comes as no surprise that knowledge management (KM) is seen as a problematic (Swan & Scarbrough, 2001), oxymoronic (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001), conflictual (Scarbrough, 1999), and fashionable concept (Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). Two different management models have gained special popularity in KM discussions, that of a community approach based on mutual coordination and that of a cognitive model based on normative control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001; Newell et al., 2002). Each model involves a different appreciation and establishment of KM practices. KM proponents embracing a community model appear more inclined to the adoption of HRM practices whereas the heralds of a cognitive model typically favour ICT practices. Overall, KM is conceived as an interwoven set of policies, strategies and techniques aimed at supporting the organization's competitiveness by optimising the conditions for knowledge exploitation and knowledge exploration via collaboration among employees (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). This broad definition, so we believe, is based on wishful thinking and grand rhetoric. More colloquially, it appears to be 'more easily said than done'. We argue that the adoption of a knowledge perspective on organizations is more fruitful for *understanding* organizations and their management in a critical sense than for *managing* them. From this point of view, the community approach appears as the most prolific. This approach has been largely developed as a critical assessment of the cognitive model, criticizing it for its mostly implicit, black-boxed and naïve notions of organizational knowledge. In this paper, we argue that, when a community approach to the management of knowledge is prevalent, the organizational conditions for inter-personal collaboration are enacted, or at least promoted, through *talk*. Yet, to date, the apologists of a community approach largely neglect this crucial mechanism. We contend that the prospects and constraints surrounding the problematic relationship between management and knowledge cannot be fully understood if we fail to recognise the role of talk as a powerful instrument managers use to make sense of organizational realities and to recreate these (e.g., Mintzberg, 1973; Mangham, 1986; Eccles & Nohria, 1992).

Ordinary talk is not only the most pervasive form of behaviour (Boden, 1997, p. 14), but also constitutes the primary medium through which human beings make sense of their world (Boden, 1994). Talk is central for understanding the inscrutable nature of organizational life even if its evanescent qualities make talk itself and its constituent effect on organizations hard to grasp. When failing to consider its value for organizational life, we allow a vital layer of knowing to escape from our grasp (King, 2003). Few can dispute its power, as organizations are created, sustained and changed through talk (Mangham, 1986, p. 82). To put it differently, organizations are made to 'tick' through talk (Boden, 1997).

While most organizational actions are conveyed through different, recursive and relational layers of talk, it appears particularly intriguing that its significance is utterly absent from the KM debates. This is particularly problematic when a community approach to KM is adopted, because the social mechanisms shaping communities derive their form and existence from talk. We understand this as an outstanding opportunity critically to examine the role of talk for enacting and framing working agendas within knowledge-intensive domains. Therefore, we believe that it is particularly interesting to explore the ways through which talk becomes a valuable instrument for the management of knowledge. We focus on management perceptions and practices in one particular knowledge-intensive domain, viz. the management of academic research. Broadly defined, academic research management is an activity aimed at improving the effectiveness and quality of research. Academic research is a timeless and innate type of knowledge intensive work. When compared to knowledge-intensive activities that have typically received much attention in KM studies, such as management consultancy (e.g. Alvesson, 1995; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003) and research and development in business environments (e.g. Armbrecht et al., 2001; Farris & Cordero, 2002), academic work and its management appears as particularly interesting. Academic research develops in what Creplet et al. (, 2001 #83, p. 1530) label as an epistemic community, characterized by “the objective of knowledge creation for the sake of knowledge creation”. Academic research involves knowledge creation in perhaps its purest sense. Therefore, the management of academic research constitutes an outstanding example of the management of a knowledge-intensive activity that allows unravelling the fundamental intricacies involved in imposing management purposes on a potentially ‘purposeless’ activity {cf. Fuller, 2002).

In this paper, we pose ourselves the question as to whether, and if so, how the dominant conversational mechanisms are related with the organization of knowledge work as exemplified by the management of academic research. In order to answer this question, we examine first the two competing KM models addressed above. Then, we discuss the role of talk within organizations. Next, we present the findings of an empirical research of academic research managers operating within the domain of business administration and management studies in The Netherlands. Analyzing these findings with the principles of the Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we explore the ways through which talk emerged from the grounded accounts as an aspect that pervades a variety of managerial actions. The objective of this analysis is to explain how the activity of research managers, which is inspired by the drive to enhance the quality and quantity of warranted knowledge, revolves around various forms of talk. We conclude by arguing that talk can be a powerful instrument to convey the need for reforms in a knowledge management sense, to legitimise choices and approaches chosen by knowledge managers, and collectively to reconstruct their work agendas.

Knowledge Management: roots and ramifications

Interest in the Knowledge-Based View of organizations (KBV) (e.g., Grant, 1996; Eisenhardt & Santos, 2002) and associated notions of Knowledge Management (KM) (e.g., Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001) boomed in the second half of the 90s, both as a managerial discourse and as an academic field of inquiry (Swan & Scarbrough, 2001). The KBV combines ideas developed in the resource-based view of organizations (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1995) with ideas stemming from the organizational learning literatures (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Levitt & March, 1988). As a result, the KBV pays much attention to the competitive importance of the knowledge resources, labelling these as valuable, rare, and hardly imitable and substitutable. These qualities make them particularly amenable to management interest, but also vulnerable to managerial maltreatment.

The KM adds the management dimension to the developing KBV picture, as it concerns policies, strategies and techniques, tools or practices aimed at supporting an organization's competitiveness by optimizing the conditions for knowledge exploitation and knowledge exploration via collaboration among employees (e.g., Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Zack, 1999). Perhaps owing to its highly ideational character (c.f., Donaldson, 2001), the concept proved to be so successful that it became a hype, stirring the attention of researchers from diverse areas, such as economics, philosophy, psychology, computer science and sociology (c.f., Earl, 2001).

To date, KM debates have mostly looked at management as a set of technological and organizational interventions, inspired by a management model. Two management models and their confrontation have gained specific popularity in KM discussions, that of a cognitive model based on normative control and that of a community approach based on mutual coordination (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001; Newell et al., 2002). Each model rests on a different appreciation of knowledge as the object of management and involves a different assessment of KM interventions. Overall, knowledge came to be seen mostly as an *asset* or as a *process* (c.f., Empson, 2001, emphasis added). Researchers who adopt a 'knowledge as an asset' perspective appear mostly inspired by economics and computer science. They view knowledge as an objectively definable commodity with an exchange value determined by an internal market (e.g., Griffiths et al., 1998; Teece, 1998). Researchers who espouse the view of 'knowledge as a process' typically find their main sources of inspiration in sociology. They see knowledge as a subjective, multidimensional and multifaceted activity that can be contested, situated, socially constructed, distributed, provisional, political, pragmatic, purposive, etc. (e.g., Blackler, 1995; Tsoukas & Mylonopoulos, 2004).

These different beliefs as regards the ontological and epistemological status of knowledge lead their adherents to embrace different management models. The cognitive KM model is based on the premise that knowledge equals objectively defined concepts and facts. It also builds on the assumption that knowledge can be codified and transferred, which clearly relates to the perspective of 'knowledge as an asset'. This model relies on the contention that

knowledge resides in the brains and bodies of individuals and groups who possess knowledge, i.e., on what Cook & Brown (1999) define as an epistemology of possession. As a result, KM defined along the lines of a cognitive model aims at codifying, capturing and commodifying knowledge. It reserves a crucial role for ICT technologies (Newell et al., 2002). Differently, the community model of KM builds on the 'knowledge as process' standpoint. This model is based on the premise that knowledge is socially constructed, experiential, at least partly tacit, and transferred through participation in social networks. It implies the adoption of what Cook and Brown label as an epistemology of practice (1999). This epistemological stance relates to an activity theory of knowing (Blackler, 1995), which stresses that a separation of knowledge from the processes that produce it fails to acknowledge its situated, contested and mediated character. Consequently, this KM approach stresses the socialization practices underlying knowledge sharing, as these determine the proclivity of organizational members to trust and cooperate (Newell et al., 2002).

While these two competing KM models may not entirely account for the diversity of standpoints and practices with regard to how organizational knowledge is to be understood and handled, their distinction is certainly instructive and conceptually useful. In addition, they clearly reflect the divide that exists between the partisans of the KM debate, viz. those who are interested in the 'technology' side versus those who emphasise the 'people' side. In the social science wing of KM, the latter group seems to dominate (c.f., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001). Therefore, the community approach to KM appears as a good candidate to represent the main concerns of this 'social wing', as it draws attention to socialization as a means to promote cooperation and trust between co-workers. We should make clear here that we concur with the belief that without trust KM initiatives are bound to fail, regardless of how thoroughly they are supported by technology and rhetoric (c.f., Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. 34). Cooperation, for example, is unlikely to occur productively and enthusiastically if not infused by genuine trust. The dynamics of cooperation may reinforce or undermine prior levels of trust. The promotion of socialization practices, which is meant to engender trust, may result from a strategy to promote a collective consciousness of being 'in-the-same-boat', in which an understanding of individual problems is built on an understanding of the problems faced by all members of the group (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 24). In a group context, people appraise a shared problematic situation by *talking* in stylised language, and the appraisal talk lasts until participants agree on a cure (Hewitt & Hall, 1973, emphasis added). Since everyday talk is the primary medium through which human beings make sense of their world (Boden, 1994), talk informs and shapes relationships, problem solving, and learning (Donnellon, 1996). To put it bluntly, talk drives action within organizations (King, 2003), as it is through language that individuals seek to justify themselves, legitimise their actions and persuade others (Davis & Luthans, 1980). The contention that talk informs and enacts coordinated action is almost self-evident. Surprisingly enough, however, this discussion is virtually absent from the broad KM debates, apart from a few notable exceptions (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). The objective of this paper is to contribute to this debate,

developing the argument that when a community orientation to KM is prevailing, *talk* should be seen as a powerful tool to convey and shape reforms, organizing work, legitimising choices, approaches, etc. Below, we will consider whether and how empirical data support this contention in the case of academic research management. Before presenting these findings, we will discuss how talk has been framed within the domain of organization studies.

Talk at work as work

Organizations can be seen as networks of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language in everyday social interaction (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Social interaction is conceived as a process in which people orient and align their conduct toward one another, and toward a common set of objectives (Blumer, 1998, p. 7-10). Language is the channel through which most of the social interaction is accomplished, since it has the capacity of infusing and structuring actions in the context of perceived realities (c.f., King, 2003). Language is, after all, one of the key tools of social influence (Pondy, 1978, p. 91). The most vivid point of convergence between language and social organization is to be found at the level of the speech acts, making these central to the analysis of all forms of interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992). To put it differently, social phenomena exist only because the capacity for speech has made complex social organization possible (Boden, 1997, p. 5). Everyday talk, which is rooted in language and speech, thus becomes the primary medium through which humans make sense of their world (Boden, 1994).

Few can dispute the power of talk within organizations, as this is inherent to almost every part of the practice of organizing (King, 2003). Through multiple layers of everyday talk, people in organizations manage, form coalitions, compete for resources, negotiate their environment, discuss agendas, discover or create shared goals and interests, uncertainties, and potential coalitions, conflicts, and generally muddle their way through the maze of organizational life (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Boden, 1994; King, 2003). Because talk portrays and recreates the heterogeneity and complexity of the organizational life while ensuring that the everyday business of organizations is accomplished, talk drives action within organizations (c.f., King, 2003). Therefore, talk is central to what organizations are (Boden, 1994, p.9). Talk-in-interaction enables professionals to pursue most of their working activities and practical goals (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Therefore, it is likely to surface in and pervade across strategies, inferences, judgments, routines, promises, procedures, norms, values, frameworks, codes, choices, routines, selections, and the like. Talk is necessary and powerful in at least two senses. First, it does things for the speaker, as it discloses his or her version of something to others. Second, talk gets others to do things both mechanically and by means of influence (Gronn, 1983). Through talk, people not only reproduce the dominant and perceived institutionalised arrangements, but they also significantly create and recreate fine distinctions that make the organization come alive (Boden, 1994). For instance, it is in the social context

of talk that problematic situations are defined, because talking about problems structures their nature (Hewitt & Hall, 1973, p. 369). In most organizations, people mix work tasks with social interaction and they do so largely through talk. Since the organising and structuring of organizations is a primarily talk-based process, talk and task tend to intertwine in finely-tuned ways (Boden, 1994; King, 2003). By means of talk, people reconcile and align their own beliefs and actions, enabling organized action to occur (Donnellon et al., 1986).

Surprisingly enough, models of management and organizational behaviour often fail to acknowledge that managers' work is interactive in its essence (Davis & Luthans, 1980). The interactive nature of management indicates that most management work is conversational. When managers are in action, they are talking and listening (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 47), which draws attention to the inherently relational character of their role. The managers' world is a verbal and oral one, as much time is spent in persuading, justifying, and legitimising past, present, and future courses of action (Davis & Luthans, 1980, p. 65). Observing managers in action shows that even though they may describe their work in rational terms, they spend very little of their time explicitly engaged in planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p.47). Most of the managers' time is spent in verbal interaction with others, for instance, in scheduled or unscheduled meetings, phone calls, personal visits, etc. (Davis & Luthans, 1980; Eccles & Nohria, 1992). As Mintzberg (1973, p. 38) puts it, virtually every empirical work of management time allocation draws the attention to the great proportion of time spent in verbal communication. Managers spend between 70 and 90 percent of their time engaged in some form of talk (e.g., Mintzberg, 1973; Gronn, 1983; Eccles & Nohria, 1992). This is not just an attribute of top managers or executives, as middle managers were also found to spend most of their time talking and listening to other persons, exchanging information, advice, and instructions, mostly face-to-face, or informally in small groups (Horne & Lupton, 1964). These authors conclude that the managers' talk is mainly about problems of organizing, regulating and unifying, i.e., about how to get things done. They emphasize that this pattern shows no marked relationship to the size and technology of the organization.

Consequently, the claim that managing concerns talk should come as no surprise (e.g., Boden, 1997; King, 2003). Talk *is* the work, as it not only consumes most of manager's time and energy, but it is also a powerful instrument or tool for performing actions like influencing, persuading, or manipulating (Gronn, 1983, emphasis in the original). Several studies stress that talk infuses and informs the managerial activity. For instance, Gronn (1983) shows that talk not only accomplishes administration work but is also used to do the work of tightening and loosening administrative control. Donnellon (1996) argues that teams do their work through language and that talk is the medium through which teamwork is done. Forray & Woodilla (2002) contend that human resource managers construct and sustain notions of 'fairness' and 'consistency' through talk. King (2003) holds that talk is the 'glue' that draws together the vital liaison between doctors, nurses, ancillary staff and patients. And, Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) draw attention to the relational character of talk, arguing that talking

and listening informally create feelings of participation, confirmation engagement, interest, visibility, and respect.

Method

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the theoretical debate on the role of talk in defining and shaping the legitimised work agendas of groups in knowledge-intensive contexts. More specifically, we pose ourselves the question as to whether, and if so, how the dominant conversational mechanisms in a knowledge-intensive organization can be related to the organization of knowledge work. We argue that academic research management qualifies as knowledge management, as it broadly aims at improving the effectiveness and quality of the knowledge production process that defines what academic research is all about. A valuable source of theorizing lies, so we argue, in the perceptions and practices of academic research managers. We strongly believe that the relevant knowledge regarding the intricacies of academic research management is engrained in their experience and perspectives. Since research managers are the privileged bearers of this knowledge, the relevance of their contribution to theory development becomes indisputably central.

The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) appears particularly useful here, as it highlights the relevancy of the participant's experience, opinions, actions, etc. Grounded theory is a highly systematic and inductive methodology used for the collection, analysis and continuous comparison of any sort of data, both qualitative and quantitative. This point is worth making, because GTA is mostly portrayed as a class member of qualitative research methodologies (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2001). However, Glaser has repeatedly stressed that this equation involves a confusion because the method is defined by its aim of conceptualization and in that quest is by no means restricted to the use of qualitative data alone (e.g. Glaser, 2001, 2003). It is worth noting that Glaser himself has contributed to the confusion that he contests, by the subtitle of his and Strauss' seminal book on GTA – 'The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for *qualitative* research' – and by the arguments the authors give in the book for doing qualitative research. Ironically enough also, the application of the very principles of GTA to the practices in which it has been used by researchers, which overwhelmingly concern investigations of a qualitative nature, would undoubtedly reinforce the strong association between GTA and qualitative methodologies.

As an inductive method, GTA seeks to discover theoretically relevant concepts from data, rather than from existing theories. The purpose is the generation – not the verification – of theory used in describing and explaining basic common patterns in social life (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A guiding maxim of GTA is that symbolic meaning is embedded in social interactions. This shows that the birthplace of the method is symbolic interactionism, represented in the person of Anselm Strauss who was a pupil of Herbert Blumer, one of the great names in the history of symbolic interactionism (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). As the title of Glaser and Strauss' book – 'The *discovery* of grounded theory' – points out, the

method is not only the heritage of symbolic interactionism but also shows positivistic traits, mostly brought in by Barney Glaser. GTA shares with positivism its contention that data are mostly theory-free and that theories are 'out there' for researchers to be scooped up. This much-criticized side to GTA is at odds with the argument, which is generally acknowledged by theorists of science, that it is never possible to distil theories of deep structures from data alone (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). However, these criticisms do not undermine the value of postponing theoretical choices and putting empirical data in the front seats of conceptualization and theory development, as GTA advocates.

The GTA method has been largely developed in studies of professional work carried out in complex organizational settings, making it particularly appropriate for researching managerial and organizational behaviour (Locke, 2001). Moreover, Locke offers several other characteristics of research situations in which adopting a GTA has proven appropriate. She maintains that the method is useful for capturing the complexity of the context in which the action unfolds. She argues that it links well to aspects of practice, enabling the participants to gain a perspective on their work situation. She shows that it is helpful for enlivening mature theorizing, as it brings new insights to established theoretical areas. GTA shares with ethnomethodology its focus on the actor perspective. In the present research, working along the lines of a GTA approach was chosen as the preferred option over an ethnomethodological approach. Within ethnomethodology, the established research tradition of conversation analysis shows the closest connection to the research topic of this paper, as it also allows unravelling elements of talk in management descriptions (e.g., Heritage, 1984; Drew & Heritage, 1992). As we do not seek either to track down the ordinary and everyday conversation of actors involved in particular forms of social interaction or to unpack the dynamics of language-in-interaction (for example, speech acts or talk), we chose not to rely on that research tradition.

Empirical research setting and interview structure

Two fundamental choices were made in the research design. First, we examined only publicly funded research, i.e. research not financially dependent from or commissioned by commercial sources. This allowed us to focus on the management practices aimed at promoting knowledge creation in a pure sense. Second, the research was conducted in the domain of business administration and management studies in the Netherlands. Within this academic domain, research is predominantly organized by research institutes whose management structure involves a director and programme coordinators. The former delineates the overall research strategy and policy, while the latter are responsible for organizing the research at the group level. Hereafter, the term 'research manager' will be used as an aggregate term referring to both research directors and programme coordinators. Data collection took place between March 2003 and August 2004 and included institutes whose

research programmes were explicitly organized around that research domain: the universities at Eindhoven, Enschede, Groningen, Maastricht, Nijmegen, Rotterdam and Tilburg.

An analysis of research-related documentation (for example, descriptions of policies, themes, and goals) proved useful for understanding how research is generally structured, both at the research institute and at the research group levels. One of the researchers conducted twenty-nine in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews with respondents formally responsible for research coordination tasks. The interviews covered two general questions. Firstly, respondents were asked how they conceived research management. Secondly, they were invited to reflect on how they conduct research management. The interviews took about two hours and were all tape-recorded. The respondents were sent a concise transcription of their accounts for assessment.

Data analysis

The data from the interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Inspired by the maxim that social interactions are imbued with symbolic meaning, the method of grounded theory aims at surfacing the latent patterns that account for the main concern of participants. This objective is based on the premise that the continual processing and resolving of that concern is the prime mover of their behaviour (Glaser, 1998). Since grounded theory aims to transcend the data in order to explain the theoretical preponderance of behaviour in a substantive area, the GTA claims that an appropriate application of its principles leads to products that are abstract from time, place and people. According to Glaser (1978), the result is a theoretical contribution that fits (the concepts express patterns in data), that works (the concepts and their relationships account for the participants' main concern), that is relevant (the theory deals with participants' main concern), and that is modifiable (as new data is analyzed).

GTA offers many principles, methods and techniques for analyzing data for 'discovering' the theory that they convey. The tactics GTA proposes to move from categories to theory include writing of memos, finding core categories and drawing diagrams. An essential method in the discovery process is the method of constant comparison. This method promotes the ongoing comparison of codes, patterns, properties, associations, and exploration of possible relationships between concepts to be backed by a permanent openness to emerging concepts. The processes of both coding and memoing are dynamic. This means that, since new data findings are to be constantly compared with similar ones from previous interviews, codes and memos are recursively reinterpreted and rewritten.

In the research, the respondents' accounts were coded immediately after the interviews and one after the other, to raise the theoretical sensitivity to emerging concepts. In addition to the codes, an analytical elaboration of their meaning and possible relationships with other codes was explored in memos.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews showed that the work of academic research managers can be understood as a subtle blend of structured and informal activities. How successful individual managers prove in brewing a digestible blend, accounts for their aptitude in achieving a productive balance between their mission and the researchers' leeway for self-development. The answers to interview question one ('How do you conceive research management?') and two ('How do you conduct research management?'), provided a rich account of the intricacies surrounding their work. In this paper, we only focus on the aspects of conversational practices that are connected to the effective or tentative organization of the research work. These include meetings, negotiation, influencing, advice, etc. The analysis of the results shows that the talk of the research managers included in the sample can be understood as a multilayered, multifaceted, and multipurpose activity. It also shows that this talk can assume three different, though interrelated forms. These we label as institutional talk, big talk, and small talk respectively. These three forms act as sensitizing concepts that are instrumental in making sense of academic research management. *Institutional talk* stands for the strategic debate with regard to the fundamental organizational choices, for instance, as regards strategic orientations, pay-per-performance criteria, etc. *Big talk* refers to the programmed discussions going on mostly at the group level, aimed at defining legitimised courses of action within the group. *Small talk* pertains to the more subtle ad-hoc, spontaneous corridor talk that may have inspirational or motivational impact. Table 1 shows a summary of the categorization of the proposed talk forms, according to three dimensions of their purpose (what is the talk aimed at?), the process that carries them (how does it happen?), and the by-products they engender (the expected outcome of the talk action). Next, we will discuss in some detail each of these forms of talk and explore how these were addressed in the interviews.

Institutional Talk

The concept of 'institutional talk' stands for the scheduled and structured forums of discussion that represent and enable the bureaucratic mechanisms of organizational maintenance. In these forums, participants' talk focuses on key strategic discussions that involve, for instance, fundamental choices and decisions on the positioning and structure of the research groups, as well as the sort of warranted research output these are expected to deliver. The content of these discussions may surface in themes such as the definition of criteria for resource allocation and research-performance evaluation, the appropriateness and urgency of self-assessment exercises, the recruitment of researchers, and the like. As one research programme coordinator explained:

[...] we have regular meetings in which we review the performance of the different subgroups. We try to assess the quality of their research, their productivity, the funding opportunities, and the like. We cannot afford to let things go their own way, looking at

them from a distance and only intervening when something is getting out of hand. We need clear directions and guidelines, which can be changed occasionally.’

Or, as a research director associate argued:

‘[...] heads of departments are, for instance, responsible for appointing researchers and conducting the annual performance appraisal. In order to ensure that there is a coherent idea as regard to where we are going, we have regular contacts with the research coordinators. The devolution of responsibilities to coordinators is not a one-time event, since they always revisit us with lots of questions (for example, whether we can facilitate a particular activity). It is a back and forth process.’

| | Institutional talk | Big talk | Small talk |
|-------------------|---|--|--|
| Purpose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy making • Strategy definition • Maintenance • Legitimization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization • Specialization • Legitimization • Evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense making • Meaning making • Social bonding • Coaching |
| Process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmed • Formal • Negotiation • Relational/dynamic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmed • Formal • Social • Relational/dynamic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ad-hoc • Casual • Personal • Relational/dynamic |
| By-product | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms and values • Negotiation space • Guidance • Regulation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation and trust • Awareness • Profiling • Collective learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Learning • Development • Nursing |

Table 1. *Types of talk*

Institutional talk can be understood as aimed at defining and inculcating a sense of direction and purpose that serves to select appropriate courses of action. The underlying process is dynamic and relational, rather than rigid. This finding suggests that the conversational mechanisms aimed at defining the institutional normative framework in which academic research is to take place are open to reinterpretations, concessions and adjustments. In other words, these mechanisms entail considerable room for negotiation and bargaining over the appropriateness and validity of research means and ends. This allows for managers and researchers to take the relevant research contexts into consideration, for instance, the tradition of the academic community or the particular characteristics of the local research groups. As one programme manager claimed:

‘ [...] we have to bargain to get time for those kinds of activities. We have been discussing this with the research institute and, although we are not as free as we would like to, there is some room for manoeuvre.’

Or, as a research director associate maintained:

‘There is a lot of room of manoeuvre for the heads of department to deviate from the institute’s guidelines. Everything depends on their personal experience with the researchers and on the negotiations between them.’

While institutional talk may have a share in the bureaucratic machinery aimed at guiding and regulating research work behaviour, it does not seem to preclude participants from

bargaining for the recognition of exceptions or subtleties. On the contrary, it appears to be tacitly accepted by those involved in the negotiation as a part of the game. Overall, institutional talk deals infuse the development of the official standpoint on what qualifies as warranted knowledge, its recognition, grading, and rewarding, and the discussions on how to organize these processes at the organizational and group levels. This pattern of *negotiated regulation* also emerged across and within the group level, where forms of big talk dominate.

Big Talk

The second sensitizing concept of talk, that of big talk, is also part of the organizational maintenance apparatus but it suits different purposes. It points to the conversational activities, mostly taking place at the group level, that aim at matching the interests and expectations of the researchers with those of the research institute. These activities are best characterized as explorations, definitions, and legitimizations of possible approaches to this matching process, rather than as directive or forcing activities. For instance, the concept of big talk may inform the discussions regarding the profile of the research group. As one research director associate explained:

‘Our current research focus did not exist a couple of years ago. It evolved through negotiation and we have selected the themes that could epitomise our best research to date.’

Or, as a research programme coordinator maintained:

‘The development of a research program in which researchers will focus their attention in the coming years has to be performed together with the researchers. It is crucial that researchers agree upon the research focus, for the lack of consensus may have a negative impact on their motivation.’

The notion of big talk is in line with the classical collegial decision-making processes, as the formal group meetings and the discussions are used collectively to craft legitimised courses of action. The absence of consensus, or of legitimacy, involves the risk of fractionating the undertakings of the research group, to say the least. Big talk is therefore to be found across the discussions on which practices are best suited for the development of the group. As one research programme coordinator argued:

‘The department meets every 4 weeks and there is always someone presenting a paper. In these meetings we discuss, for instance, what sort of structural changes are needed to ensure that both quality and quantity of research output increases. The question that pervades these fevered discussions is how we can ensure that people do research and publish.’

Or, as another research programme coordinator mentioned:

‘Internally, we discuss which conferences we should attend, what contacts we should make at an institute level, and who should go on a sabbatical and where. (We need to evaluate the relevance and suitability of the targeted sabbatical research group and to develop the contacts). We have to come up with these questions. Do we want to have our

knowledge there, or do we want to get something from them? How do we position ourselves in the global research community? This is something to manage, i.e., managing in terms of ensuring that the group has the right position. This happens by stimulating people to taking certain steps.'

Big talk does not only inform the mechanisms aimed at stimulating the development of an intellectually inspiring work context, but it is also expected to enhance the social climate of the research group. Content-related discussions are seen to increase the social bonding. As a research programme coordinator argued:

'Group meetings should be stimulated because they allow discussions around research products, next to that of more ordinary problems. These meetings can also enhance cooperation across researchers.'

Or, as another research programme coordinator explained:

'The only thing I do is asking questions. For instance, at the end of the year everyone has to produce a list of conference plans for the next year. With the overview, we can see whether there are misrepresented or burdened participations. By doing this and discussing this, we create a shared attitude in the group.'

Big talk also plays a supportive role. This means that the formal and programmed discussions that take place at the group level also involve coaching elements. This reinforces the notion that improving the research content cannot be dissociated from the social context in which research takes place. As a research programme coordinator argued:

'We have, as well, periodical discussions in which people talk about new research ideas or projects they might be involved in. We can then discuss and give comments, criticism and suggestions to the emergent ideas. Most of the rest is related with the content side of research and is divided into 2 major activities. First, I provide ad-hoc support to the people who, for instance, got stuck in the process of writing or are digesting a rejection and who seek to discuss these matters with me. Second, I participate in the discussions of PhD projects, which reflects an indirect collaboration between me and the other researchers.'

Or, as a research director explained:

'What I do most is talking to people. Research management implies talking, discussing and negotiating with the board as well as talking to researchers. Research management is all about communication. The role of a director and what s/he can accomplish is to quite some extent determined not only by the ambition s/he has, but also by his/her skills as regard to dealing with people. Ambitious goals are easily hampered if one lacks communication skills. For instance, I have to guarantee that those who have a fellow status have a minimum amount of hours per week to do research. It is a responsibility of the researchers to object pressures for teaching. However, if this pressure becomes structural and the researchers do not get the research time they are entitled to, I intervene talking to the Dean, explaining that this is an unacceptable situation.'

This suggests that within the realm of the big talk, research managers may also find motives and room for ad-hoc and personalized support. We then slide into the third layer of

talk. This layer concerns managers talking to researchers to help them make sense of opportunities and cope with these, to lay out alternative courses of action, or to discuss their difficulties while motivating them at the same time. This important layer of talk is dubbed here as small talk.

Small talk

The deeper layer of small talk pertains to the more subtle, spontaneous, informal, but by no means less useful sort of corridor talk. This type of talk is likely to inspire research behaviour in different ways and magnitudes. It involves a subtle combination of professional advice, counselling, and nursing with personal support. As one research programme coordinator argued:

‘At the end of the day, the practice of research management boils down to communication. Communication is the most important element in managing research or managing whatever activity, anyway. It is important to listen to what people have to say, to be receptive to their ideas and to try to understand the sensitivities of the different subgroups and researchers.’

Or, as another research programme coordinator suggested:

‘I can help researchers finding a way to make a better use of their knowledge, capabilities and networks. Since we have a small group, this sort of assessment, support and advice is done on an individual basis.’

At the level of small talk, participants do privilege informal, ad-hoc, and personalised contacts as opposed to the formal mechanisms of both the institutional and big talk forms. This form of interaction is perceived as valuable in terms of assisting participants with the soft sides to their work. As a research coordinator argued:

‘This is why trust, transparency, open-mindedness and cooperative attitudes are so crucial. Therefore, research managers need to understand researchers’ sensitivities. If they take too many things for granted, problems are bound to arise. This is perhaps the most acute challenge that research managers face. They have to look at the other side and understand researchers’ problems. A research manager needs to communicate with researchers and understand their sensitivities, rather than being dogmatic about things.’

The facilitation work is promoted via closer and informal channels. Therefore, at the level of small talk, informality clearly dominates the talk agenda. As a research programme coordinator explained:

‘Research management should facilitate and stimulate exchange of information and knowledge in a low profile way. Intranet or other sophisticated tools do not really work. People can do it on a daily basis, on an informal basis, walking around, looking at each other’s bookshelves.’

Or, as another research programme coordinator argued:

‘I try to keep the number of meetings as low as possible. I consider the informal interpersonal contact a privileged way of interaction. I always keep my door open; if

something has to be done, discussed, or decided, we can easily walk into each other's rooms.'

'I also try to stimulate people to work together in small groups. This is done on a regular and informal basis: I walk around, people come to me, I listen, and I advise. I work with the people with whom I have research topics and research strategies' affinities.'

Eventually, this delicate form of talk is also seen to have a motivational impact. As one research programme coordinator argued:

'It is much easier to start things than to finish them, and the thing in-between is the hardest. There is a tremendous challenge to bridge the temporal gap between the excitement about an idea and the stage of writing it down. It is thus motivating to ask and to remind people how are they doing and if they need some sort of help.'

Therefore, small talk represents the casual, soft, sensible and supportive side of research management, which is likely to help researchers re-framing, re-assessing, re-positioning their goals, approaches or expectations, so that a legitimate compromise with stricter guidelines defined by the institutional talk is achieved.

Discussion and conclusion

The systematic comparative analysis of the data, based on the grounded theory approach adopted in this research, indicates that three intertwined layers of talk characterise the activity of research management. These are the levels of institutional talk, big talk, and small talk (see Table 1 for an overview of these forms of talk and their characteristics). Particularly the dynamic combination of these types of talk determines how research managers earn their sphere of influence. Conceptions of how forms of talk are interweaved offer powerful stepping-stones for understanding organizations as knowledge-intensive firms and for developing notions of knowledge management.

In the introduction we have stressed that particularly the community approach to KM justifies paying attention to talk mechanisms. In this research, that because of its focus on academic research most clearly links to such an approach in the notion of research communities, a specification of what makes communities tick predominantly shows at the levels of small talk and big talk. *Small talk* surfaces in the individual and group discussions between researchers who do research and researchers who manage research. Academic researchers are members of combined local and global communities. Individual researchers and research groups are typically involved in overlapping and conflicting work relationships. Individual researchers can be members of multiple research groups and – e.g. as affiliated research fellows – even of several research institutions. Their status as successful scientist depends on the status of the institute that employs them, on their research group, but also on their individual and collective research output and its outlets (status of journal, publisher etc). When the opportunity arises, they engage in ad-hoc cooperation with individuals they may have never met. Establishing joint projects within their own research group may sometimes

even prove harder than with outsiders because of conflicting personalities or lacking overlap in thematic interests. The duality of a local-cosmopolitan status of scientists is therefore as informative as it is disguising because of the fact that under the umbrella term of the ‘international academic community’ hides a myriad of overlapping and conflicting communities of academic and pseudo-academic communities. All these communities come with their own sensemaking and knowing practices, with their own goals and objectives, that may support each other or may counteract. Small talk appears as a main constituent of knowledge production when these communities take shape and in situations when they provide the context for actual research work.

Big talk pervades the activities aimed at developing the profile of the research group, enacting a collectively legitimised sense of direction. At this level, the talk aims at encouraging the development of a community of knowing. The side effect is that of attempts to stimulate the proclivity of researchers to cooperate and trust. Big talk appears as a connecting mechanism between the levels of small talk, where the ‘real’ work gets done, and institutional talk, that concerns itself with the viability of the organizational setting. Big talk plays an important role in handling the conflicts and overlaps between the various goals of science, e.g. those between science as a cosmopolitan institution and the research organization as its local constituent. Understanding the workings of big talk also sheds light on the alleged notion that transitions in science are uni-directional, for instance from a mode-1 to a mode-2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). Looking at academic research via notions of talk makes it stand out clearly that this notion is overly simplistic. Lave and Wenger (1991) stress that participation in communities is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. Communities thrive on mechanisms for dealing with outside pressures, such as the call for accountability of science, pressures of increased managerialism and science getting subjected to market forces. Cohen et al. (1999) show that an increase in internal and external pressures on academic research is dealt with through a renegotiation of researchers’ personal and professional interests (c.f. also Prichard & Willmott, 1997). If indeed the renegotiating process appears crucial for how both management knowledge and knowledge as the object of management evolve, a perspective on the talk components of renegotiation is indispensable. In conjunction with small talk, big talk establishes the ‘knowledge infrastructure’ or the intra-organizational and extra-organizational context for the development of knowledge domains through their constituent knowledge processes

The third form of talk, the *institutional talk*, is found across the formal and programmed conversational activities aimed at defining and refining the strategic orientation of the research organization. At this level, the talk focus on the strategic discussions aimed at defining the fundamental choices and decisions as to what sort of knowledge is privileged (prioritization), how this is to be recognised (discrimination), and rewarded (evaluation). Knowledge production in these discussions almost automatically takes on a black-box character. As the focus is on recognizing the competitive value of the organization’s

knowledge resources, this clearly resonates with the notion of a knowledge strategy (e.g., Zack, 1999). At this level, the analysis of knowledge management in terms of talk shows the clearest connections to the cognitive approach in KM, treating knowledge as an asset and as stock. The content of institutional talk appears partially as a representation of this perspective and re-establishes it.

In this paper, we have focused on understanding the knowledge-intensive organization as an activity system, which stresses the close link between knowledge and knowing. Organizations as knowledge-driven activity systems are more than communities, as they appear rather as quasi-objects made up of a dynamic combination of individuals, relationships, physical objects, concepts etc. (cf. Latour & Porter, 1993). Even if – as we do – one endorses this view, the community approach in KM remains central for understanding organizations as knowledge systems. Key in the development of this approach is searching for the critical mechanisms that create and recreate communities and that link these to the other aspects that make up organizations. Talk appears as such a crucial mechanism. In this paper we have only studied the role of talk in one particular knowledge intensive domain, that of academic research. In that domain we have not done much more than scratched the surface of the epistemological connotations that go along with the various forms of talk. Notwithstanding these limitations of the present paper, we feel that the case for the KBV and KM debates embracing and developing notions of talk as constituting mechanisms of organizations as knowledge-based activity systems stands firm. Paraphrasing the received notion of “management by walking around”, we feel that there is every cause to start studying knowledge management as an activity that is to be understood as “management by *talking* around”, if we mean to develop the notions of a community approach to KM.

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Endnotes

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