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The Relational Dimension of Feedback Interactions: A Study of Early Feedback Meetings Between Entrepreneurs and Potential Mentors

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Entrepreneurs' responses to feedback are in part determined by how the interactions during which they receive it unfold. Prior studies primarily discuss feedback interactions between entrepreneurs and their mentors or trusted advisors. As a result of this focus on longstanding relationships, there is limited knowledge of 'early' meetings – conversations between feedback providers and entrepreneurs who do not know each other well – and the ways in which these shape the relationship between the interactants, as well as the way feedback is received. Our analysis of 54 early feedback interactions suggests that changes in epistemic stance and alignment influence whether there is affiliation, that is, affective cooperation, between entrepreneurs and feedback providers. We theorize that affiliation is necessary for early feedback interactions to develop into longstanding feedback relationships.

Introduction

Feedback plays an important role in the process of starting a new venture (Bergman and McMullen, in press; Grimes, 2018; Weinberger *et al*., 2018). Entrepreneurs may adjust their course in response to performance feedback, that is, upon realizing that their performance is above or below aspirations (Domurath, Patzelt and Liebl, 2020; Piening *et al*., 2021). They can also decide to make changes after receiving interpersonal feedback from investors, mentors, customers, or peer entrepreneurs (Balachandra, Sapienza and Kim, 2014; Barney *et al*., 1996; Drencheva *et al*., 2021; Krishnan *et al*., 2021; Lahti, 2014; Leatherbee and Katila, 2020). The focus of this paper lies on interpersonal feedback.

Prior research found that the attitude and behaviour of the entrepreneur and feedback provider are the main factors determining whether interpersonal feedback has positive effects on entrepreneurs and their ventures (Kirtley and O'Mahoney, in press; Zuzul and Tripsas, 2020). These studies generally limit their focus to 'one of the agents in the feedback dyad' (Anseel, Vossaert and Corneillie, 2018, p. 337). A smaller stream of work acknowledges that interpersonal feedback revolves around interactions (Ashford, De Stobbeleir and Nujella, 2016; Wu, Parker and De Jong, 2014). These studies show that the conversations that entrepreneurs and feedback providers have, as well as the context in which these take place, shape the way feedback is received (Amezcua *et al*., 2013; Haines, in press; Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013).

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Most research treats feedback interactions as one-off encounters during which people dispassionately exchange viewpoints (Fisher, Pillemer and Amabile, 2018). Yet, these conversations also have implications for the relationship between the feedback provider and feedback receiver (Anseel, Vossaert and Corneillie, 2018). This relational dimension of feedback is only considered in studies of long-term relationships, which find that entrepreneurs who receive feedback from someone they trust are more likely to reconsider entrenched beliefs and explore new areas (e.g., Strike and Rerup, 2016). Along similar lines, the mentoring literature also emphasizes the relational nature of longstanding feedback relationships (Allen *et al*., 2017; Jones and Corner, 2012), and even suggests that feedback should only be provided as part of an established mentorship (Humberd and Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983). Due to this focus on existing relationships, the mentoring and entrepreneurship literatures do not explain how entrepreneurs and feedback providers relate to each other *before* trust and a shared history have developed.

A better understanding of the relational dimension of 'early' feedback meetings, that is, interactions between entrepreneurs and feedback providers who do not know each other well, is important for two main reasons. First, those meetings are increasingly common: nascent entrepreneurs – people 'in the process of establishing a business venture' (Dimov, 2010, p. 1126) – frequently receive feedback from people they have never met before, for instance during events organized by incubators and accelerators (Bergman and McMullen, in press; Cohen, Bingham and Hallen, 2019; Hallen, Cohen and Bingham, 2020). Second, early feedback interactions may kickstart long-term feedback relationships. Research suggests that long-term relationships offer benefits that one-off feedback cannot provide (Humberd and Rouse, 2016; Fisher, Pillemer and Amabile, 2018) but does not explain how they form. While early feedback interactions may be a starting point, there is no guarantee, because feedback providers and receivers who are relative strangers face challenges in communicating with each other (Harrison and Rouse, 2015; Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013). Exploring the relational dimension of early feedback interactions may shed light on the connection between these interactions and long-term feedback relationships.

In this paper, we therefore address the following question: How do early feedback interactions between nascent entrepreneurs and feedback providers unfold, and how do these interactions shape the relationship that is formed and the way feedback is received? To answer this question, we analysed 54 early meetings that were facilitated by an Amsterdam-based accelerator. Across these meetings, we observed differences related to alignment, that is, the 'structural level of cooperation between interactants' (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011b, p. 20), and epistemic stance, namely the extent to which one party displays more knowledge about a certain topic than the other (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011a). These differences in turn seem connected to two manifestations of affiliation (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011b): the level of agreement between the interactants, and the expressed intention to meet again. Based on these findings, we argue that affiliation is necessary for early interactions to develop into long-term feedback relationships.

Our findings have three main theoretical implications. First, we contribute to the literature on entrepreneurial feedback, which focuses on interactions between entrepreneurs and their mentors or trusted advisors but does not explain how those longstanding bonds develop. We theorize that the conditions that shape affiliation *during* early feedback interactions can contribute to the initiation of a long-term feedback relationship *after* the meeting. Second, we show how the dynamics of early feedback interactions, particularly spillover effects from feedback discussions that take place at the start of these meetings, shape the way feedback is received. We thereby extend prior work on entrepreneurial feedback, which does not discuss in detail how entrepreneurs respond to the feedback they receive during early interactions. Finally, we advance the mentoring literature by demonstrating that, contrary to what existing work assumes, feedback is not only provided *after* mentorships have been established but also has a strong impact on early interactions.

Literature review

Interpersonal feedback as an interactive phenomenon

The existing literature on interpersonal feedback in entrepreneurship focuses primarily on measur-

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ing the impact of feedback on the development of entrepreneurial ideas, the performance of new ventures, and the founding entrepreneurs personally (Friesl, 2012; Kirtley and O'Mahoney, in press; Patton, 2014; Rotger, Gørtz and Storey, 2012; Snihur, Reiche and Quintane, 2017). These positive benefits are most likely to be realized if entrepreneurs actively seek feedback and review their ideas critically once they have received it (Chatterji *et al*., 2019; Marvel, Wolfe and Kuratko, 2020; Shepherd, Sattari and Patzelt, 2022; Zuzul and Tripsas, 2020). The expertise of the feedback provider, the valence and timing of the feedback itself, and the context in which it is provided also shape the impact that feedback might have (Amezcua *et al*., 2013; Kaffka *et al*., 2021; Krishnan *et al*., 2021; Kuhn and Galloway, 2013; Wood and McKinley, 2010).

In outlining the conditions under which feedback can have a positive impact on entrepreneurs and their venture ideas, most studies isolate one dimension of feedback interactions: the entrepreneur, the feedback provider, or the setting in which they meet. But even though 'it is possible to disentangle and examine the individual behaviours of the two agents involved in the [feedback] episode, they are dependent on each other' (Anseel, Vossaert and Corneillie, 2018, p. 336). This observation, combined with the realization that 'feedback involves social interactions' (Wu, Parker and De Jong, 2014, p. 442, see also Harrison and Rouse, 2015), sparked a new stream of research based on analyses of feedback conversations.

To date, however, most studies promoting an interactive view of feedback are conceptual (e.g., Ashford, De Stobbeleir and Nujella, 2016; Anseel, Vossaert and Corneillie, 2018). Empirical research based on interactional data is more limited and does not always fully embrace the implications of adopting an interactional perspective. Lefebvre and Redien-Collot (2013), for example, find that entrepreneurs may not appreciate all criticism but do not explore whether feedback providers therefore start treating them as being 'resistant' or 'defensive' (Swan and Fox, 2009). Similarly, Haines (in press) points out that entrepreneurs sometimes dismiss feedback yet does not describe the feedback provider's subsequent reaction. Hence, prior studies are focused on entrepreneurs' immediate responses to feedback.

Building a relationship through feedback interactions

Fully understanding interpersonal feedback requires taking into consideration that feedback, as well as reactions to it, shape the relationship between the feedback provider and receiver (Anseel, Vossaert and Corneillie, 2018). To our knowledge, only a few studies have examined this relational dimension of feedback interactions. Harrison and Rouse (2015) found that feedback providers and receivers drew on prior meetings and concluded that doing so 'allowed feedback providers to better suggest opportunities' (Ibid., p. 396). Strike and Rerup (2016) observed feedback providers and entrepreneurs who went through various interconnected feedback phases together. The trusting relationship that they thus developed enabled the feedback provider to slow down the entrepreneurs' decision-making and insert doubt.

Both these studies describe patterns that occur across multiple meetings between feedback receivers and their mentor or trusted advisor and highlight the importance of mutual understanding and trust. They do not, however, explain how entrepreneurs and feedback providers relate to each other during earlier feedback meetings, *before* trust and mutual understanding start playing a role. Yet, what happens during early meetings may arguably prevent or enable the development of a long-term mentoring relationship (Anseel, Vossaert and Corneillie, 2018) and all its associated benefits (Assenova, 2020; Prashantham and Floyd, 2019).

To learn more about early interactions between entrepreneurs and potential mentors, we consulted the mentoring literature. This body of work, like research on feedback in entrepreneurship, shows that long-term feedback relationships can have a range of positive outcomes for the feedback receiver (e.g., Eby *et al*., 2013; Hu, Li and Kwan, 2022; Lyons and Perrewé, 2014; Ragins, Cotton and Miller, 2000). But whereas the entrepreneurship literature is silent on the formation of these relationships, mentoring research sheds some light on their initiation (Kram, 1983). The main distinction it makes is between formal and informal mentorships. Informal mentorships develop spontaneously on the basis of mutual identification (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Formal mentorships are 'organisationally orchestrated' (Allen *et al*., 2017, p. 330); that is, mentor and mentee are paired with or introduced to each other by someone else

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(e.g., Allen and Eby, 2003; Assenova, 2020; Wang, Tomlinson and Noe, 2010).

Despite consistently pointing out whether the mentoring relationships they examined were initiated formally or informally, existing studies of mentoring rarely examine what happens during the initiation stage. When they do discuss the beginning of mentoring relationships, they describe how mentors and mentees develop fantasies of the other (Humberd and Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983) or how organizations can best pair them (Matarazzo and Finkelstein, 2015). Hence, like entrepreneurial feedback research, the mentoring literature does not explain how early interactions unfold. In fact, it suggests that feedback only plays a role once mentor and mentee have started cultivating their relationship (Humberd and Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983; Snoeren *et al*., 2016). So, how entrepreneurs relate to feedback providers during early interactions remains an open question.

Methods

Research setting

This paper is based on data collected at a start-up accelerator based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. We will refer to it as AMcubator to ensure anonymity. Accelerators provide 'short-term, limited duration, cohort-based educational programs for nascent ventures' (Cohen, Bingham and Hallen, 2019, p. 812). Nascent entrepreneurs are unlikely to have mentors who can support them in the development of their ventures. Typically, accelerators attempt to change that by facilitating meetings between the entrepreneurs and people interested in helping start-ups (Cohen, Bingham and Hallen, 2019; Hallen, Cohen and Bingham, 2020). Hence, an accelerator programme is a highly suitable context for studying the initiation of long-term feedback relationships.

AMcubator organised 10 networking events, primarily during the first few weeks of the accelerator programme. During each event, small groups of potential mentors visited the AMcubator offices. In total, entrepreneurs had the opportunity to meet with 100 experts. These meetings had two aims: to allow entrepreneurs to receive feedback on their ideas, and to help them gauge the potential for starting a long-term mentoring relationship. The entrepreneurs received information about each of the 100 feedback providers ahead of their arrival, namely a short bio and a description of their main area of expertise. They could then indicate whom they wanted to meet.

The meetings themselves were so-called 'speed meeting sessions'. These sessions started with a plenary introduction, during which the feedback providers introduced themselves and the entrepreneurs pitched their current thinking about their venture idea. After the introduction, all feedback providers moved to their assigned meeting location. The entrepreneurs visited each expert they had selected for 20 minutes. When time was up, AMcubator staff announced that the conversations should be ended, and encouraged the entrepreneurs to move to their next meeting.

Data collection

We obtained permission to attend the speed meeting sessions that were organized as part of the second edition of AMcubator's 'web and mobile accelerator programme', which focused on nascent technological ventures. The programme received 400 applications. Out of them, the AMcubator management admitted 10 entrepreneurial teams to the programme. Table 1 introduces the eight ventures whose meetings with potential mentors we analysed. The remaining two teams were excluded from the analysis because the data we have on them is limited (they often met with feedback providers other than those the first author shadowed) and therefore does not allow us to compare their behaviour across meetings.

The first author was present at nine speed meeting sessions. At the start of each session, he approached a feedback provider and asked him – all the experts whose meetings were attended were men – for permission to join his meetings. Most feedback providers had also joined the previous edition of the 'web and mobile' programme and were working with new venture founders on a professional basis. So, in that sense, they had feedback-giving experience.

Table 2 gives an overview of the feedback providers' expertise and the meetings they had. In total, the first author attended 64 meetings. Ten of them have not been analysed – seven because they involved the founders of the two ventures that were excluded from the analysis, two due to a lack of feedback, and one as a result of a faulty recording. The analysis of the remaining 54 meetings was based primarily on the audio recordings.

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Table 1. Participants in AMcubator's accelerator programme

Venture name (pseudonym)	Venture idea
3D Share	Connecting 3D printer owners with people who want to make a 3D print
GameBook	Creating an online platform where gamers can discover, follow, and share gaming experiences
ProcessCorp	Enabling customers to monitor, manage, and optimize their business processes in real-time
eLearners	Building an online learning platform for people who want to learn effectively from each other
eHealth	Launching an online system that allows health professionals to access patient data from any device
Parkling	Introducing dynamic pricing in parking garages to make parking cheaper and improve utilization of parking spaces
GoodFood	Developing an online platform where professionals can order good food from the best chefs in town
Jewels	Creating an online tool to help people design and customize 3D-printable jewellery

Table 2. Encounters observed during speed meeting sessions

Date	Feedback provider (pseudonym)	Expertise	Entrepreneurs that feedback provider met with
March 23	Sam	Digital marketing expert, entrepreneur, and investor	3D Share, GameBook, ProcessCorp, eLearners, eHealth, Parkling, Jewels
March 25	Rob	Executive search, commercial role at large multinational organization	3D Share, ProcessCorp, eLearners, eHealth, Parkling, GoodFood, Jewels
March 28	John	Entrepreneur, owner of venture capital firm	3D Share, GameBook, ProcessCorp, eLearners, eHealth, Parkling
April 2	Tim	Investor working at venture capital firm	3D Share, GameBook, ProcessCorp, eHealth, GoodFood, Jewels
April 8	Manuel	Former accountant/consultant, now entrepreneur and start-up advisor	3D Share, GameBook, ProcessCorp, eLearners, eHealth, Parkling, GoodFood
April 11	Chris	Entrepreneur	GameBook, ProcessCorp, eHealth, Parkling, GoodFood, Jewels
April 15	Martin	Sales at large telecommunications firms, now entrepreneur	3D Share, GameBook, eLearners, eHealth, Parkling, GoodFood, Jewels
April 20	Nick	Website developer and entrepreneur	3D Share, ProcessCorp, eLearners, Parkling, Jewels
May 29	Ray	Marketing and product development, now entrepreneur	GameBook, Parkling, Jewels

In addition, we used the extensive notes that the first author took during the meetings. These notes covered information that the audio recorders did not pick up, such as diagrams that entrepreneurs and feedback providers drew to elaborate on what they said. Hence, we used real-time data, thereby limiting 'the likelihood of self-reporting bias' (Maxwell and Lévesque, 2014, p. 1065).

Data analysis

Dyadic working relationships, such as those between mentor and mentee or feedback provider and feedback receiver, are best studied using methods that can capture the specifics of interpersonal exchanges (Krasikova and LeBreton, 2012). Hence, like a growing number of studies in entrepreneurship and management (e.g., Chalmers and Shaw, 2017; Vom Lehn and Heath, 2022; Yamauchi and Hiramoto, 2016), we follow seminal work in linguistics and sociology and treat interactions as the vehicle through which everyday behaviour is accomplished (Goffman, 1967; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Searle, 1969).

Although we follow prior research in leveraging existing ideas about the way interactants respond to each other, our approach was largely inductive; we used open coding to analyse how exactly the feedback interactions unfolded. Contextualizing existing analytical frameworks is common in

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studies of dyadic working relationships (Dowie and De Bruijn, 2022; Vom Lehn and Heath, 2022) and fits recent calls for more contingent approaches to qualitative data analysis (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021). Specifically, we took the following interrelated steps to analyse our data.

Step 1: Identifying illocutionary acts. Initially, our analysis focused on the individual utterances made by the feedback providers and entrepreneurs. We asked ourselves which topic was advanced by the speaker; that is, we studied what Searle (1969) refers to as locutionary acts. We also examined what the utterance was doing – the illocutionary act (Llewellyn and Spence, 2009). To illustrate the difference between locutionary and illocutionary acts, Searle discusses the question: 'Is there any salt here?' (1969, p. 53). Responding to the locutionary act alone, one could say: 'Yes, there is salt here'. However, most people would pick up on the illocutionary act, treat the utterance as a request, and pass over the salt. Along these lines, we examined the locutionary and illocutionary acts performed in every sentence spoken during the conversations we recorded. Table 3 gives an overview of the main illocutionary acts in our data.

Step 2: Analysing relationships between illocutionary acts. The illocutionary acts shown in Table 3 are performed by individual speakers. Because 'the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons' (Goffman, 1967, p. 2), we also analysed how each illocutionary act was related to adjacent utterances (Haines, in press). Regarding these relations, prior work in linguistics discusses alignment, epistemic stance, and affiliation (Stivers, 2011). We used these general notions as sensitizing concepts that formed a point of departure for developing specific ideas (Charmaz, 2006) relevant to our context.

Alignment is the 'structural level of cooperation between interactants' (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011b, p. 20), meaning that successive utterances contribute to the same action sequence. This happens when someone advances the same topic as their conversation partner and matches the other's illocutionary act. For example, speakers who *request information* start a question–answer action sequence. To align, that is, to contribute to that sequence, the other speaker should perform a matching illocutionary act on the same topic, such as making an *assertion* that provides the requested information. In the opposite situation, called 'disalignment' (Nguyen and Janssens, 2019, p. 377), speakers 'do not cooperate with the action sequence' (Keevallik, 2011, p. 185). We found two manifestations of disalignment. One was comparatively mild, meaning that successive utterances differed only slightly; they advanced the same topic but performed nonmatching illocutionary acts, or switched to a related topic without drastically changing the action sequence. The second form of disalignment was more radical, in that adjacent utterances covered entirely unrelated topics. Disaligning utterances usually initiated an entirely new action sequence, but sometimes instigated a return to an earlier action sequence. We refer to the latter form of disalignment as 'realignment'.

Epistemic stance concerns how speakers 'see information or knowledge to be distributed between them and [their conversation partners]' (Hayano, 2011, p. 59). If speakers act as if one of them is more knowledgeable, there is a wide epistemic stance gap between them. This happens when, for instance, one speaker *requests information*, thus taking a weak epistemic stance, and the other speaker takes a strong stance through *making an assertion* that provides the information. In this example, the second speaker has been assigned epistemic primacy (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011a). Epistemic stance gaps can become narrower (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011b), for example when speakers who originally *requested information* later upgrade their epistemic stance by *making an assertion* about the same topic. We also observed situations where the epistemic stance gap was reversed, that is, when speakers who were asked to provide information, instead of accepting the epistemic primacy they had been assigned, handed it over to their conversation partner by performing an epistemically weak illocutionary act such as *requesting clarification*.

Affiliation is the 'affective level of cooperation' (Nguyen and Janssens, 2019, p. 375) between speakers. It can be observed when speakers cooperate at the level of action or at the level of affective stance (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011b). In our data, cooperation at the level of action manifested itself as *proposed* action: some speakers, after *evaluating* a meeting positively, expressed the intention to meet again. Cooperation at the level of affective stance refers to the extent to which

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Table 3. Overview of illocutionary acts

Illocutionary act	Description	Illustrative example
Greeting (GRT)	Acknowledging the presence of the other speaker	3D SHARE, referring to an earlier encounter with Manuel: 'We talked during the selection days (…) and later on as well, I think.' MANUEL: 'Yeah, I was here for that lecture.'
Asserting (ASRT)	Sharing information with the other speaker	GOODFOOD to CHRIS about feedback they received: 'I was talking to [another expert] about a problem we have with our website (…). He gave some great advice. He said 'you've got account details for 120 people. Just start using email, send a letter.' Notify everyone about what we offer from Monday to Sunday in their neighbourhood erm…, and…yeah, just use email and take that website [offline]'
Requesting information (QINF)	Asking the other speaker for information	TIM, asking PROCESSCORP: 'How far are you with the product now?' (…) PROCESSCORP, asking TIM: 'Do you have some kind of rough estimate, say, to make one VC deal: it's like three weeks full time [work]? To just have some understanding of the time period…'
Requesting clarification (QCLR)	Asking the other speaker to elaborate on or repeat information	PROCESSCORP, explaining their product: 'We deliver adapters for the systems, for the most common systems, like SAP, IBM, and Oracle. And you have to implement them. (…)' MANUEL, asking for clarification: 'So basically, you're gonna be a bit like [mentions company in PROCESSCORP's industry]?'
Referring (REF)	Suggesting a future conversation partner to the other speaker	MARTIN suggesting that PARKLING talks to one of his friends: 'A friend of mine has got erm… coming to think of it, he's got a parking place at erm… [Amsterdam airport]. (…) He's got, erm…legal parking spots and drives shuttle busses from and to the airport. (…) If you wanna…do you wanna talk to him?'
Proposing (PROP)	Suggesting a future activity for both speakers	SAM proposing to JEWELS to meet again: 'What we could do is…would it be an idea if we meet again at the end of the afternoon? By that time, I'll have finished all my conversations, you'll have had more conversations. So you can make a choice, say 'yeah, that feels good, he can help us.'
Evaluating (EVAL)	Assessing a topic that was discussed earlier	NICK about the design of ELEARNERS' platform: 'This looks good, I don't really know what I could add to it. It just looks very neat. Maybe ever so slightly clinical. On the other hand, if I would use this, I'd like the layout.'
Requesting opinion (QOP)	Asking the other speaker for their opinion	EHEALTH, asking CHRIS: 'Should we invest more in marketing or in development?'
Questioning (QSTN)	Sharing doubts about the accuracy of information provided by the other speaker	JOHN doubting whether ELEARNERS, by offering content on design, is addressing a B2C market: 'Why is design a consumer…I am designing, which can be a hobby, but my employer is a design agency. Doesn't that mean it's B2B?'
Advising (ADV)	Suggesting a future course of action to the other speaker	RAY advising GAMEBOOK on product differentiation: 'You need to differentiate somewhere in the product, in your offering. (…) You promise that this is for gamers, but [you need to show] evidence that it's for gamers: "Look at this button, nobody has this button."'

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speakers agree or disagree with another speaker (Hakulinen and Sorjonen, 2011). We observed mild and strong manifestations of both agreement and disagreement. Mild agreement occurred when speakers presented overlapping opinions. Speakers who strongly agreed also positively evaluated their conversation partner's opinion or expressed a willingness to implement it. In situations of mild disagreement, non-overlapping opinions were uttered with a downgraded epistemic stance. Strong disagreement happened when speakers took a strong epistemic stance when expressing a differing opinion.

Table 4 illustrates how we analysed the relationships between illocutionary acts. Prior work based on analyses of interactions explains that, because of space constraints, it is important to be selective and prioritize the data that best suits the researchers' purposes, even when that means omitting utterances (see Nguyen and Janssens, 2019; Yamauchi and Hiramoto, 2016). In line with that recommendation, Table 4 focuses on an excerpt from the conversation between Tim and GoodFood that fits our current purpose: highlighting the wide variety of ways in which alignment, epistemic stance, and affiliation manifested themselves in our data.

Step 3: Creating and comparing timelines. For each of the 54 meetings, we created timelines that show all locutionary and illocutionary acts performed by the feedback provider and entrepreneur. Figure 1 displays what this looks like for the aforementioned excerpt of the conversation between Tim and GoodFood. Level 1 in the figure shows the label assigned to each utterance. The first component of each label is a number indicating which utterance it concerns. The second component clarifies who the speaker was: FP for feedback provider, and ENT for entrepreneur. The third is an abbreviation that refers to the illocutionary acts shown in Table 3, that is, ASRT for asserting. The fourth component indicates the topic advanced by the speaker (the locutionary act). The remaining three levels visualize the chronological development of alignment, epistemic stance, and affiliation.

After creating these timelines, we compared them, following Czarniawska's (2004) suggestion to observe how conversations are repeated and how they change. As conversations are highly ritualistic (Goffman, 1967; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974), we found many similarities. For instance, most meetings began with an introductory sequence, which typically consisted of *greetings*, *assertions*, and *proposals* that set the scene for the remainder of the conversation. Introductory sequences were normally followed by question–answer sequences through which the feedback provider and entrepreneur acquired information about each other.

The similarities between meetings decreased when the feedback provider or entrepreneur started *evaluating*, *questioning*, *requesting opinion*, or *advising*. These illocutionary acts marked the beginning of what we refer to as feedback sequences. Utterance 35 in Figure 1 is an example. Feedback sequences end with the last utterance about the topic that was advanced at the start of the sequence. Some were uninterrupted, while others were interjected by utterances about another topic (e.g., utterance 41 in Figure 1). These topic changes are instances of disalignment. If the speakers returned to the original topic later, they displayed realignment. We also observed variation across feedback sequences in the way the epistemic stance gap between the feedback provider and entrepreneur developed. We formed four clusters of feedback sequences that highlight these alignment and stance-related differences.

Once we had grouped similar feedback sequences together, we examined whether the development of alignment and epistemic stance throughout a sequence was related to changes in the level of agreement or disagreement displayed by the interactants. Although we found some connections, the pattern was not consistent. To resolve these inconsistencies, we classified each feedback sequence as early or late, compared to other feedback sequences in the same interaction. We found that feedback sequences that were alike with respect to epistemic stance and alignment, but not in terms of agreement, often occurred at different moments. This suggests that the timing of a sequence shapes affiliation, at least regarding the level of agreement. To corroborate these findings, we examined whether entrepreneurs who strongly agreed with a feedback provider were more likely to propose a follow-up meeting.

The patterns that emerged from our analysis allow us to explain which early feedback interactions may develop into long-term feedback relationships. Like Harrison and Rouse's (2015) theory of feedback interactions over the course of creative projects, our theory offers necessary

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Table 4. Illustration of our analytical approach – conversation between Tim and GoodFood

Utterance	Characteristics of utterance	Relationship with preceding utterances
32. TIM: 'Have you checked [whether reviews are important] with them? With the customers?'	*Topic*: market positioning (customer reviews) *Illocutionary act*: requesting information	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and similar (not feedback-related) illocutionary act as utterance #41 (not shown here). *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, entrepreneur primacy – feedback provider requests information (weak stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
33. GOODFOOD: 'Yes, yes. And you can tell that companies like Booking.com and Tripadvisor are super successful because they leverage reviews. It is a hygiene factor.'	*Topic*: market positioning (customer reviews) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and similar (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, entrepreneur primacy – entrepreneur provides requested information (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
34. TIM: '(…) Those reviews are of course…erm, are very important (…) [for] retaining customers. And they also play a role in shaping the decision to buy from a particular chef.'	*Topic*: market positioning (customer reviews) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and same (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, entrepreneur primacy – feedback provider shares own understanding of the topic (stance upgrade) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
35. TIM: '(…) I don't want to start a debate, but the question is whether [reviews] matter for their decision to go to your platform.'	*Topic*: market positioning (customer reviews) *Illocutionary act*: questioning	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – same topic but change to feedback-related illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, entrepreneur primacy – feedback provider gives feedback on the topic (stance upgrade) *Affective stance*: Disagreement (mild) – contrary opinion phrased as a question
36. GOODFOOD: '(…) Well, I think convenience definitely matters, and the fact that [the food] is of the highest quality because you order from a chef. And….'	*Topic*: market positioning (convenience & quality) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – slightly different topic but response is connected to feedback-related illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, entrepreneur primacy – entrepreneur provides first assessment of the new topic (weak stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
37. TIM: 'Price, what role does that play?'	*Topic*: market positioning (price) *Illocutionary act*: requesting information	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – slightly different topic and different (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, entrepreneur primacy – feedback provider upgrades weak stance associated with requesting information by asking a leading question *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
38. GOODFOOD: 'Price is not…we could maybe even increase our prices, because it is not one of the top-2 reasons for people to buy food from us.'	*Topic*: market positioning (price) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and similar (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, entrepreneur primacy – entrepreneur provides requested information (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
39. TIM: 'Okay. I guess what I'm looking for is whether you erm…(silence) whether you know who you're competing with.'	*Topic*: market positioning (competition) *Illocutionary act*: requesting information	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – slightly different topic but similar (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, entrepreneur primacy – feedback provider upgrades weak stance associated with requesting information by asking a loaded question *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)

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Table 4. (Continued)

Utterance	Characteristics of utterance	Relationship with preceding utterances
40. GOODFOOD: 'Yes, we are…we primarily…we see [name of competitor] as our main competitor. But they don't provide quality food, at least that's the perception people have – no quality.'	*Topic*: market positioning (competition) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and similar (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, entrepreneur primacy – entrepreneur provides requested information (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
41. TIM: 'But it's dirt cheap, so that is….'	*Topic*: competition *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – slightly different topic but same (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, feedback provider primacy – feedback provider makes first assessment of the new topic (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
42. GOODFOOD: 'That is, that's not true! On average, people pay 15–20 euros for a main course at [name of competitor].'	*Topic*: competition *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and same (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, feedback provider primacy – entrepreneur shares own assessment of the topic (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Disagreement (strong) – contrary opinion phrased as an epistemically strong assertion
43. TIM: 'Alright, yeah. You can tell, I don't use [name of competitor] (…).'	*Topic*: competition *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and same (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Feedback provider primacy lost – feedback provider downgrades stance drastically, expressing lack of knowledge *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
Utterances 44-53 omitted		
54. GOODFOOD: 'Our [market] positioning is not clear to you yet?'	*Topic*: market positioning (clarity) *Illocutionary act*: requesting information	*Alignment*: Realignment (mild) – different but related topic that is connected to utterance #32-40 and similar (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, feedback provider primacy – entrepreneur upgrades weak stance associated with requesting information by asking a leading question *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
55. TIM: 'Well, I don't need to know right now.'	*Topic*: market positioning (clarity) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Aligned – same topic and same (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Narrow gap, feedback provider primacy – feedback provider gives requested information (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
56. TIM: 'It would be more important to me that you keep an eye on…that you try to differentiate yourself on criteria that are important to your customers (…).'	*Topic*: market positioning (general) *Illocutionary act*: advising	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – slightly different topic and different (feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, feedback provider primacy – feedback provider gives feedback on new topic (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)
57. GOODFOOD: 'People who order food now enjoy reading [the chef's] story. That is the feedback we're getting.'	*Topic*: market positioning (stories) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Disalignment (mild) – slightly different topic and different (feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, entrepreneur primacy – entrepreneur makes first assertion about a new topic (strong stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)

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Table 4. (Continued)

Utterance	Characteristics of utterance	Relationship with preceding utterances
58. GOODFOOD: 'But yeah, the question is whether [those stories] compel people to order. If they do not, erm…convenience will become more important, and so will our technology (…).'	*Topic*: market positioning (general) *Illocutionary act*: asserting	*Alignment*: Realignment (mild) – slightly different topic that is connected to the topic and feedback-related illocutionary act of utterance #56 *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, feedback provider primacy – entrepreneur expresses doubt (weak stance) *Affective stance*: Agreement (mild) – overlapping opinion but no assessment or intention to implement
59. TIM: 'How will you do the erm… selection? Will you make a selection?'	*Topic*: finding suppliers *Illocutionary act*: requesting information	*Alignment*: Disalignment (strong) – unrelated topic and different (not feedback-related) illocutionary act *Epistemic stance*: Wide gap, entrepreneur primacy – feedback provider requests information (weak stance) *Affective stance*: Not applicable (neutral)

conditions for the outcomes we observed rather than necessary *and* sufficient conditions. In other words, we argue that cooperation at the level of action and affective stance during early feedback interactions is necessary to kickstart a long-term feedback relationship, but do not claim that affiliation and the developments in alignment and epistemic stance associated with it are sufficient for the development of such relationships.

Findings

We identified four types of feedback sequence: comprehensive unsolicited, incomplete unsolicited, comprehensive solicited, and incomplete solicited feedback sequences. During solicited feedback sequences, entrepreneurs explicitly requested feedback on specific issues, thus going beyond the general openness to feedback they displayed by signing up for the speed meeting sessions. Conversely, unsolicited feedback sequences revolved around feedback that entrepreneurs did not directly ask for. Comprehensive and incomplete feedback sequences differed with respect to the development of alignment and epistemic stance. We will first elaborate on these differences by discussing each type of sequence separately. Thereafter, we show that feedback interactions were often made up of multiple feedback sequences. Finally, we demonstrate that the way feedback sequences are combined during interactions shapes affiliation, that is, agreement and the expressed intention to meet again.

Comprehensive solicited feedback sequences

Beginning of sequence: Comprehensive solicited feedback sequences started with radical disalignment; entrepreneurs ended the preceding discussion through asking for feedback, thus assigning epistemic primacy to the feedback provider. GameBook, for instance, suddenly switched from *making assertions* about his product to *requesting* Manuel's *opinion*: 'We have actually some troubles making a financial roadmap (…) How do you plan that?' The entrepreneur hereby initiated the meeting's first feedback sequence. Manuel, like all feedback providers contributing to a comprehensive solicited feedback sequence, disaligned mildly. He stayed on topic but, rather than providing his opinion, *requested information*: 'Do you understand…do you have your metrics?' Hence, the mentor gave epistemic primacy to GameBook, who aligned with the request by responding with a simple 'Yeah' before mentioning an example metric: 'Retention'.

Middle of sequence: Eventually, one of the interactants realigned with the entrepreneur's original *request for opinion*. Epistemic primacy thus returned to the feedback provider. As part of this realignment, Manuel made *assertions* about the components of a financial roadmap: 'There are only two types of costs. There are the marketing costs (…) and there are organization costs.'

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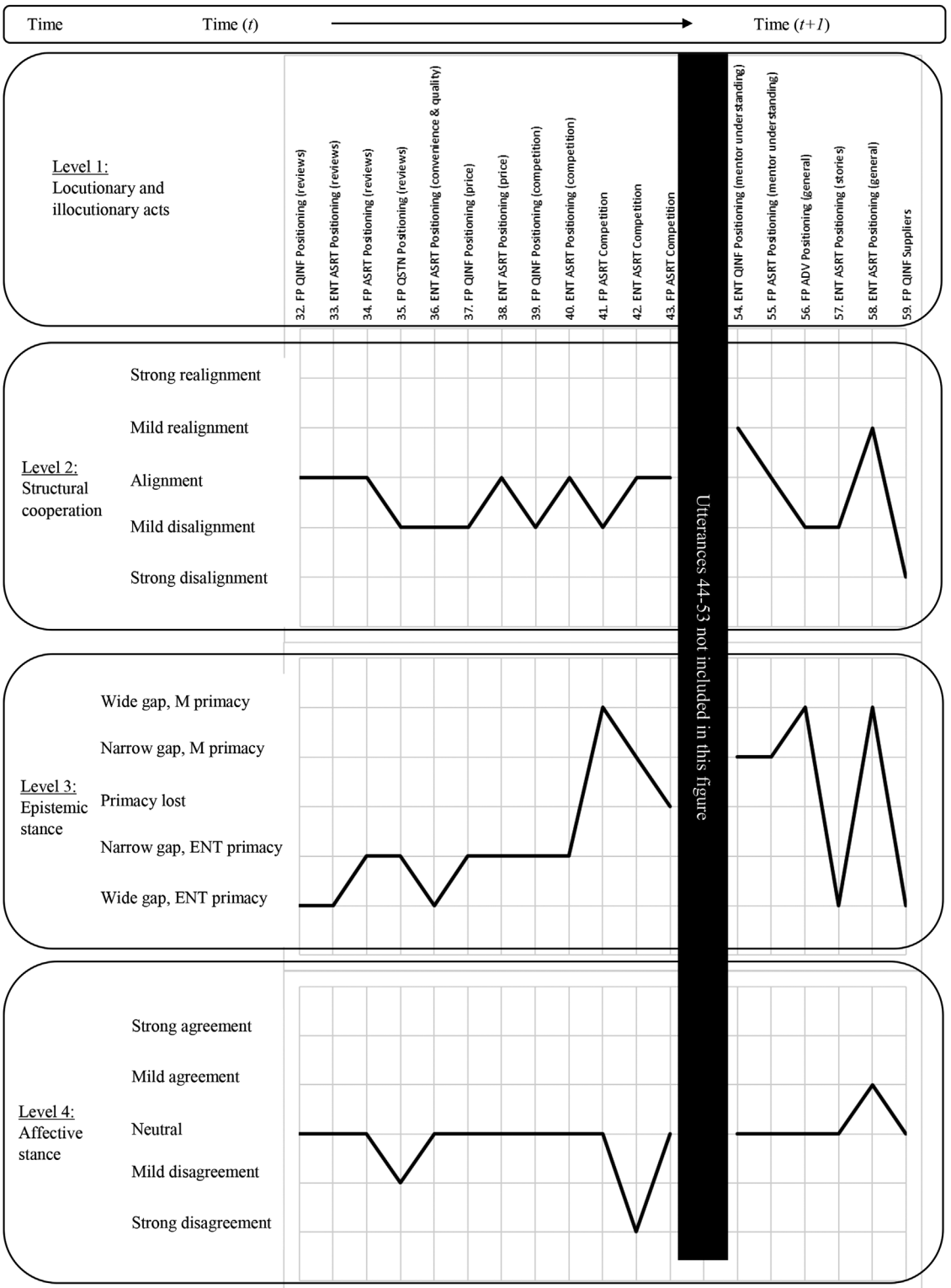

Figure 1. Timeline for the excerpt from the conversation between Tim and GoodFood shown in Table 3

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In comprehensive solicited feedback sequences, entrepreneurs reacted to the feedback provider's initial feedback by asking follow-up questions or making assertions. GameBook *requested* more *information*: 'And then you just like put a margin on top of that?' Although he asked a question, the entrepreneur narrowed the epistemic stance gap; he shared his ideas about what to do after mapping the main costs. Yet, Manuel retained epistemic primacy, as he continued taking a strong stance by *advising*: 'Your figures don't have to be perfect, but just make sure you file it perfectly so you can find it back.'

End of sequence: Comprehensive solicited feedback sequences ended either because the time allotted to the meeting was up, or through radical disalignment by the feedback provider or entrepreneur. The former happened to Manuel and GameBook, but not before the entrepreneur expressed strong agreement with Manuel's *advice*: 'That's what we have to do, definitely.' As the meeting between Manuel and GameBook illustrates, we only observed strong affiliation during early comprehensive solicited feedback sequences, that is, those that preceded other feedback sequences that occurred during a meeting. Table 5 (first column) provides an example of a late comprehensive solicited feedback sequence. Affiliation, if it occurred at all in those sequences, was mild at best.

Incomplete solicited feedback sequences

Beginning of sequence: Incomplete solicited feedback sequences started with a *request for opinion* from an entrepreneur. With that request, the entrepreneur often radically disaligned and took a weak epistemic stance. GameBook asked John the same question he asked Manuel. By doing so, he ended a solicited feedback sequence about revenue models: 'Another question would be: (…) how can we make a strong roadmap for funding?'

Similarly, Parkling disaligned radically when, after receiving comprehensive unsolicited feedback on the competitive positioning of his venture from Ray, he *requested* the feedback provider's *opinion*: 'One more question about the product. We have implemented a late registration process – we allow you to download the app, see the value, you can explore all the parking [spots]….'

Middle of sequence: Incomplete solicited feedback sequences differed from comprehensive solicited feedback sequences in that an entrepreneur's *request for opinion* was not followed by mild disalignment from the feedback provider. Table 5 shows an instance of radical disalignment. Ray and John, on the other hand, aligned with GameBook's and Parkling's *requests for opinion* very quickly. Ray's *criticism* even interrupted Parkling's description of their late registration process: 'That's terrible.' He thus adopted a strong epistemic stance. John, on the other hand, did not assume epistemic primacy: 'I don't have a lot of experience with internet consumer markets, to be honest with you. We invest more in B2B.' Although this type of response sometimes ended feedback sequences, John eventually *advised* GameBook: 'One is erm…, erm (…) making your costs as low as possible [and] your revenue as high as possible.' Although *advising* is an epistemically strong illocutionary act, the hesitant nature of John's advice suggests that he still assigned himself a relatively weak epistemic pos.

End of sequence: Comprehensive solicited feedback sequences continued beyond a feedback provider's initial feedback. Incomplete sequences were short. John, soon after providing his initial *advice* to GameBook, ended the sequence by radically changing topic: 'The second one is…I mean…how far are you with this platform? (…) How far are you away from getting it live?' Ray also disaligned right after *criticizing* Parkling's late registration process. He looked at the prototype of the app shown to him by the entrepreneur and *evaluated* another feature: 'And you have a "reserve" function…okay, that's pretty fancy.' Entrepreneurs only expressed agreement during incomplete solicited feedback sequences when these followed a comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequence. The two examples discussed here underline that general pattern. There was no affiliation between John and GameBook during the feedback sequence on funding roadmaps that followed another solicited feedback sequence. Parkling, who solicited feedback on the registration process after receiving comprehensive unsolicited feedback, expressed strong agreement with Ray's criticism: 'That's terrible. We know that. A bit weird.'

Comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences

Beginning of sequence: Comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences began when feedback providers – through *questioning*, *advising*, or *criticizing* – expressed their opinion about something

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Table 5. Solicited feedback sequences

	Comprehensive sequence – example: Tim–3D Share	Incomplete sequence – example: Rob–eLearners
Start of sequence	Beginning of sequence: *Entrepreneur disaligns radically from preceding sequence by soliciting feedback, thereby assigning epistemic primacy to the feedback provider*. 3D SHARE (*radical disalignment – was making assertions about scaling, starts late feedback sequence about angel investments*): 'We are considering contacting [our former boss] and other old colleagues and have them invest in us. (…) How should we manage this?' (*Requests opinion, takes weak stance*.) *Feedback provider disaligns mildly and hands epistemic primacy to entrepreneur. Entrepreneur aligns with this move*. TIM: 'It would be a small [funding] round, right?' (*Downgrades epistemic stance by requesting information instead of providing opinion but stays on topic – mild disalignment*.) 3D SHARE: 'Yes.' (*Provides information, thus showing alignment*.) Middle of sequence: *Realignment with the first move; feedback provider gives feedback solicited by the entrepreneur, thereby assuming epistemic primacy*. TIM: 'I wouldn't just approach 3D [printing] related people. I'd also think about (…) what are the skills you need for the upcoming angel round.' (*Provides advice about selecting angels, thus taking strong stance*.) *Continued alignment with feedback sequence through additional requests for information or assertions. The latter constitutes an epistemic stance upgrade. In either case, feedback providers retain primacy*. 3D SHARE: 'Yes, [such skill-based] partnerships are important to us.' (*Shares own, overlapping thoughts on angels – stance upgrade and mild agreement, which was common in late comprehensive solicited feedback sequences*.) TIM: (…) 'For instance, you could say that (…) it is good to also get someone on board who knows a lot [about peer-to-peer business].' (*Provides details on earlier advice – strong stance, thus retaining epistemic primacy*.) End of sequence: *Feedback sequence ends due to radical disalignment or because time is up*. 3D SHARE, when someone reminds him of the time: 'Yes, I'm done.'	Beginning of sequence: *Entrepreneur disaligns radically from preceding sequence by soliciting feedback, thus assigning epistemic primacy to the feedback provider*. ELEARNERS (*radical disalignment – was answering Rob's requests for information about their product, now initiates first feedback sequence*): 'We need help with marketing.' (*Requests opinion, takes weak stance*.) Middle of sequence: *Feedback provider disaligns radically by changing topic of conversation or indicates inability to provide feedback* ROB: 'As always. Simply building a product is not entrepreneurship; it is craftsmanship. But you can do that?' (*Changes topic from marketing to product development and performs a different illocutionary act – requesting information*.) ELEARNERS: 'Yes, we can [build a product].' (*Aligns with Rob's request for information*.) End of sequence: *Feedback provider nor entrepreneur returns to original feedback sequence* ROB: '[The product] is ready?' (*Feedback sequence ends definitively without any agreement, which was common for early incomplete feedback sequences*.)
End of sequence		

entrepreneurs said, even though their views had not been requested. This was an epistemically strong act, as they became the first to express their opinion. It was also a mild form of disalignment; while the feedback provider advanced the same topic as the entrepreneur, they performed a non-matching illocutionary act. Manuel, for example, *questioned* 3D Share's plans. The entrepreneur intended to allow inhabitants of 20 cities to register their 3D printer on his platform. Yet, 3D

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Share would only start operating in a city once 50 people registered. In response, Manuel said: 'If you build people's anticipation early, and then you don't deliver (…) they're waiting.' In comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences, feedback often sparked a lengthy discussion, during which the epistemic stance gap narrowed. 3D Share *asserted* that people can influence how long they wait: 'They [can] rally and get enough of their 3D printer owner friends onto our platform.' Through making this counterargument, the entrepreneur upgraded his epistemic stance. Reacting to the entrepreneur's strong disagreement, Manuel moved from *questioning* 3D Share's plans to *advising* on what would need to be done when expanding to a new city: 'PR, marketing, operational (…) there must be like 10 factors.' 3D Share continued disagreeing strongly: 'I think we have to separate (…) the PR roadmap and an operational roadmap.'

Middle of sequence: After feedback providers or entrepreneurs had been making epistemically strong utterances on the same topic for some time, one of them disaligned mildly. Manuel switched from debating how 3D Share should plan for expansion to *requesting information* about the cities the entrepreneur intended to launch in: 'Why don't [you] pick one city in Asia, like Singapore?' As this example suggests, the epistemic stance balance changed in the middle of comprehensive unsolicited advice sequences; while the feedback provider held epistemic primacy earlier, it now got assigned to the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs generally accepted epistemic primacy. 3D Share shared their knowledge of the Singaporean market: 'We worked in the 3D printing industry for four years [and] we've seen very little activity [in Singapore].' As the conversation moved on, it became clear that the disaligning utterance had not ended the feedback sequence; the feedback provider and entrepreneur eventually realigned. This involved the feedback provider taking up epistemic primacy again. Manuel returned to *criticizing* 3D Share's expansion plans: 'You get people excited, and then they wait two or three months for you to launch, and then it's a complete mess. What you've done is you just (…) created a market for your competitor.' Entrepreneurs aligned but, in contrast to what happened at the beginning of the sequence, took a weak epistemic stance. 3D share, for instance, now *requested* Manuel's *opinion*: 'How do you deal with that?'

End of sequence: Affiliation was common in comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences that took place at the start of a meeting, even when entrepreneurs, such as 3D Share, initially strongly disagreed (see Table 6, left column, for an additional example). Before *requesting* Manuel's *opinion*, 3D Share expressed agreement with the feedback provider's *criticism*: 'I think that's a fair comment.' Comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences ended by means of radical disalignment or when the time allocated for the meeting had transpired. For the meeting between 3D Share and Manuel, it was the latter; 20 minutes after the start, the entrepreneur wrapped up: 'I think we really need to continue this conversation.' This utterance illustrates another feature of feedback interactions with an early comprehensive unsolicited advice sequence: they regularly ended with the entrepreneur or feedback provider expressing the intention to meet again.

Incomplete unsolicited feedback sequences

Beginning of sequence: Incomplete unsolicited feedback sequences were instigated by feedback providers, who radically disaligned by giving feedback on a topic unrelated to the preceding discussion. Nick, for example, initiated an early feedback sequence when he switched from *requesting information* about eLearners' product to *advising* on a potential revenue model: 'You could have premium [learning] channels.' eLearners disaligned, changing the conversation from revenue models to the word the feedback provider used to refer to his product. The entrepreneur said he was 'still figuring out how to call' the learning channels: '"Textbook" is an annoying word (…) We are really looking for the best label.' Other entrepreneurs who received this kind of unsolicited feedback responded differently. When Rob abruptly ended an introductory sequence through *questioning* Parkling's decision to launch in Amsterdam – 'I don't want to be negative, but I think that your chances of success in Holland are not so big' – the entrepreneur aligned (see right column in Table 6 for a similar example). Yet, he expressed strong disagreement by *asserting* that parking garages in the Netherlands have a need for Parkling: 'They have empty spaces. That's what we're focusing on.'

Middle of sequence: When entrepreneurs, like eLearners, disaligned in response to unsolicited feedback, the sequence ended right after it began.

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Table 6. Unsolicited feedback sequences

	Comprehensive sequence – example: Ray–Jewels	Incomplete sequence – example: Rob–eLearners
Start of sequence	Beginning of sequence: *Feedback provider disaligns mildly by performing nonmatching illocutionary act on the same topic and taking a strong epistemic stance. Entrepreneur aligns and upgrades stance.* RAY (*was requesting information about Jewels' partnership with a young designer, now starts early feedback sequence about that collaboration*): 'Promoting your own brand will be hard [if the designer's brand is visible on each product], I think.' (*Criticizes, so takes strong stance.*) JEWELS: '(…) Well, we will also add "Jewels" to [the packaging].' (*Aligns and upgrades epistemic stance by making counter-argument–strong disagreement.)* *Initial response to feedback sparks longer discussion. Epistemic stance gap narrows.* RAY: 'I think it's really important to be explicit about how all these things relate to each other.' (*Now advising instead of criticizing but staying on topic – maintains strong epistemic stance.*) JEWELS: 'If we wouldn't want [her labels on our products] anymore, she'd remove it. But for now, we're OK with it.' (*Aligns and upgrades stance by making counter-argument–strong disagreement.*) Middle of sequence: *Feedback provider or entrepreneur changes to a related topic (mild disalignment). Other party aligns. Epistemic stance balance changes (feedback provider no longer has epistemic primacy).* RAY: 'How will you 3D print all [jewellery]? Locally, or…?' (*Mild disalignment: changes topic from partnership to production and, by requesting information, gives primacy to entrepreneur.*) JEWELS: 'Initially, yes. Later, we can also have things printed in China.' (*Provides information, thus showing alignment.*) *Realignment with initial feedback. Epistemic primacy returns to feedback provider.* RAY: 'You could decide to only use her products when you launch (…) but say that you'll release your own products after three months.' (*Returns to earlier topic; takes strong stance by advising.*) JEWELS: '(…) Yeah, yeah. That's a good erm… (*takes weak stance by treating feedback provider's advice as a novel suggestion*). We have got a roadmap for the next few years. And partnerships play a key role in that. So, we will have to critically re-evaluate them.' (*Alignment and strong agreement, which was common in early comprehensive unsolicited feedback cycles.*) End of sequence: *Feedback sequence ends due to radical disalignment or because time is up.* JEWELS: 'Plenty to think about.' (*Signals end of feedback sequence – meeting time is up.*)	Beginning of sequence: *Feedback provider disaligns radically by changing to unrelated topic, while taking a strong epistemic stance. Entrepreneur aligns and upgrades stance.* SAM (*was providing solicited feedback on venture planning, now initiates new sequence about target market*): 'I'd say: decide [between Germany and the Netherlands]. You cannot do everything.' (*Advises, so takes strong stance.*) PROCESSCORP: 'We are maybe focusing on [Germany when] prototyping (…) But the best growing market (…) is the US market.' (*Aligns and upgrades stance – strongly disagrees with choosing either Germany or the Netherlands.*) *Initial response to feedback sparks longer discussion, during which feedback provider retains epistemic primacy.* SAM: 'I disagree (…) My take on the German market is: while you think it is saturated, has a lot of competitors, by offering a new angle you have a new market.' (*Expands on advice, strong stance.*) End of sequence: *Radical disalignment ends the feedback sequence.* SAM: 'You cannot do everything at once. So, you have to define certain stages that you [need to complete before you can] grow for the current six months.' (*Changes topic back to venture planning – sequence is abandoned without any affiliation, which was common for incomplete feedback sequences that did not follow comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences.*)
End of sequence		

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Those who aligned by upgrading their epistemic stance, as Parkling did, sometimes gained epistemic primacy because the feedback provider responded by lowering his stance. Rob, having heard the entrepreneur's justification for launching in Amsterdam, stopped *criticizing* and performed the epistemically weak action of *requesting information*: 'What's the, yeah, so I am… Erm…Why are there empty spaces?'

End of sequence: Incomplete unsolicited feedback sequences were generally quite short. Unless they followed an early comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequence, they were unlikely to lead to affiliation between the feedback provider and entrepreneur. For example, eLearners' disalignment ended the feedback sequence that started with Nick's *advice* about their revenue model. The entrepreneur expressed neither agreement nor disagreement. The sequence that unfolded after Rob's *criticism* of Parkling's target market was longer. Rob reassumed epistemic primacy, *advising* the entrepreneur to 'find a more meaningful market and go there.' Parkling, however, did not respond, which prompted Rob to *propose* changing topic: 'Anything else I can help with?' In line with the general pattern related to early incomplete unsolicited feedback sequences, Rob and Parkling did not affiliate.

Combinations between feedback sequences and their impact on affiliation

Thus far, we have discussed each type of feedback sequence in isolation. Yet, most conversations contained more than one sequence. Some combined multiple solicited feedback sequences, each covering a different topic. In other meetings, the interactants switched between solicited and unsolicited feedback sequences, or blended comprehensive and incomplete sequences. Table 7 gives an overview of the various combinations of feedback sequences we identified.

Combinations 1, 2, and 3 share several characteristics. First, each of these comprises at least one unsolicited feedback sequence. Second, they all contain one or more comprehensive feedback sequences. Third, these comprehensive sequences occurred at the start of conversations. Agreement, as Table 7 shows, was common when feedback interactions had these characteristics. In fact, entrepreneurs frequently expressed agreement during each feedback sequence embedded in those conversations. In addition, feedback interactions that encompassed combinations 1–3 were more likely to end with the intention to meet again. Hence, these combinations seem to create conversational flow: the 'experience of smooth, efficient, and mutually engaging conversation' (Truong, Fast and Kim, 2020, p. 2).

Combinations 4–6 did not have the aforementioned characteristics; they lacked an unsolicited feedback sequence (#4), did not contain a comprehensive feedback sequence (#5), or did not start with a comprehensive sequence (#6). Affiliation, particularly strong agreement and intentions to meet again, was rare during conversations comprising these combinations of feedback sequences. Hence, these combinations lead to interactional trouble: persistent disalignment or disaffiliation, frequently triggered by difficulties related to epistemic stance (Nguyen and Janssens, 2019).

Table 7 suggests that nobody was able to singlehandedly determine the course of every conversation they had. Except for Nick and Ray, who did not have many meetings, all feedback providers and all entrepreneurs went through at least three different combinations of feedback sequences. We therefore argue that, rather than any individual attitudes or behaviours, the relational characteristics that differentiate combinations 1–3 from combinations 4–6 are the conditions necessary for affiliation to develop during early feedback interactions.

First necessary condition: mild disalignment. Our findings suggest that it is important for feedback providers and entrepreneurs who do not have a longstanding relationship to find the right level of conversational alignment. The highest levels of alignment occurred during meetings in which all feedback was solicited (combination #4 in Table 7). As indicated by the lack of affiliation associated with that combination of feedback sequences, entrepreneurs may not be looking for a feedback provider who rarely disaligns, that is, never provides unsolicited feedback. Conversations that contained combinations 5 and 6 were characterized by radical disalignment by feedback providers and entrepreneurs: feedback providers gave unsolicited feedback that was unrelated to anything discussed previously and entrepreneurs frequently did not cooperate with those feedback sequences. The low level of affiliation in those conversations suggests that entrepreneurs might not like radical disalignment. Combinations 1–3 featured com-

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Table 7. Linking combinations of feedback sequences to agreement and meeting intentions

Combination of feedback sequences	Affective stance: Early feedback sequences	Affective stance: Later feedback sequences	Meeting intention
Combinations 1–3 contained unsolicited feedback sequences and comprehensive feedback sequences, with the latter being one of the earlier feedback sequences. These combinations are associated with (strong) agreement and may lead to an expressed intention to meet again.			
Combination #1: Early (un)solicited feedback sequences are comprehensive; later ones are incomplete (un)solicited 11 meetings: Sam–eHealth, Sam–GameBook, Rob–Jewels, John–eLearners, Manuel–GameBook, Manuel–Parkling, Chris–Jewels, Chris–ProcessCorp, Martin–eLearners, Ray–GameBook, Ray–Parkling	• Strong agreement: 7/11 meetings – 1 after initial disagreement • Mild agreement: 1/11 meetings • Neutral: 2/11 meetings • Strong disagreement: 1/11 meetings	• Strong agreement: 9/11 meetings – 1 after initial disagreement • Mild agreement: 2/11 meetings	4/11 meetings
Combination #2: Early and late sequences are comprehensive unsolicited 8 meetings: Sam–eLearners, Sam–Parkling, Tim–Jewels, Manuel–3D Share, Manuel–ProcessCorp, Martin–GoodFood, Martin–Jewels, Ray–Jewels	• Strong agreement: 4/8 meetings – 2 after initial disagreement • Mild agreement: 3/8 meetings • Neutral: 1/8 meetings	• Strong agreement: 8/8 meetings – 1 after initial disagreement	5/8 meetings
Combination #3: Early sequences (incomplete solicited and comprehensive unsolicited) merge towards the end of the meeting 3 meetings: Sam–3D Share, Sam–Jewels, John–eHealth	• Strong agreement: 3/3 meetings – 1 after initial disagreement	• Strong agreement: 3/3 meetings	2/3 meetings

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Table 7. (Continued)

Combination of feedback sequences	Affective stance		Meeting intention
	Early feedback sequences	Later feedback sequences	
The below combinations did not contain unsolicited feedback sequences (#4) or lacked a comprehensive sequence (#5). If comprehensive sequences occurred, they were one of the later feedback sequences (#6). These combinations are associated with a lack of agreement and rarely ended with an expressed intention to meet again.			
Combination #4: Early sequences are incomplete solicited; later ones are comprehensive solicited 8 meetings: Rob–eHealth, Rob–ProcessCorp, Tim–eHealth, Chris–eHealth, Chris–GameBook, Chris–Parkling, Martin–eHealth, Martin–GameBook	• Mild agreement: 1/8 meetings • Neutral: 7/8 meetings	• Mild agreement: 1/8 meetings • Neutral: 7/8 meetings	0/8 meetings
Combination #5: Early and late sequences are incomplete 18 meetings: Sam–ProcessCorp, Rob–3D Share, Rob–eLearners, Rob–GoodFood, John–3D Share, John–GameBook, John–Parkling, Tim–GameBook, Tim–GoodFood, Tim–ProcessCorp, Manuel–eLearners, Manuel–GoodFood, Martin–3D Share, Martin–Parkling, Nick–3D Share, Nick–eLearners, Nick–Parkling, Nick–ProcessCorp	• Strong agreement: 1/18 meetings • Mild agreement: 3/18 meetings • Neutral: 8/18 meetings • Mild disagreement: 1/18 meetings • Strong disagreement: 5/18 meetings	• Strong agreement: 2/18 meetings • Mild agreement: 2/18 meetings • Neutral: 8/18 meetings • Mild disagreement: 1/18 meetings • Strong disagreement: 5/18 meetings	1/18 meetings
Combination #6: Early sequences are incomplete unsolicited; later ones are comprehensive (solicited or unsolicited) 6 meetings: Rob–Parkling, John–ProcessCorp, Tim–3D Share, Manuel–eHealth, Chris–GoodFood, Nick–Jewels	• Neutral: 4/6 meetings • Mild disagreement: 1/6 meetings • Strong disagreement: 1/6 meetings	• Neutral: 4/6 meetings • Mild disagreement: 1/6 meetings • Strong disagreement: (1/6 meetings	1/6 meetings

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prehensive unsolicited feedback sequences that involved mild disalignment. As entrepreneurs cooperated with those unsolicited feedback sequences and often showed affiliation, this may be the preferred level of conversational alignment.

Second necessary condition: feedback provider epistemic primacy (semi-permanent). Another key factor shaping affiliation relates to epistemic stance. Generally, feedback providers and entrepreneurs were less likely to agree and express the intention to meet again during incomplete feedback sequences (combinations 4 and 5). In those sequences, feedback providers regularly lost epistemic primacy; they downgraded their epistemic stance after entrepreneurs displayed their knowledge. They also rarely reversed the epistemic stance balance; that is, they did not request any information from the entrepreneur about a topic related to the one their feedback focused on. Conversely, entrepreneurs usually agreed with feedback providers who maintained epistemic primacy, despite occasionally sacrificing it to further explore a solicited feedback sequence or pause an unsolicited feedback sequence. This suggests that, during early feedback interactions, entrepreneurs liked feedback providers who projected expertise while simultaneously treating the entrepreneur as knowledgeable.

Third necessary condition: timing of comprehensive feedback sequences. Although entrepreneurs generally did not express agreement during incomplete feedback sequences, there was an exception to this overall pattern: we observed affiliation when these sequences were preceded by feedback sequences that met the first two necessary conditions (combination #1). Contrarily, there was no affiliation when comprehensive unsolicited feedback sequences, during which entrepreneurs usually displayed agreement, followed an incomplete sequence (combination #6). Hence, early comprehensive feedback sequences seem to have a positive impact on responses to future feedback, while early incomplete feedback sequences have negative spillover effects. This suggests that entrepreneurs are more satisfied when they and the feedback provider have managed to commit to an early feedback sequence – started it but also finished it through realignment – than when those sequences were abandoned owing to radical disalignment.

Discussion

Contributions

Our study extends the literature on entrepreneurial feedback by explaining how long-term feedback relationships develop. Previous research shows that those relationships provide benefits (Assenova, 2020; Fisher, Pillemer and Amabile, 2018; Prashantham and Floyd, 2019; Strike and Rerup, 2016) but is silent on their beginnings. We found that interactions during which the entrepreneur and feedback provider show affiliation have characteristics that are also present in successful long-term feedback relationships. First, mild disalignment is an indicator of two key ingredients of successful mentoring relationships: the willingness to work together synergistically and the ability to learn from each other (Deptula and Williams, 2017). This is because mildly disaligning turns, that is, unsolicited feedback given in response to something an entrepreneur said, introduce new viewpoints that are nevertheless related to previous turns, and therefore do not pose a big threat to the receiver's self-image (see Goffman, 1967). Second, semi-permanent epistemic primacy for the feedback provider is an indicator of mentorship potential because it provides feedback receivers with the guidance they expect (Bailey, Voyles and Finkelstein, 2016; Fowler and O'Gorman, 2005) while respecting their desire to be treated as a knowledgeable conversation partner (Eby and Allen, 2002; Ghosh *et al*., 2020). Third, going through a comprehensive feedback sequence early in a meeting, particularly when meeting time is limited, demonstrates commitment. Commitment is another important prerequisite for long-term mentoring relationships (Strike, 2013; Strike and Rerup, 2016). In sum, because mild disalignment, semi-permanent epistemic primacy for the feedback provider, and early comprehensive feedback resemble qualities that define successful long-term feedback relationships, we theorize that these characteristics are necessary for such relationships to develop.

We also contribute to entrepreneurial feedback research by highlighting that even early interactions between entrepreneurs and feedback providers are impacted by relational factors. Previous research found that these interactants face challenges (Haines, in press; Harrison and Rouse, 2015; Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013) because they do not have a longstanding relationship and

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are therefore unable to reap the benefits of trust and a shared history (Fisher, Pillemer and Amabile, 2018; Strike and Rerup, 2016). Our findings suggest that entrepreneurs' responses to feedback during early interactions are nevertheless shaped by their emerging relationship with a feedback provider. Specifically, we introduce the notion of feedback spillover. Feedback spillover can be negative as well as positive. We found that entrepreneurs were unlikely to express agreement with any feedback they received in meetings that began with an incomplete feedback sequence, that is, a sequence characterized neither by mild disalignment nor by semi-permanent feedback provider epistemic primacy. Conversely, comprehensive feedback sequences had positive spillover effects: the entrepreneur and feedback provider tended to agree during subsequent feedback sequences, irrespective of their nature. Hence, our study demonstrates that, even during early feedback interactions, the way entrepreneurs and feedback providers relate to each other affects how feedback is received.

Third, we advance the mentoring literature, which highlights that mentoring relationships are initiated formally or informally (Allen *et al*., 2017; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). However, apart from pointing out that mentor and mentee imagine what interacting with the other would be like (Humberd and Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983), this stream of research does not explain what happens during the initiation stage. Our analysis of early interactions between entrepreneurs and potential mentors addresses this gap. We find that these meetings are characterized by changes in epistemic stance and alignment, which in turn shape whether entrepreneurs and their potential mentors display affiliation. Because those interactional dynamics were most prominent when entrepreneurs received feedback, our findings challenge a widespread assumption in mentoring research; we find that feedback not only plays a role *after* mentor and mentee have moved past the early stages of their relationship (Humberd and Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983; Snoeren *et al*., 2016), but may in fact determine *whether* that relationship is formed in the first place.

Our study has practical implications too. The three conditions that shape affiliation translate into a set of conversational behaviours that can readily be used by people involved in early feedback interactions. For the interactants, it seems crucial to acknowledge the limitations of not having a shared history. They can do so through asking and answering questions. They should also initiate as well as align with feedback discussions that are unsolicited and strive to relate such feedback to topics discussed earlier in the meeting. Furthermore, it is also important to fully commit to a feedback sequence, especially at the start of a meeting, even when meeting time is limited. Facilitators of early feedback meetings could add value by sharing these tips with feedback providers and receivers before their initial meeting.

Limitations and future research

We believe we have made several important contributions. Yet, our study has limitations. For example, although we show that the dynamics that unfold during feedback meetings are conditions *necessary* for affiliation to occur, studying interactions does not provide access to an individual's psychology and attitudes (Billig, 1996; Goffman, 1967). So, we do not know whether affiliation was *sufficient* for the development of a long-term relationship. Future research could address this limitation, for instance by tracking which speed dates between feedback providers and entrepreneurs lead to follow-up meetings.

Another limitation of our study relates to our research setting. Studying feedback in the context of an accelerator allowed us to examine interactions between people who do not have a longstanding relationship, and thereby explore feedback dynamics that prior research has overlooked. Yet, although other organizations, that is, universities (Ghosh *et al*., 2020), also facilitate feedback interactions for employees who have only just met each other, most people may not receive such high amounts of feedback in a relatively short period of time (Cohen, Bingham and Hallen, 2019; Grimes, 2018; Hallen, Cohen and Bingham, 2020). They may, therefore, have more time to process feedback (Bakker, Kenis and Oerlemans, 2013). Examining whether the feedback dynamics we observed are also present in other contexts could be worthwhile.

Finally, although interactions can be analysed without using the procedures typical in conversation analysis (e.g., Cunliffe and Locke, 2020), deploying those methods may have certain advantages. For instance, the detailed transcripts typi-

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cally used in this tradition can be expanded to include nonverbal communication such as gestures and gaze (e.g., Best and Hindmarsh, 2019; Van De Mieroop, Clifton and Verhelst, 2020). Leveraging the potential of conversation analysis could therefore be another direction for the future exploration of our theorizing.

Conclusion

Feedback interactions between people who do not have a longstanding relationship have received scant research attention. We found that affiliation is most likely to occur during those interactions when they begin with feedback sequences that enable feedback providers to display mild disalignment and semi-permanently hold epistemic primacy. We argue that affiliation is necessary for early feedback meetings to develop into long-term mentoring relationships.

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