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# Interactional use of compliments in mental health rehabilitation



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## ABSTRACT

Complimenting is a valuable skill in mental health care. Today, several clinical models view positive reinforcement as beneficial for the client's process of change; however, they ignore the ambiguous nature of complimenting in social interaction. Drawing on a data set of 29 video-recorded mental health rehabilitation group meetings, and using conversation analysis as the method, we qualitatively analyzed the range of purposes served by positive assessments doing complimenting. Our results showed that compliments were used for 1) encouraging members to participate in the community, 2) increasing the pressure on members to respond, 3) closing down topics that were not relevant for discussion at that moment, and 4) generating exclusion and preparing a member for a negative decision. Our findings demonstrate that not all compliments serve straightforwardly *positive* interactional goals, as they are used for advancing mental-health professionals' own agendas. Moreover, due to the positive nature of the compliments per se, it is difficult for compliment recipients to resist the functions that compliments are designed to serve. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what might constitute *genuinely positive* reinforcement in the continually changing context of moment-by-moment social interaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Complimenting is a valuable skill in both mental health care and in a range of other professional contexts (e.g., Zirpoli and Melloy, 2001; Burgh and Mayhall, 2002; Gathman et al., 2008; Weiste, 2018). The counselling literature suggests that positive reinforcements, such as complimenting, serve several purposes in the processes of client's process of change (Wall et al., 1989; Walter and Peller, 1992). Statements of praise provide for a positive interactional atmosphere, highlight the actions that clients have already undertaken to reach their goal, alleviate clients' fears that the clinician will pass judgement on them, and alleviate concerns about change (Walter and Peller, 1992). Moreover, in a supportive interactional climate, positive reinforcements are considered to essentially enhance the client's sense of self-efficacy (Wall et al., 1989). The clinical textbooks do not, however, consider the ambiguous nature of the compliments. Previous research focusing on the microlevel details of interaction has shown that some compliment-like social actions may not always serve *positive* interactional goals. In fact, the

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act of complimenting may also be used, for instance, for reproaching, criticizing, and interrupting (Golato, 2005). Moreover, compliments have such a peculiar character, that, due to their inherently positive nature, it is extremely difficult for compliment recipients to resist them. Therefore, the use of compliments can also serve strategic aims. It is this ambiguity between “genuine” complimenting and their strategic use that our research targets in the context of mental health rehabilitation.

Complimenting is not an easy skill. In general, it involves a positive evaluation of the characteristics or actions of another person. A compliment may be defined as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker” (Holmes, 1988: 85). As for their content, compliments may consist of praise (Hudak et al., 2010) or positive feedback (Gathman et al., 2008), while their implementation in face-to-face social interaction is ultimately an intricate endeavor involving a complex interplay of format-like linguistic patterns, prosody, body postures, gestures, facial expressions, and gaze (Keisanen and Kärkkäinen, 2014). In Finnish, compliments are typically simple clauses with a subject, the verb *be* and a predicative (e.g., *toi on ihana* / ‘that is wonderful’) or plain characterizations without a verb (e.g., *ihana* / ‘wonderful’) (Etelämäki et al., 2013). Often, compliments are presented without a person reference: they are presented as general facts rather than one’s own opinions (Etelämäki et al., 2013).

From the perspective of conversation analysis, compliments may be best thought of as positive assessments. The relationship between a positive evaluation of the characteristics or actions of another person, on the one hand, and the action of complimenting, on the other, is, however, more complex than might first be expected. For instance, positive assessments are not the only way of complimenting another person (Golato, 2005). In addition, “complimenting a recipient can be accomplished with a question, with a correction, or with a positive evaluation of a third party” (Shaw and Kitzinger, 2012: 216–217). Even more importantly, not all positive assessments primarily concern complimenting another person. In addition to complimenting, positive assessments may also serve darker interactional goals, such as reproaching, criticizing, and interrupting (Golato, 2005). Thus, for example, in the context of medical consultations, compliments from patients to physicians work to exert pressure on physicians in the patients’ pursuit of certain diagnoses or treatment options (Gill, 2005; Hudak et al., 2010).

Another feature that makes compliments particularly multifaced social actions, and interesting in the present context, is the complexity of responding to them. Whereas conversation-analytic research has established that a preferred response to an assessment is an upgraded second assessment conveying the second speaker’s strong agreement with the first speaker (Pomerantz, 1984), such responses are rare as a reaction to compliments, since participants normally tend to avoid self-praise (Pomerantz, 1978). Nevertheless, research on intercultural pragmatics has emphasized the need to consider the cultural specificity of the formation and reception of compliments (e.g., Chen, 1993; Yläne-McEwen, 1993; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). For instance, Golato (2005) has shown that in German-speaking countries a strong agreement with a compliment may not be considered self-praise. In Finnish, compliments are typically responded to with an agreement, but an orientation towards avoiding a self-praise is visible in the ways in which recipients provide explanations right after the agreement (Etelämäki et al., 2013). Moreover, due to the inherently positive nature of compliments, it is extremely difficult for compliment recipients to complain about the speaker’s act of complimenting. Thus, even if recipients seek to diminish the magnitude of praise embedded in the compliment, it may remain difficult for them to resist its intended functions. Therefore, the use of compliments can also serve strategic aims.

In this article, we aim to expand on prior research on compliments by showing something of the range and diversity of purposes served by positive assessments involving complimenting in the institutional context of mental-health rehabilitation. In our analysis, we ask:

1. How do the mental health professionals compliment clients in their turns of talk?
2. What functions do these compliments perform in their local interactional context?

## 2. Materials and method

The data analyzed in this study are drawn from one Finnish Clubhouse. Clubhouses are non-governmental community houses that offer individuals with mental illnesses work-oriented psychosocial rehabilitation (Hänninen, 2012). A key principle in all Clubhouse activities, ranging from cleaning the facilities and cooking the lunch to admiration and international collaboration, is to provide members with a positive working atmosphere and increase their sense of self-efficacy (Clubhouse International, 2018). Members work alongside paid staff in an equal relationship, taking responsibility for all aspects of running the Clubhouse (Hänninen, 2012). All these operational principles are documented in the Clubhouse Standards (Clubhouse International, 2018). The model’s accrediting body, Clubhouse International, routinely administers two fidelity scales to each Clubhouse to ensure its adherence to the Standards. Currently, approximately 200 Clubhouses around the world are certified, with most programs in the U.S., followed by Finland.

We analyze a dataset of 29 video-recorded weekly group meetings that focused on topics related to working life. The meetings lasted from 30 to 60 min, comprising a total of 22 h and 40 min of interaction. The meetings involved 2–10 members and 1–3 support workers. As participation in the group was voluntary and open to all Clubhouse members, the attendance of the participants varied: some members were present in almost all the meetings in the data corpus, while some participated

only once. All the support workers were trained in social work, and their experience varied from six months to several years. The data were collected with one video-camera placed in the corner of the room. In the meeting, all participants sat around a square table. One of the Clubhouse members acted as a research assistant and was responsible for recording the meetings.

Informed written consent was obtained from all participants, and they were advised they could withdraw their consent at any point during the data collection. The anonymity of the participants was carefully ensured by altering the participants' names and other identifying details in the text. A research permit was obtained from the board of directors at the Clubhouse, and ethical approval was issued by the Southern Finland Clubhouse Association.

The recordings were analyzed by means of institutional conversation analysis (CA) (e.g., Arminen, 2005; Heritage and Clayman, 2010). Conversation analysts inductively investigate naturally occurring interaction to uncover the practices of interaction through which the meanings of social actions are produced (Arminen, 2005). According to CA, social actions are accomplished through adjacent utterances: questions elicit answers, advising elicits confirmation or rejection, and displays of affective stance elicit affiliation. Institutional CA builds on this basic view and explicates how sequences of social actions contribute to achieving the goals of the institution at hand (Arminen, 2005; Heritage and Clayman, 2010).

Our analytic procedure began by transcribing the data according to CA conventions (Schegloff, 2007; Nevile, 2004; see Appendix). Next, the video-recordings were watched multiple times, and sequences of talk in which a support worker positively assessed a member were identified. From 22 h and 40 min of interaction, we found 34 such cases. We analyzed this collection case-by-case to establish the nature and variation of the practices that the mental health professionals used, paying specific attention to the primary interactional function and sequential location of these practices as well as to their implications for the further unfolding of interaction. On this basis, the cases were divided into four categories. In the results section below, we present our qualitative analysis of each category, providing data examples for each.

### 3. Results

Our results show that positive assessments involving complimenting serve a range of purposes. First, mental-health professionals complimented members by providing a positive assessment of some action they had performed at the Clubhouse. In this way, they supported and encouraged members to participate in the community. Second, by complimenting a certain participant's competencies or qualities, mental-health professionals increased the pressure on members to respond in moments when everyone remained silent. Third, by complimenting a member's *off topic* contributions, mental-health professionals were able to signal their appreciation of the member's contribution while gently closing down topics that were not relevant for discussion in the group at that moment. Fourth, compliments were used to generate exclusion or prepare members for a negative decision. For instance, the act of complimenting a member's personal qualities served to *soften the blow* when that member was about to be excluded from a group of candidates considered suitable for pursuing supported employment (see also Golato, 2005). Mental-health professionals also complimented members on skills, competencies or personal characteristics to encourage them to apply for certain employment positions, while the other members present at the encounter were thus deemed unqualified for that position. Thus, although a compliment served as positive reinforcement for one member, it also functioned as a means of excluding others.

In the following, we illustrate each type of compliment from the perspective of its interactional function in its local sequential context. While we demonstrate that not all compliments serve straightforwardly *positive* interactional goals, nonetheless each type of compliment performs a significant function in the institutional context of mental-health rehabilitation.

#### 3.1. Encouraging member participation in the community

In our data, a typical way for a professional to compliment a client was to provide a positive assessment of an action that member had performed at the Clubhouse. We found 13 such cases in the data. In this way, mental-health professionals implicitly supported and encouraged members to participate in the community in the future. This type of compliment also seemed to serve the purpose of empowering members to take a more active role in their own lives. Members oriented to support workers' positive assessments as compliments, which was evident in their following turns at talk, which involved expressions of agreement and gratitude (see Etelämäki et al., 2013). Members' response turns often also entailed downgrading the positive assessment of their own behavior to avoid self-praise.

Extract 1 is a case in point. Prior to the extract, a support worker (SW1) has read aloud a section of the minutes of a previous group meeting, written by a group member (Teo). In the minutes they list possible topics for future meetings (not shown in the data extract).

#### Extract 1

- 01 SW2: *toihan on ihan valmis eiks oo, (.) sehän oli hienosti*  
*that is totally ready isn't it (.) that was written*
- 02 *kirjotettu hyvä Teo [heh heh*  
*very well good job Teo heh heh*  
 ↑  
 ((gazes at Teo))
- 03 Teo: [kiitos.  
 thank you

04 SW2: °sehän oli (0.5) hyvä° eiks toi oo aika semmonen sopiva  
*that was (0.5) good isn't that a good*  
 05 suupala yhdelle kerralle?  
*portion for one meeting*  
 06 Teo: mm (0.5) mä yritin raapustaa omista harakanvarpaistani  
*mm (0.5) I tried to write based on my own chicken scratch*  
 07 tommosen puhtaaksi kirjotetun lyijykynällä,  
*a kind of a neat version with a pencil,*

In lines 1–2, SW2 responds by describing the minutes as complete and requiring no revision. By addressing the member who has written the minutes (Teo) and gazing at him, SW2 foregrounds him and compliments his behavior (see [Etelämäki et al., 2013](#)). Here, the support worker's compliment is accompanied by laughter, thus implying that paying compliments is, in some respects, a delicate activity ([Haakana, 2008](#)). Here, the compliment targets a concrete activity performed by a member: the formulation of a text. The compliment is positive in that it highlights the member's ability as a writer. In addition, the compliment implies the completion of the writing task: there is no need for the text to be revised.

Teo responds with a simple “thank you” (l. 3), and SW2 further compliments Teo's behavior by stating, “that that was good” (l. 4). After that, SW2 continues to discuss the possible topics for the future meeting that they have considered before the complimenting sequence (l. 4–5). In lines 6–7, Teo still returns to the compliment, downgrading the positive assessment of his own behavior by calling his handwriting “as chicken scratch.”

In sum, in this section of our data, the mental-health professionals provided positive assessments of the actions clients had performed at the Clubhouse. These positive assessments involving complimenting seemed to support and encourage clients' participation in the community. These compliments were responded to with an agreement (*joo*/"yes") or a show of appreciation (*kiitos*/"thank you") often accompanied by an explanation or downgrading of the assessment, implying that the participants oriented to them as mere compliments (see [Etelämäki et al., 2013](#)).

### 3.2. Increasing response pressure

Compliments were also used in our data to increase the pressure on members to respond when the group remained silent. There were six such cases in the data. These cases typically occurred in the context of decision-making (responding to a proposal) or the delegation of tasks (responding to a request). In these cases, the compliment targeted a certain participant's competencies, and, in by this way, the support workers pursued a response from the recipient. Here, the participants responded not to the compliment itself but to the other action with which it was combined.

Extract 2 provides one such an example. Prior to the extract, the group members have been creating a bullet point list of what constitutes *Transitional Work* (a Clubhouse-supported work program). The list is now ready, and they are planning how to put it on the wall. At the beginning of the extract (l. 1–6), one of the support workers (SW1) makes an alternative proposal: they could write the list on a piece of cardboard or they could print the list and glue it onto the cardboard.

#### Extract 2

01 SW1: mut se et mil- milläläilla me nyt se askarrellaan  
*but that how how should we now craft that*  
 02 sitten että tehäaks me tota (0.2) käsin pahville  
*so that should we do it (0.2) by hand on cardboard*  
 03 °tuol on pahvejaki mitä me voidaan käyttää°  
*there is some cardboard we can use*  
 ↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↑  
 ((points and gazes towards the corner of the room))  
 04 SW2: m[m.  
 05 SW1: [vai onks se sitten et tehdään tietokoneella  
*or should we do it on the computer*  
 ↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↑  
 ((gazes at SW2))  
 06 °ja tulostetaan (0.2) aakolmosta ja, °  
*and print some A3 and*  
 ↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↑  
 ((gazes back towards the corner and wrinkles her nose))  
 07 (1.5)  
 08 SW2: mitä ootte mieltä,  
*what do you think*  
 ↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↑  
 ((gazes at Leo))  
 09 (2.0)  
 10 SW2: miten ois selkeempi.  
*what would be clearest*  
 ↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↑  
 ((gazes at Sue))  
 11 Sue: oisko tommoset kartongit kivempiä, (h)he(h)  
*are cardboard pieces perhaps better heh*  
 ↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↑

- ((gazes towards the corner))
- 12 SW2: niin ne on kivem[piä(h),  
yes they are better (h)
- 13 SW1: [nii vähän tämmösiä vä[°rikkäämpiä°  
yeah they are more colorful
- 14 SW2: [°nii kyllä°.  
yes right
- 15 (2.0) ((SW1 walks across the room to the cardboard pieces))
- 16 SW1: ja ku voihan sen tehdä monella tavalla et jos on kartonki  
and we can do it in many ways so if we have (.) cardboard
- 17 ni tähänhä nyt voi vaikka tulostaa asio- ja leikata  
then we can for example print and cut  
↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
((puts some cardboard on table and demonstrates with her hands))
- 18 ja liimata kartongille tai sitten että kirjottaa käsin tai,  
and paste and then write by hand or  
↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
((gazes at Sue))
- 19 SW2: mm.  
↑\_↑  
((gazes at Sue))
- 20 Sue: mmm.  
↑\_↑  
((gazes at SW1))
- 21 (2.0)
- 22 SW1: Leo on taiteellinen henkilö (0.2) onko sulla  
**Leo is an artistic person (0.2) do you have**  
↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
((gazes at the cardboard and folds it))
- 23 jotain mielipidettä?  
**some opinion**  
↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
((gazes at Leo and smiles, also Sue and SW2 gazes at Leo))
- 24 Leo: hhh ei erityisesti.  
not particularly.  
(6.0) ((SW1 gazes at the cardboard, Sue and SW2 gazes at SW1))
- 26 SW2: mä ehdottaisin et nyt aluks ainakin  
I suggest that we start by  
↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
((gazes at SW1))
- 27 kirjoitettaisiin koneelle se (0.2)  
writing it on the computer (0.2) ((continues))

The SW1's proposal in lines 1–6 elicits no response from the group members (a gap in line 7). The group members sit still, gazing towards the table. In line 8, SW2 asks the group an open question (“what do you think?”). The question is not addressed to anyone in particular, but SW2 gazes at Leo, which indicates that she is attempting to pursue a response from him. When no response follows, she poses a new question while gazing at another member, Sue (l. 10). Sue responds by providing her opinion in favor of one of the original alternatives produced by SW1 (l. 11). Both support workers agree with Sue (l. 12–14), and SW1 continues by elaborating on why this alternative is preferable (l. 16–19), and SW2 and Sue produce confirming response particles (l. 20–21). Then, SW1 produces a positive statement about Leo combined with a question (l. 23–24). Her question to Leo (“do you have some opinion?”) is preceded by a statement about Leo's disposition, “Leo is an artistic person.”

The support worker's categorization of Leo as an artistic person casts him as an expert and invites him to participate in the conversation. However, Leo does not respond to the compliment, providing, instead, a literal answer to the question: “not particularly” (l. 26). Leo's response is followed by long pause (l. 27), after which SW2 suggests the alternative they should choose. Thus, the compliment (combined with a question) is used as an attempt to invite Leo to participate and take a stance on the suggestion. Finally, the support worker selects one of the suggested alternatives on behalf of the Clubhouse members (l. 28–29).

In sum, by producing a compliment targeted at a certain group member, the support workers attempted to pursue a response from that participant to a proposal or request. Here, the members responded not to the compliment itself but to the action with which it was combined (see also [Etelämäki et al., 2013](#); [Golato, 2005](#)). In this way, the support workers were able to invite members' contributions and promote discussion, encouraging members' participation not only on the level of community (as in Extract 1) but also in local moments of interaction.

### 3.3. Closing a topic initiated by a member

Compliments also served to gently close down topics initiated by members and guide them towards the agenda of the group. We found four such instances in our data. In this way, members' off-topic contributions were acknowledged but not



- 25           ↑aina heh heh se on tärkeä? heh [heh heh  
**interesting heh heh that's important heh heh heh**  
 ↑\_\_\_\_\_↑\_\_\_\_\_↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
 ((gazes at SW2)) ((gazes et Roi)) ((gazes at SW2))
- 26 Matt:           [hehhh  
                   ↑\_\_\_\_↑  
                   ((gazes at SW1 and smiles))
- 26 SW2:   mitäs sitten jos mä laitan tähän et ens kerralla  
*what about if I write here that next time*
- 27           jatkettais mahdollisesti vielä suunnitteluu  
*we would possibly continue with planning ((continues))*

Here, in line 1, Matt states that he is interested in discussing the salary from transitional work. Matt's suggestion is accompanied by laughter, which implies that the suggestion is considered a delicate activity, even a joke (Haakana, 2008). SW1 minimally acknowledges Matt's suggestion (l. 2), but another member, Roi, agrees with Matt (l. 3). At this point, SW1 also agrees and begins to ponder how salary could be formulated as a broader topic (l. 5–11). In this way, SW1 demonstrates that Matt's suggestion, which was presented with laughter, is taken up and seriously considered. At the same time, SW1 rejects the idea that salary as such could be adopted as the topic of the meeting. In line 11, SW1 asks again what the topic of the meeting could be if they were to talk about "money politics," and Roi suggests that the topic could be "retaining social benefits" (l. 13). SW1 responds by hesitating (a gap in line 14), using a question format ("could we," l. 15) and selecting the word "twitter," which all mark a reserved stance towards Roi's suggestion. SW1 also suggests again that the topic should be broader, covering also "studying and employment" (l. 17–18).

At this point, Roi takes a turn and begins to discuss social benefits from his own perspective (l. 19–20). Roi's turn is unclearly produced, but he seems to be referring to a sum of money he has received in social benefits. Roi gazes at SW1 and smiles, implying that he is offering some good news about the money he has received. SW1 smiles, nods and positively acknowledges Roi's utterance, gazing at SW2, not Roi (l. 22). Right after that, SW1 turns her gaze towards Matt (l. 23), who initially suggested money matters as the topic, and makes a positive comment on Matt's contribution (l. 24–25): her tone sounds playful, and the turn is accompanied by laughter. Here, she attempts to show appreciation for Matt's suggestion and, at the same time, close down a discussion that has strayed off topic. In the following turn, SW2 returns to the main agenda of the group by explicitly stating the topics of the following week's group meetings (l. 26–27).

In sum, members' off-topic contributions pose a challenge for support workers: as in many other types of institutional settings, counsellors perform the dual role of inviting members' contributions and promoting discussion while, at the same time, ensuring that members focus on the topics and tasks of the group. Complimenting members' contributions helps support workers achieve this dual goal: to signal appreciation for members' contributions and gently guide them towards the main agenda of the group.

### 3.4. Generating exclusion

Our data also involve a category of cases in which compliments are used to prepare a member for a negative decision and generate exclusion. There were 11 such cases in our data. These compliments occur in the context of selecting Clubhouse members for the transitional employment program – a Clubhouse-created prevocational training program. The selection and training of members are managed by the Clubhouse community, not by employers. When discussing decisions about entrance into employment (see Valkeapää et al., 2018), which are highly consequential for Clubhouse members, the support workers often complimented those members who were about to be excluded from the group of candidates considered suitable to pursue transitional employment. In some other cases, however, complimenting one member reduced the possibilities of the other members present in the encounter to express their interest in the job, as the compliment implicitly established the standard against which everyone else's competences would be measured. Thus, in these cases too, the compliments were intertwined with other complex social actions to which the members were expected to respond. Extracts 4 and 5 provide examples of both types of case.

Extract 4 is an example of a case in which complimenting a member prepares him for a negative decision. The extract is preceded by a discussion about who should be chosen for a transitional employment place, Roi or Teo. The support worker (SW1) has asked both members to explain why they would be the best choice, and, in response, they have both expressed their eagerness to participate and provided an account of their own superiority (not shown in the extract). At this point, starting in line 1, SW1 provides a summary of the prior discussion.

#### Extract 4

- 01 SW1: ootte kyllä ollu ahkeria ootte tehny niitä hommia (0.3) on oma-  
**you have both been diligent you have done those tasks (0.3)**  
 ↑\_\_\_\_\_↑  
 ((gazes at all the participants one at the time))
- 02           alotteisuuttaki löytyy ja säännöllisyyttä löytyy ja ja ja muita  
**you have initiative and you're punctual and and and other**
- 03           asioita löytyy et et et ninku et, (0.5) et ainoo mitä (.) mä  
*stuff so so so like so (0.5) so the only thing that (.) I*

- 04 tossa, (0.5) mitä (.) Roi toi pikkusen sitä että (.) Roilla on  
there (0.5) what (.) Roi mentioned it a little that (.) **Roi has**  
↑  
( (gazes towards Roi who sits outside the video) )
- 05 varmaan niin just toi se on rehellisyyttä se että tuntee itsensä  
**surely it's just that it's honesty that one knows oneself**
- 06 musta Roi toi sen tosi hienosti tossa että, (0.4) mä kirjasin sen  
**I think Roi brought it up so well that (0.4) I wrote it**  
↑ ↑  
( (grasps a paper and gazes at it) )
- 07 tänne koska se oli musta ninku hyvä asia että sen niinku  
**here because I think it was a good thing that one like**
- 08 tunnistaa itsessään niitä kehittämisen alueita.  
**recognizes areas of development in oneself**  
↑
- 09 (1.0)
- 10 SW1: sä täällä (.) sanot että tota ni että se oma-aloitteisuus on  
here you (.) say that well that initiative is  
↑  
( (gazes towards Roi) )
- 11 varmaan se mitä pitää kehittää. (0.6) koska se on semmonen (.)  
surely what you need to develop (0.6) because it's a (.)
- 12 kyllä tosi tärkeä ominaisuus. (0.3) ja mää (.) mää tunnistan (.)  
really important feature (0.3) and I (.) I recognize (.)
- 13 jos mä ihän rehellinen oon ni kyl mää (.) Roi tunnistan että  
if I'm honest then well I (.) Roi recognize that
- 14 .hh se on varmaan se sulla se, (0.4) mitä sä pystyt kehittään  
.hh it's surely that for you (0.4) what you can still develop
- 15 täällä klubilla vielä.  
here in the Clubhouse  
↑
- 16 Roi: °joo°.  
yes
- 17 SW1: .hh koska se on just sitä mitä siellä työssä tarvii että se  
.hh because it's just what you need there at work so that  
↑ ↑ ↑  
( (gazes at Teo) ) ( (gazes towards Roi) )
- 18 oma-aloitteisuus on taas semmonen tosi tärkeä asia.  
initiative is a really important thing ((continues))  
↑  
( (gazes at Teo and Bea sitting next to Teo) )

Initially, SW1 praises all the present members by shifting his gaze from member to member around the table and referring to them as having initiative and being punctual (l. 1–3). He then shifts his gaze to one of the members, Roi, and turns to discussing him. He praises Roi for being self-reflective and recognizing his own main area of development (l. 4–5). SW1 presents his compliment in the first-person singular (“I think”, l. 6), which is rare in “plain compliments” but typical in complex, affectively loaded cases in which the participants simultaneously negotiate their mutual relations (Etelämäki et al., 2013). That seems to be the case here, as the negotiation also concerns who should participate (and how) in making such types of high-stake decisions at the Clubhouse (Valkeapää et al., 2018, Valkeapää et al., 2020). During the action of complimenting, SW1 gazes at Roi. In line 6, he grasps a piece of paper from the desk and gazes at it. Thus, no one is clearly selected as the next speaker and everyone remains silent (l. 9). The support worker continues by stating that initiative is a critical indicator of success in the employment market (l. 10–12). He also turns the complimented feature, the ability to self-reflection, against Roi. The support worker refers to Roi's own reports of areas where he needs to develop and to the support worker's written notes (l. 6–7) of these reports (l. 10). Thus, he seemingly refers to an external authority as the source of information regarding Roi's need for improvement. He also gazes at Roi, apparently expecting his confirmation. In line 16, Roi minimally agrees, and SW1 continues to justify the need for initiative at work on a more general level (l. 17–18).

Thus, the support worker's seemingly positive comment on Roi's abilities is connected to expressing content that is actually to Roi's detriment. The attribute of possessing initiative is given the status of a necessary feature in the employment market (l. 17–18), which is then used to exclude Roi from the competition over the transition workplace. Thus, complimenting can be used to prepare for decisions that have negative consequences for the recipient (see Golato, 2005, for complimenting preceding criticism). Such decisions can be viewed as potentially face-threatening, and compliments seemed to enable mental-health professionals to ameliorate their impact.



In addition, complimenting was also targeted at those members who were to be selected for the employment program. In those cases, the support workers used complimenting as a way to increase pressure on a member to contact a particular workplace. While complimenting one member, however, the possibilities of the other members present in the encounter to express interest in the job were reduced, as the compliment implicitly established the standard against which everyone else's competences would be measured.

Extract 5 provides one such example. Prior to the extract, the support worker (SW1) has made several attempts to persuade one of the members (Mio) to commit to applying for a transitional workplace. The member has demonstrated slight resistance, but the support worker is driving the idea forward. At the beginning of the extract, another member, Bea, hands a piece of paper with the workplace phone number to Mio (l. 1), and SW1 offers advice on what he should ask when contacting the potential employer (l. 2–4, 6–8, and 10–11).

### Extract 5

- 01 Bea: tos on sen [numero,  
here is her number,  
↑\_\_\_\_↑  
(hands a piece of paper to Mio and points at it with her index  
finger))
- 02 SW1: [kyselet vähä?  
you ask a bit  
↑\_\_\_\_↑  
(gazes at Mio, Mio gazes at the paper))
- 03 niinku sanoit et sä oot täältä  
as you just said you have
- 04 klubilta kuitenkin saanu[ (-) sen niin sä  
gotten it at the Clubhouse (-) so then you
- 05 Bea: [(clears her throat)]
- 06 SW1: kyselet tätä että (.h) niin ku omalta  
ask that (.h) like on your own
- 07 kohdaltas että mimmoset täs  
part that what is
- 08 [on että mitä pitää mitä mitä se on  
here what should what what it is
- 09 Leo: [( .hh)]
- 10 SW1: se työ ja mikä palkka et kaikkihan  
the work at what salary and everything is
- 11 riippuu mitkä työajat ja tämmöset ni  
dependent on what work times and so forth so
- 12 .hh mä en ketään muuta nyt keksi  
**.hh I can't think of anyone else**  
↑\_\_\_\_\_  
(gazes at Bea, Leo and Teo one at the time))
- 13 meidän talosta ku Mio jos nyt ollaan  
**from our ((Club))house than Mio if we are now**  
↑↑\_\_\_\_↑ ↑\_\_\_\_\_  
(gazes at Mio) (gazes at Bea and then Leo))
- 14 rehellisiä (0.2) Mio haltsaa tietsikat  
honest (0.2) Mio is so good with  
↑\_\_\_\_\_  
(gazes at Mio; Mio still gazes at the paper))
- 15 niin hyvi. (0.3) varmaan meistä ei kukaan ihan,  
**computers (0.3) / I'm sure none of us**  
↑↑\_\_\_\_\_  
(gaze and lateral hand movement towards others))
- 16 (.) oo ihan niissä niin,  
**(.) is quite as**  
↑
- 17 Bea: mm[m  
↑\_\_\_\_↑  
(nods, gazes at SW1))
- 18 SW1: [tai en minä tiedä ooks[ä Bea]  
or well I don't know what about you Bea  
↑\_\_\_\_\_  
(gazes at Bea and points at her with her index finger))
- 19 Bea: [ (- - ) [(-)  
↑\_\_\_\_↑  
(gazes as SW1 and then Mio))
- 20 Mio: [no se tää  
well this  
↑\_\_\_\_\_  
(gazes at the piece of  
paper))

21            voi olla sellaista varasto (.) kirjanpitoa  
               *could be some kind of warehouse (.) bookkeeping*  
 22            et emmä usko että,  
               *so I don't think that*  
               —↑↑—————↑  
               ((gazes at SW1))

In lines 12–16, the support worker produces an explicit account promoting this particular member (Mio) for the transitional workplace. He gazes at Mio and compliments his proficiency in IT and computers; he is the best, and perhaps also the only, possible applicant for the workplace. Similar to Extract 4, the compliment is provided in the first person singular (“I can’t think,” l. 12). The compliment appears to serve a two-fold function: to both provide positive encouragement and to increase the response pressure on the member to commit to contacting the workplace. Nonetheless, at the same time, by complimenting one of the members, the other members present in the encounter are excluded from the recruitment process. This is visible in the interaction, when the support worker gazes at another member, Bea, and asks about her IT proficiency (l. 18). However, the support worker’s compliment is not appreciated by Mio either: in line 20, he begins a turn in which he states that proficiency in IT is not required in the proposed workplace.

In sum, when one member was complimented on certain skills, competencies or personal characteristics to encourage him to apply for a certain position, the other members present at the encounter were thereby excluded. Thus, although a compliment served as positive reinforcement for one member, it also served to disqualify the other members.

#### 4. Conclusion and discussion

This paper has demonstrated that positive assessments involving complimenting may serve a range of purposes in the institutional context of mental-health rehabilitation. Compliments used for praising a member’s behavior to encourage their participation in the community (Extract 1) come closest to the notion of positive reinforcement as described in clinical textbooks (e.g., [Walter and Peller, 1992](#)). Support for this claim can be found in the responses to such compliments. In our data, members responded to these compliments from support workers with expressions of agreement and gratitude, which indicates that they themselves oriented to the status of these utterances as *genuine* compliments ([Etelämäki et al., 2013](#)). Furthermore, their response turns often also entailed downgrading the positive assessments of their behavior. These types of responses, which indicate a desire to avoid self-praise, have been considered a generic feature of compliment sequences also in other contexts ([Pomerantz, 1978](#)). According to resource-centered and solution-focused clinical thinking, this type of compliment may be seen to provide for a positive interactional atmosphere and highlight actions and behaviors that further the client’s process of change (e.g., [Walter and Peller, 1992](#)).

Our findings show, however, that not all compliments are used merely to provide support and positive reinforcement for the client. Our data also revealed something of the *darker side* of complimenting as an interactional phenomenon (see also [Golato, 2005](#)). For instance, in our data, mental-health professionals often used compliments for agenda management purposes. Here, our findings can be explained with reference to the twofold nature of these professionals’ responsibilities in group counselling. While, on the one hand, their task is to encourage group members to engage in interaction with the rest of the group, on the other hand, they must also ensure that the activities of the group further its institutional goals (e.g., [Vehviläinen, 1999](#)).

We have demonstrated how compliments can serve both purposes. Compliments were used for increasing the pressure on group members to respond in moments of decision-making and task delegation where the group remained silent (Extract 2), while compliments were also used for closing down topics that were not relevant for discussion in the group at that moment (Extract 3). Unlike the instances of *genuine* compliments discussed above, these compliments elicited a different reaction. They either received no response from the recipients, or the response was targeted at the other action (such as question, proposal or request) with which the compliment was intertwined. This suggests that the participants’ oriented to them as being other than (mere) compliments. Nonetheless, as both the act of pressuring participants to produce talk in the face of silence and the act of closing down a topic that seems irrelevant for the group can be seen as potentially face-threatening endeavors, the mental-health professionals’ use of compliments enabled them to manage the agenda of the group’s discussion in a gentler and less threatening way. Similarly, but more dramatically, given the high-stake nature of the event, the mental-health professional’s act of complimenting in Extract 4 served to *soften the blow* to a member immediately prior to his exclusion from the group of candidates for transitional employment (see [Golato, 2005](#)).

In addition, compliments may also function as a way for speakers to advance some project, plan, or agenda of their own. As mentioned earlier, prior research has shown this to be the case, for example, in medical interactions, where compliments are sometimes used by patients to exert pressure on doctors to deliver a particular diagnosis or treatment plan ([Gill, 2005](#); [Hudak et al., 2010](#)). In our data, we observed a parallel phenomenon. As shown in our analysis (Extract 5), support workers used complimenting as a means of increasing pressure on a member to contact a particular workplace. While contacting the workplace might have had positive consequences for the member, and also for the community as a whole, which would have been able to send a competent member to the company, nonetheless not all the consequences of this type of complimenting practice can be seen as straightforwardly positive. First, the possibilities of the other members present in the encounter to express interest in the job were reduced, as the compliment, which targeted only one of the members, also implicitly established the standard against which everyone else’s competences would be measured. Mental-health professionals’ compliments may thus have real-life consequences, not only for the recipients of positive reinforcement but also for the

others who are thereby excluded. Second, when mental-health professionals' compliments target the skills, competencies or personal characteristics of a particular member, the other group members may lack epistemic access to the content of that compliment (Raymond and Heritage, 2006). Thus, given that support workers' task in this context is to encourage member participation in interactional encounters, it is possible that complimenting one member for their personal qualities may exclude the other members also locally, in the interaction then and there. In other words, in such instances, mental-health professionals might begin a topic to which others cannot contribute. Compared with Extract 1, where the support worker's compliment targeted a member's previous accomplishment and thus implicitly highlighted its value to the entire group without excluding the possibility of the other members achieving the same in the future, the support worker's compliment in Extract 5 made exclusion inevitable.

While complimenting is a profitable professional skill across a wide range of institutional contexts (e.g., Zirpoli and Melloy, 2001; Burgh and Mayhall, 2002; Gathman et al., 2008; Weiste, 2018), serving an important function in promoting clients' empowerment (Wall et al., 1989), our study has highlighted the multifaceted nature of complimenting as an action (see also Golato, 2005; Etelämäki et al., 2013). Furthermore, our analysis also points to the strategic usefulness of compliments in participants' implicit negotiations of power and control over the matters at hand. Overall, while social interaction consists of participants, in turn, imposing constraints on the speakers-to-come in terms of their next utterances, the relatively stable trajectories of initiative action (e.g., proposals and requests) and responsive action (e.g., acceptances and rejections) are enabled by the mechanism of accountability (Schegloff, 2007). This means that deviations from the expected trajectories of action typically call for the deviating participant to justify their conduct (Heritage, 1984). Participants' orientations to the possibility of accountability may thus be seen to allow the emergence of what Goffman (1983) famously referred to as the *interaction order* – a distinctive realm of social reality in its own right. There seem to be, however, certain types of actions and practices that are inherently more immune to the challenges of accountability (see e.g., Stevanovic, 2012; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014). Indeed, compliments, we maintain, may come to be seen as such accountability-immune actions. Due to their inherently positive nature, it is challenging for compliment recipients to complain about the speaker's act of complimenting. Thus, even if recipients seek to diminish the magnitude of praise embedded in the compliment, it may remain difficult for recipients to resist its intended functions. Therefore, analogous to what has been claimed about the offering of sympathy as a tool for promoting one's self-interests and gaining social status (Clark, 1997), the use of compliments can also serve strategic aims. Compliments are powerful, but not only by virtue of their ability to foster empowerment.

The study nevertheless has certain limitations. First, the relatively small size of our collection of compliments means, rather obviously, that the practices described in this paper may well fail to represent all the ways in which compliments are used in the context of mental-health rehabilitation, let alone elsewhere. Second, given the Finnishness of our data, the findings of this article should not be uncritically applied to other contexts and languages. Third, as our data were recorded only with one video-camera, conducting a systematic multimodal analysis of complimenting actions in multi-party conversations was unfeasible. Fourth, our methodological approach, conversation analysis, has a significant inherent limitation in that it neither allows researchers to make claims about how the clients themselves experienced the compliments discussed in the analysis, nor enables investigation of the potential link between the interactional practices described in the paper and measures of the supportiveness of the professional–client relationship or the efficacy of the overall rehabilitation process. What our methodological approach does allow, however, is the inspection of next turns to reveal how previous talk has been understood by the participants themselves (see Sacks et al., 1974). In this way, we have been able to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of complimenting as an action and provide a more nuanced understanding of what could or should constitute “genuinely positive” reinforcement in the continually changing context of moment-by-moment social interaction.

### Author contributions

**Elina Weiste:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing, Funding Acquisition.

**Camilla Lindholm:** Writing, Project Administration, Funding Acquisition.

**Taina Valkeapää:** Data Curation, Writing.

**Melisa Stevanovic:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing, Funding Acquisition.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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### Appendix. Transcription Symbols

[ ]	Overlapping talk
(.)	A pause of less than 0.2 seconds
(0.0)	Pause: silence measured in seconds and tenths of a second

WORD	Talk of a louder volume than the surrounding talk
.hh	Inhaling
hh	Exhaling
mt, krhm	Vocal noises
£word£	Spoken in a smiley voice
wo(h)rd	Laugh particle inserted within a word
((word))	Transcriber's comments
<u>word</u>	Accented sound or syllable
-	Abrupt cut-off of preceding sound
:	Lengthening of a sound
?	Final rise intonation
,	Final level intonation
.	Final falling intonation
↑_↑	Beginning, end and duration of multimodal actions
(( ))	Transcribers description of phenomena

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