Autonomy and Emotion Management

Middle managers in welfare professions during radical organizational change

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ABSTRACT

This case study was conducted among middle managers during a period of radical change within the Norwegian child welfare service. Our goal was to explore how the middle managers handle and respond to emotional dissonance and constraints in autonomy during the change process. We collected data through group meetings, individual interviews, and focus groups. Prior research on middle managers has shown their importance in the implementation of organizational change. We propose that middle managers conduct emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing in response to the increased complexity of organizational expectations during change processes. Further, we argue that the need for relevant emotion management reflects a threat to managers' autonomy. Our findings indicate that middle managers feel emotional dissonance, due to their position as both recipients and executers of organizational change. This makes them vulnerable to questions of loyalty, and they feel they have no backstage where they can express themselves openly. However, their ability to plan emotion management and to balance various conflicting expectations enables them to maintain autonomy during a radical change process. Our basic arguments and findings are summarized by applying the logic of a historistic functional model.

Introduction

This study took place in the Norwegian child welfare service during a radical change. Our aim is to advance the knowledge of how middle managers in welfare professions handle and respond to constraints in autonomy during change processes in public organizations. We choose to study the middle managers' efforts of emotion management in organizational change because we assume that these efforts affect the ability to maneuver and implement changes in welfare organizations.

The Norwegian context of this study provides an opportunity to analyze welfare professions within a country, which to a large extent organizes welfare services as a

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public responsibility. This is a characteristic that the Scandinavian countries have in common. Nonetheless, the Norwegian welfare-regime is continuously revised and updated. As demands for differentiated assistance and quality are increasing, the public sector has introduced various measures from the New Public Management and Post New Public Management toolbox to meet emerging challenges within different sectors of society (Busch and Wennes, 2009; Fallan and Pettersen, 2010). Attempts to increase efficiency and effectively organize public services appear in different forms. Reforms, evaluations, and change-projects have been proposed and implemented at a rapid pace (Härenstam et al., 2004). One central critique of ongoing change and restructuring in the public sector has been the lack of consistency between demands and resources. Another objection is a lack of oversight, and ambiguous goals and intentions behind the different processes.

Research on power and decision-making in Norwegian public organization revealed a tendency to decentralize managerial dilemmas in the planning stages of change (Vike et al., 2002). This suggested that top-level managers tend to shove difficult matters of priority downward, when making strategic decisions. Thus, middle managers at the lower levels of public organizations must handle a variety of interests and dilemmas from which higher level managers are shielded (Björk, 2013). One example of such a dilemma is the potential conflict between the economic rationality and the rationality of care (Waerness, 1992). This refers to the fact that managers in welfare professions are subject to different formalities 'that govern managerial action from many directions' (Björk, 2013, p. 32). One important formality is based upon professional codes of conduct and legislative regulations of practice, written in order to protect and secure the patient's, client's, or child's best interests in all situations. Dealing with opposing formalities can be experienced as double-bind situations, where the managers cannot win, no matter what they do (Dopson and Neumann, 1998). Research on organizational changes in welfare organizations has pointed out that contradictions between the need for economic efficiency and professional codes of conduct can cause moral distress, a perceived decrease in autonomy, and negative responses toward the change process (Bernstrøm, 2014; Kälvemark, 2001).

Middle management is typically defined as a position 'between the operating core and the apex' (Mintzberg, 1989). According to Harding et al. (2014) middle managers are both controllers and controlled, resisted and resisters. They propose that the middle managers, due to their position looking upward and downward at the same time, *constitute* organizational hierarchy, rather than being slotted into it (Harding et al., 2014). Recent research contributions on middle managers have emphasized their key role in organizational change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Balogun et al., 2003; Clarke et al., 2007; Huy, 2002; Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Pappas and Wooldridge, 2007). These contributions cover subjects related to brokerage (Shi et al., 2009), a variety of subjects connected with processes of sense-making and sense-giving in organizational change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Hope, 2010; Luscher and Lewis, 2008), as well as about middle managers and emotions in organizational change (Clarke et al., 2007; Huy, 2002). Middle managers are an important asset in organizational strategy building and in the implementation of organizational change (Ashkanasy and Humphrey, 2011; Clarke et al., 2007; Dutton et al., 1997; Huy, 2002, 2010; Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Shi et al., 2009). Thus, the level of organizational expectations toward their attitudes, performances, and behavior is likely to increase during times of change and uncertainty (Clarke et al., 2007).

Although the literature on emotions in leadership is growing rapidly (see for instance Ashkanasy and Humphrey, 2011; Bolton, 2005; Clarke et al., 2007; Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2008; Huy, 2002) the emotional properties implicated within middle managerial tasks in organizational change seem to be underexplored. We claim that it is important to study this subject among middle managers in public welfare organizations in particular, due to the multidimensional aspect of professional, managerial, and emotional concerns in institutions of care. Further, we propose that the contextual implications of organizational change are: (1) increase and incongruence in role-related expectations, and (2) restrictions in managerial discretion and decision-making, which lead to constraints on autonomy followed by increase in emotional dissonance for the middle managers.

Earlier findings suggest that middle managers report higher levels of person/role conflict and emotional dissonance than top managers do, and that these experiences are partially mediated through the institutional and economic context of the public sector (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014). However, studies on emotional challenges and emotional dissonance within welfare professions often focus on issues such as emotional labor, burnout, and authenticity among the professionals (nurses, social workers, etc.) themselves (Grandey et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Moreau and Mageau, 2012; Travis et al., 2015). The impact of emotional challenges on managers in welfare professions during organizational change appears to be underexplored. Further, although several studies recognize the link between autonomy and emotion management as important (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 2003; Humphrey et al., 2008; Mumby and Putnam, 1992) we have yet to see an attempt to describe their interconnection in the context of organizational change. Thus our research question is:

> How do middle managers in welfare professions handle and respond to constraints on autonomy and subsequent emotional dissonance during organizational change?

In order to answer this question we will elaborate and discuss the theoretical basis for our arguments. Further, we will describe the methodology of the study before we present our findings. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our findings and present a model of the connection between middle managerial autonomy, emotion management, and emotional dissonance in organizational change.

Main concepts and arguments

By autonomy we mean individual autonomy, hence the freedom to make one's own judgment and to express oneself in a true manner (Humphrey et al., 2008). In addition to individual autonomy, we are also preoccupied with the concept of managerial autonomy, defined as discretion in decision-making on matters of importance for the organization (Roness et al., 2008). Our understanding of the concept of autonomy in middle management includes the freedom to act in accordance with personal values, to express emotions truthfully, and the opportunity to attend to other people's emotions.

In regard to emotion management in organizational change, we apply Hochschild's (2003) concept of emotion management. However, we suggest that Huy's (2002) concept of emotional balancing in organizational change can complement Hochschild's

original concepts. According to Hochschild (2003), emotion management refers to using effort to control and manage feelings and emotions while keeping facial and bodily displays consistent with expectations in social interaction. Hochschild (2003) coined the term emotion work to describe the efforts of adapting our emotional displays to social expectations in a *private* context. Emotional labor, on the other hand, is conducting emotion work in face-to-face interactions related to *occupational* tasks (Hochschild, 2003). The concept of emotional balancing of organizational change was introduced by Huy (2002) after a large study of middle managers and their contribution during organizational change. Emotional balancing 'refers to a group-level process juxtaposing emotion-related actions intended to drive change while inducing a sense of continuity in a group of people' (Huy, 2002, p. 33). With this background, we propose that emotion management in organizational change includes three strategies, namely emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing. Emotional dissonance is both an antecedent and a consequence of emotion management (Abraham, 1998; Hochschild, 2003). This concept refers to a conflict between expected emotional expressions and felt emotions.

Middle managers and autonomy

In his classic work, Goffman (1959) addressed the challenges in the role of the mediator, or the go-between. According to Goffman, the mediator tends to present an adjusted version of matters to each side, in order to achieve a wanted effect. At the same time, the go-between displays what can be seen as false impressions of loyalty to each side. Goffman (1959) described this as a discrepant role, encumbered by an activity, which he characterized as 'bizarre, untenable and undignified, vacillating as it does from one set of appearances and loyalties to another' (Goffman, 1959, p. 149). Thus, Goffman's 'mediator-role' aligns with the middle managerial role during changes in modern organizations.

Being in the middle poses challenges related to role conflicts and questions of loyalty. The need to adjust appearances and expressions of opinion can cause person/role conflicts among middle managers (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014). Thus, the act of balancing different groups of interests is a demanding one. In fact, Huy (2001) compared the role of a middle manager in organizational change to the act of a tightrope artist. This refers to the balance between promoting continuity and change in order to meet the expectations of both employees and superiors (Huy, 2002). The metaphor of the tightrope artist also provides an informative picture of how middle managers need to balance their own emotional reactions with organizational expectations of managerial conduct during times of change. Typically, the longstanding restructuring and evaluation processes within the Norwegian child welfare system appear to contribute to an organizational state where change projects are ubiquitous. This affects managerial autonomy, in the sense that middle managers face hiring freezes, lack of financial oversight, and limitations on managerial discretion and decision-making over a long period.

Balancing the emotional impact of change

Huy (2002) originally proposed emotional balancing as a group-level strategy. However, he also described the middle managerial role as acting like the tightrope artist (Huy,

2001), balancing between continuity and change, in order to minimize the negative emotional impact of a change process.

Middle managers in welfare professions are often responsible for the professional quality of their service unit. This entails following important legislative acts such as the Child Welfare Act and the Social Care Act. At the same time they are accountable for keeping the budget, and the financial resources to secure the quality of public services are often limited (Björk, 2013). This implies that middle managers in welfare organizations are dependent on making autonomous managerial judgments on how and what to prioritize in times of change. One may say that the emotional concerns about organizational change constitute a multidimensional challenge for middle managers in welfare professions. They are mediating between different levels of the organization (Balogun et al., 2005; Shi et al., 2009), and complying with the different formalities of care and efficiency (Björk, 2013). Besides, they are also concerned with deciding when to advocate change, and when to focus on continuity in their interaction with different parts and people within the organization (Huy, 2001, 2002).

In addition this, middle managers may themselves struggle with conflicting feelings, being simultaneously change agents and recipients (Huy, 1999, 2002). This infers that the capacity to mediate is dependent on whether the change process is in accordance with what they feel and believe is the best strategy for the future of the organization. As autonomy refers to the freedom to determine courses of action and which emotions to display in various situations (Humphrey et al., 2008), we argue that the decrease in *managerial* autonomy during long-standing organizational change also affects the middle managers' *individual* autonomy.

In cases where there is incongruence between personal values and the tasks at hand, there is also a risk of emotional dissonance (Abraham, 1998). Thus, one may assume that constricted autonomy exposes the middle managers to potential emotional dissonance. This assumption leads us to the next part of the theoretical reasoning behind our study. In order to explore how middle managers could handle a decrease in autonomy and the subsequent emotional dissonance during organizational change, we will now describe and discuss different strategies of emotion management.

Emotion management: Strategies for dampening emotional dissonance and maintaining autonomy

Research on emotional labor in leadership has disclosed a connection between degree of felt authenticity and the freedom to express genuine emotions within the managerial role (Gardner et al., 2009). Clarke et al. (2007) found that middle managers' emotion work in organizational change is often unsupported and unacknowledged by upper management. According to Hochschild (2003), the level of autonomy when performing emotion management is important because of its consequences. However, emotion management provides a way for middle managers to respond to experiences of emotional dissonance and decrease in managerial autonomy, while they are acting as mediators on a tightrope in welfare organizations.

The social and organizational expectations of correct emotional displays have been coined as feeling rules (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 2003), later suggested labeled display rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). As noted, emotional

dissonance refers to experiences of discrepancy between genuine feelings and emotional displays that are expected according to feeling rules. This concept has been linked with person/role conflict, and is sometimes referred to as emotion-rule dissonance.

Emotion work involves attempting to change an emotion or a feeling to make it appropriate in any given *social* situation. This not only refers to the suppression or expression of emotions, but also to working on one's actual feelings, to shape them, and fit them to experienced or foreseen expectations within one's surroundings (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 2003). Emotional labor, on the other hand, is the effort made to adjust emotions and emotional displays to *organizational* expectations and feeling rules.

The original conceptualization (Hochschild, 2003) claims that emotion work is a part of the private sphere, and that emotion work in the workplace is best described as emotional labor. However, welfare organizations involve social relations that extend beyond commercial purposes. Managers in welfare professions balance the roles of administrator, coworker, and supervisor in their everyday interaction with their employees. Hence, we argue that they conduct emotion *work*, when they work on their feelings and emotional displays in their interaction with their coworkers out of *respect* for them and their emotions, and in accordance with social expectations and/or social feeling rules. However, they also apply emotion *labor*, for instance in situations where they adapt their emotional expressions in order to 'sell' in the change.

According to Piderit (2000), responses to expectations in organizational change align with three main attitude dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and intentional. The middle managers assess the change and its impact on each level. Their review is dependent on their autonomy, and it is important for their ability to manage the change in interaction with their employees. However, there may be little room for acting upon and expressing personal values and true feelings during radical change. Thus, the presentation of relevant emotional displays involves efforts of both emotion work and emotional labor. Middle managers often receive some information about a change proposal in advance, thus their intentional reviews are typically antecedent. This part of the response process compares with planning strategic responses such as exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (Farrell, 1983; Hirschman, 1970). The intentional set of responses may depend on the degree of emotional dissonance and the conditions for emotion management during the change process. Contextual conditions can involve issues of trust, support, openness, and opportunities of agency.

Hochschild (2003) applied Stanislavsky's concepts of method acting in order to explain different strategies of emotion management. Surface-acting is a response-focused strategy, for example to put on a fake smile, or pretend to have specific feelings. Deep-acting is an antecedent-focused strategy. A person is deep-acting when he/she utilizes personal experiences or memories in order to induce the feelings that a professional role demands in a situation at work. In their role as a mediator, middle managers in welfare organizations are likely to apply both deep- and surface-acting in their efforts of emotion management. Research on surface- and deep-acting has revealed that frequent resorting to surface-acting involves greater risk of experiencing emotional dissonance and work withdrawal, than does deep-acting. However, as emotion management in response to decreased autonomy probably is an antecedent strategy, the middle managers in this study will most likely apply deep-acting more often than surface-acting.

We argue that middle managers have a mediator role, which implies dealing with contradictory expectations and emotional responses in their performances of the

managerial role. At the same time, the managers themselves may experience ambivalent attitudes and emotional dissonance toward the change itself, as well as toward the conditions for managerial and professional conduct during the change process. The tasks and restraints concomitant with the change process could result in lowered managerial and individual autonomy. Further, we propose that middle managers apply basic strategies of emotion management in order to sustain autonomy in their efforts to handle the complexity of organizational change. These include emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing.

Having presented and discussed the theoretical basis for this study, we will now proceed to account for our methodological approach, followed by our findings and interpretations.

Methodology

Research context

Norwegian child welfare (also referred to as child protection) is a large and complex system, with wide responsibilities. It entails multiple types of services organized on both the municipal and the governmental level. One of Norwegian child welfare's major tasks is to uncover and provide protection and help for children who live in dysfunctional families. In 2004, the Department of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion (BLD) initiated a management reform for Norwegian child welfare services. The initial goal of the reform was to ensure a better utilization of resources, increase the quality and equality of the services, and reduce the use of private providers in the field (Backe-Hansen et al., 2011).

An important result of the evaluation and restructuring of governmental child welfare was the decision to decrease the use of residential institutions. The fundamental idea was that it is better for children to grow up in normal family homes than in institutions (Backe-Hansen et al., 2011). Another argument for this measure was that running institutions is expensive and inefficient (Backe-Hansen et al., 2011). This decision meant that several institutions would be closed or scaled down, and that the demand for the recruitment of qualified and willing family-homes would increase.

Design, data collection, and analysis

The overall perspective of this case study is that of social constructivism. This implies a view of how the middle managers of our study participate in their social world by playing the middle managerial role, and in particular of how their 'internalizing of these roles, makes the same world become subjectively real to them' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 74). Our purpose was to view the emotional processes among middle managers in welfare professions, within the context of organizational change.[1] An abductive approach was adopted, as our aim was to explore the potential connection between autonomy and emotion management, in order to better understand and explain this phenomenon (Danermark, 2012). Following Danermark, we see abduction as a way 'to interpret and recontextualize individual phenomena within a conceptual framework

or a set of ideas' (2012, p. 80). A case analysis provides an opportunity to place our findings into the context of change in welfare organizations, which is important for the validity of our interpretations. In addition to the advantage of achieving rich contextual insights, this research strategy also provided the chance to study the dynamics of the research setting over time (Yin, 2009). The case is set in Norwegian child welfare, where our interviewees work in positions as department managers for residential units and family units. The group of managers in this study consisted of four men and ten women. The youngest manager was 29 years old, while the oldest was 57, with a mean age of 41.

We followed the units through two stages of a radical change process, the proposal stage and the implementation stage. The data were collected and processed by triangulating between individual interviews, group meetings, focus group interviews, and written documents on the sector and on the change process (see Table 1). Former studies with comparable research subjects have applied similar approaches of collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources, in order to access rich descriptions and insights on emotions and emotion management in organizations (Clarke et al., 2007; Gjerberg and Amble, 2003; Huy, 2002). In addition to middle managers, we also interviewed two top managers and one administrative coworker. These interviews served to widen our understanding of the organizations in which the middle managers worked. They included conversations about the history of the units involved and other central practical information about the change process.

Table 1 Data collection

Units	2
Departments	7
Individual interviews with middle managers	11
Individual interviews with top managers	3
Individual interview with a member of top administration	1
Group meetings	4
Focus group interviews	2

The collection and analysis of our material was conducted in three steps. Each analytical step was guided and followed by theoretical considerations. (1) Group meetings with brainstorming about the forthcoming organizational change. The subjects that surfaced in these meetings contributed to the individual interview guide. (2) Individual interviews with department managers in two separate units within child welfare. The individual interviews formed a basis for the planning and execution of focus group interviews. (3) Focus group interviews with department managers representing five different departments and two units within Norwegian child welfare. The participants (five in each focus group) received a formal invitation to the focus groups with a list of five subjects, each containing two questions for discussion. The subjects of the focus groups included the impact of the process on each department, empowerment, feelings toward the process, loyalty, professionalism, openness, and continuity vs. change. The second focus group served the purpose of following up on subjects that emerged during the first one,

as well as offering an opportunity for clarification or enriched insight into the main subjects of the study. During the final steps of the analysis, both the individual and the focus group transcripts were analyzed thematically. Sections and statements involving discussion about emotions, emotional displays, behavior, and responses toward and within the change process were retrieved from the material. The final step of the analysis was to identify the statements that appeared to represent the middle managerial experience in general.

In line with the chosen research strategy, our analytical methods were characterized by switching focus between theory and empirical findings. During the final step of the analysis, the already established theoretical categories related to emotions and responses to change were obvious parts of the material. However, the analytical process revealed two overarching themes that appeared to entail specific categories related to conditions for middle managers during the change, and their efforts to cope with these conditions. Theme 1, **Impact of change on autonomy in role-play**, included 'Professional and personal ambivalence,' 'Role-play—Being oil on water,' 'Emotional dissonance–Lack of backstage,' and 'Conflicts of loyalty—Double-bind.' Theme 2, **Emotion management**, comprised 'Emotional balancing—Managing other peoples' emotions,' 'Emotion work and emotional labor—Reshaping and redressing own emotions,' and 'Different approaches to and experiences of emotion management.' Finally, the findings revealed what can be summed up as three different combinations of emotion management strategies. We present these in our conclusion and apply the metaphors of 'log off,' 'log on,' and 'log into' to describe the different emotion management-'profiles' adapted by the middle managers.

The chosen research strategy enhances the ability to secure the internal validity of our analysis and conclusions. Through triangulation, we have strived to gather diversified information about the case. The managers were selected because they were part of the same sector and profession. An advantage of conducting this research in Norwegian child welfare is that the interviewees were used to talking about feelings in their line of duty. We assume that access to interviewees who are familiar, and confident, with discussing emotional expressions and feelings has enriched the content of our data. Further, we believe that insight in how managers within welfare professions handle the challenges implicated in the ongoing reforms and changes in Norwegian public sector can strengthen the ability to plan and implement such projects in the future.

Findings and interpretations

Impact of change on autonomy in role-play

Professional and personal ambivalence

During the individual interviews, the middle managers reflected on their own emotional, cognitive, and intentional responses toward the change. Their attitudes were mostly positive on the cognitive level. They thought that change was necessary and that it could improve Norwegian child welfare. Nonetheless, the managers in our study believed that the communication about the real motives behind the process was not entirely truthful. They perceived that although the government promoted professional quality as the main

rationale for the process, economy and savings were equally important motives. Most of them agreed with the need to save and increase efficiency. Nonetheless, they expressed both professional and personal ambivalence toward the consequences of economic savings. This ambivalence seemed to relate to the emotional and cognitive reviews of these aspects. One of the middle managers responded to this subject, during an individual interview, as:

> No, of course I believe that there is a financial winning in this as well. Because it is way out there, to think that this has nothing to do with economy. Of course, it is about economy. We have a large deficit. However, they have had a parallel process with focus on professional things, which I find to be good. And we have received quality requirements and professional standards […].

Another middle manager voiced skepticism and disappointment toward the communication during a focus group:

> A lie is a lie, I say. Even though we cannot catch them in it. It includes going out and selling this change process, saying that it is all about professional improvement. This is going to make everything better for our kids. I experience this as pure nonsense. It is all about the economy. I do not think the kids are worse off, by any means. However, I wish I were met with openness.

On the emotional level, there were different evaluations of the project. These ranged from excitement over being approved as a new department, to anxiety and sadness due to concerns for one's department's and personnel's future.

The reflections about which actions to take in response to the change were linked with the cognitive and emotional attitudes. Although some of the department managers did talk about exit as an option, they still had decided to remain loyal and support the change, until further notice. When asked about how she intended to respond to change when the decision was made, one of the managers offered the following comment:

> […] It depends on what my job will be further on. If I am placed to do a job that I am not ok with, then I do not think I will be sitting somewhere making trouble and mischief. I will rather find myself some other job. Am I expected to conduct a task? Well, then I will do that. However, I will not… It must be something that I care to do, and not contrary to my beliefs.

Hence, although responses differed on the emotional level, the department managers' general expressions consisted of hesitant and pending attitudes. They were prepared to do their job as mediators and implementers of organizational change. Yet, they acknowledged their own thoughts, beliefs, and intentions as an important part of the process. Their personal attitudes would affect their employees, and in turn their reactions toward the change.

Role-play—Being 'oil on water'

The middle managers of this study highlighted role conflicts, change-related fatigue among their employees, and questions of loyalty as challenging consequences of the

change process. The questions of loyalty were related to limitations in managerial autonomy, which resulted in frustration due to limited access to proactive decision-making and lack of continuity. Additionally, some of the employees harbored suspicions of secrecy and accused management of withholding vital information. In sum, these factors made up a complex set of different considerations that made the managers typically feel that 'You need to say the right things in the right way. In a way, there is pressure on those things. And if you don't do it, you will get confronted with it at any given time.'

This statement describes a demand for a nuanced role-play through emotion management. The perceived pressure seemed to make the managers view professionalism as an opposite of emotionality. When playing their part as managers it became important to facilitate professional displays. One of the middle managers explained this in the following way, during a focus group discussion:

> […] It is role-play. You take on a role. You cannot play out your whole register of emotions when you are inside a role. You need to moderate in both directions. Both in the negative and the positive direction. […] You need to play the part, as it is demanded of you. It does not need to be a very tight box, but you must at least think about what you are going to convey, also in regards to feelings. It is like being 'oil on water'.

Being 'oil on water' did not imply being emotionally numb, or emotionless. Rather, it referred to setting back personal emotions in order to calm the waters and keep all emotional responses at bay. Another informant responded to this metaphor, saying that it '[…] refers very much to expectations. […] We are supposed to contain the employees' emotions. We are supposed to listen to their frustrations, and then respond the way you put it.'

Emotional dissonance—Lack of backstage

However, the need for relevant role-play and emotion management was not entirely straightforward for the middle managers. The challenges related to autonomy created a basis for experiences of emotional dissonance due to lack of trust, and increased resistance from the employees. One of the department managers described the feelings of emotional dissonance in the following way:

> […] Coming to a staff meeting where you feel that people almost hate you. In example, the resistance is almost... You represent everything that they dislike. And what I am saying is that you feel like you have no friends, anywhere. That is an uncomfortable feeling. You can feel like: 'Yeah, but you must listen to me, I have done the best I can'. But, you just have to contain the feeling of people not liking you, or of them being your opponents. And of course, there is a lot of discomfort related to that.

Experiences of emotional dissonance due to the decrease in autonomy were demanding for the middle managers. Although strategies of emotion management were said to be necessary in order to maintain a professional appearance, they were also referred to as challenging and sometimes exhausting. The most prominent issues of cost in emotion management among the middle managers in this study are addressed in the quote above. These entail feelings of being misunderstood, loneliness, and limited support.

Another basic factor was said to be lack of 'backstage', or as one of the department managers worded it, 'You are expected to regulate other people's feelings, and then there is little focus on our own emotions. Where are we supposed to get out our own frustrations and feelings?'

Loyalty conflicts—Double-bind

The feelings of emotional dissonance were also linked with the wish to secure the best possible service for the children. The personal experiences of inadequacy and loyalty conflicts evoked strong emotions among many of the middle managers:

> [..] And then there is that thing … Being dangerously close to running out empty. It could be that I should try and force myself to remove focus away from the primary tasks, from time to time. That I should not see the kids so much. Not see the children and their fate, and the individual cases this much. And that I should not be concentrating so much on my personnel that is having a difficult time, and force myself to look upwards. Once I was asked where my loyalty lies? Is it upwards, or downwards? […] I found it difficult to answer that. Because no matter what my answer was, it would be disloyal.

The loyalty conflicts caused a double-bind situation, of a 'damned if I do, damned if I don't' variety. Due to such contextual circumstances, the two main challenges of being a middle manager in change processes were said to be: (1) Providing tranquility and some sense of security for their staff, and (2) The need to calm oneself through managing one's own responses and emotions toward the change. The ability to fulfill these tasks is dependent on the department managers' felt autonomy. However, the foregoing recount of contextual aspects linked to the change process supports the assumption that it contributes to decrease the managers' ability to express concerns and emotions in an authentic manner. The impact of the change process on autonomy will activate efforts of emotion management.

Emotion management

Emotional balancing—Managing other people's emotions

The department managers need to attend to their employees' frustrations and make sure that they are capable of doing their job. At the same time, they are expected to communicate and implement new visions, values, and goals as these come along. The long-lasting process has made it necessary to help the staff see the changes as something else than frustrating disturbances only. The department managers dealt with this by creating room for expressing frustration. One of the managers explained this during a focus group:

> I was very concerned that they need to be allowed to talk about this (the employee's and their feelings towards the change). I was going to let them talk it through, but then we must turn it around in the end towards something positive. […] Because now when people start talking about how hard things have been, I can respond by saying: 'yes but now things have become better'.

The main reasons for venting frustration involved an attempt to clean the slate. This could motivate employees to keep providing good social services, and create a dialogue about the ongoing changes. In addition to creating room for expressing negative emotions and concerns about the change, the department managers persisted in communicating about the reform and the reasons for it. However, they believed that correct and informative input might help the employees to accept the changes. Another department manager presented this strategy as follows: 'I think you need to provide your people with knowledge about the reasons behind these processes. I think it is important for the employees to understand this process, as a kind of orientation towards reality.'

The shift between attending to emotional responses and providing knowledge of the reform constituted what Huy (2002) refers to as emotional balancing. This strategy was a steady part of the department managers' everyday communication with their staff. The freedom to predict when to advocate change and when to facilitate 'venting' emotional responses was said to be important for their own mastery of dilemmas of loyalty and insecurities (or threats to autonomy) due to the constant focus on change.

Emotion work and emotional labor: Reshaping and redressing own emotions

The managers managed their own emotions for two purposes. The first was to work on their own emotional responses as recipients of change; the second was to work on their emotional displays as implementers of change. One of them described this process quite vividly during a focus group discussion:

> […] I have become to know myself enough to realize that if I get a message that I do not like, a new working schedule or something like that, then I need to work through it by myself a couple of hours, because something obviously occurs. You experience resistance and think to yourself: 'Oh my god.'(Sighs and lays her head on the table in front of her). This kind of irrational feeling. And then you must start processing it to yourself […] And I have found a strategy to deal with this. Before I proceed with the information, I must process my own emotions for a little while, before I am able to present it in a coherent way to anyone else, because obviously I have feelings towards all of these things. As well as opinions and utterances and… There is the need to dress them into reasonable expressions, in a way. So it won't come out completely irrational.

The middle managers found it necessary to reshape their emotions in their interaction with colleagues, superiors, employees, and clients. In this example, the informant conducts emotional labor, through deep-acting. She resorts to an antecedent strategy and works through her initial emotional reaction in order to present herself in accordance with organizational expectations and feeling rules.

Another aspect of managing own emotions involved conducting emotion work in order to adjust emotional displays, out of respect for other people's feelings. This strategy was mostly applied in informal interaction with staff, or at meetings where the middle manager dampened their own enthusiasm in order to avoid alienating their group of coworkers. A focus group discussion about emotional displays explained this as follows:

> Also, when you sit in forums and you are feeling one type of emotion, for instance, I can feel enthusiastic, but I am sitting there sharing my enthusiasm with someone who has a

very different perception, and then there is collision. And they get stressed out. If someone displays high level of enthusiasm for something that you yourself have a bad feeling towards, because things were better before or something like that…this creates…It causes both dissent and it creates distance, and it causes frustration. It actually causes distrust towards the people that you are supposed to carry the load with, because one experiences it as standing on different feet, or different islands. This is unfortunate. It actually is very unfortunate. […].

The common denominator for emotion work and emotional labor was that the managers did it to hide their feelings, or dampen their emotional expressions. They applied techniques of deep-acting and surface-acting in order to meet the expectations they were facing. They did this either in order to show compassion toward employees who were not coping with the change process, or as calm promoters of change. They were required to 'sell' in the change efforts, and create enthusiasm around the visions and goals of the process. However, the middle managers agreed that although enthusiasm was an accepted and wanted emotional expression from the organization's point of view, they still refrained from displaying high levels of positive emotions in their meetings with employees who harbored negative emotions toward the change. This implied that the department managers attempted to be sensitive for the emotional responses among their colleagues and staff, to consider them, and adjust their feelings and emotional displays in accordance.

Different approaches to and experiences of emotion management

Although all the managers reported having to use emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing, there were apparent differences in how these processes affected them. Some spoke of these efforts as natural parts of the managerial role, sometimes challenging but not in a destructive kind of way. Or, as one of the managers described it, 'You use all you got, both in terms of knowledge and experience, and kind of different approaches to get them to join your project, on all occasions.'

Others said that they felt exhausted and sick of not being able to speak their true mind. This made it harder for them to facilitate deep-acting, or as another manager worded it:

I feel that I need longer time to have a little talk with myself. I need longer time to get the feeling that: 'Yes, we can do this. I can believe in this'. […] Earlier it came to me automatically. So there is something about the experience of having almost run out empty.

Then again, there were managers who reported a negligent approach to the process. They chose to limit their focus on the change process to a minimum and expected their employees to focus solely on their primary tasks. They seemed to focus mostly on continuity, although without putting effort into emotion work and attendance to emotional reactions due to the uncertainties of change. Their attitude toward the process was not to let it affect their everyday job. However, their perceived autonomy was also under pressure. These managers were especially concerned about the increased workload due to restrictions in managerial autonomy.

Thus, the department managers seemed to have different approaches, or 'profiles,' in their utilization of emotion management strategies. Nonetheless, the efforts they made aimed at increasing or maintaining their sense of autonomy in their enactment of the middle managerial part, irrespective of how they viewed their position. The common experience appeared to be the need to apply both emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing in order to feel autonomous in their interaction with the rest of the organization.

Summary, elaborations, and conclusion

This study examines the potential connection between emotion management and autonomy among middle managers in welfare professions, during organizational change. We argue that middle managers in welfare professions are serving as mediators during change processes (Goffman, 1959), an act reminiscent of walking on tightrope (Huy, 2001). They must play the challenging act of balancing different sets of loyalties, while handling restraints on individual and managerial autonomy.

We propose that the expectations and conditions that these managers face could constrain their autonomy and cause subsequent emotional dissonance. Further, we argue that the middle managers may respond to these conditions by enacting strategies of emotion management. They attempt to sustain or reinstate autonomy by applying emotional balancing, emotional labor, and emotion work.

Our data indicate that middle managers in welfare organizations will experience constraints in autonomy during organizational change. Individuals in such positions in Norwegian child welfare must handle contradictory demands and double standards, feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Additionally, they are subject to organizational feeling rules that appear to give limited room to display genuine emotions in a spontaneous manner. All of the interviewees reported some degree of emotional dissonance, seemingly reflecting constraints on their mediator role. These perceptions were related to decreased managerial autonomy, which included restrictions on discretion in decision-making, as well as pressure on individual autonomy—being unable to express emotions and opinions freely.

The logic of autonomy and emotion management during organizational change

Our research question aimed at exploring how middle managers in welfare professions handled changes in autonomy and subsequent emotional dissonance during organizational change. The implications of our main findings could be summarized through an adaptation of Arthur Stinchcombe and Merton's (1968) model for historistic and functional explanations (see Figure 1). This model implies that the tension (T) created by the change has an impact on the middle manager's perceived autonomy (H). Thus, their autonomy is threatened. The model postulates that the higher the level of tension on this so-called homeostatic variable (here: Autonomy), the higher the level of structure activity. In this study, the structure activity (S) includes various aspects of middle managerial emotion management.

Due to a long-term focus on organizational change, restructure, and development, the middle managers in Norwegian child welfare have been conducting emotion management over time. According to the interviewees of the study, '*change is normality.*' Their main task is to keep a focus on providing consistent and good care for the youngsters in child welfare custody. Meanwhile, they are also expected to follow up and implement the incremental changes and improvements related to the child welfare reform. Hence, in line with the logic of our model, the tensions created by the change process (T) challenge the middle managers' sense of autonomy. This increases the need for emotion management (+), due to experiences of emotional dissonance (–). The middle managers respond to this by managing their own emotions and emotional expressions, and by balancing the emotional impact of the change on their employees.

Figure 1: Autonomy and emotion management in organizational change.
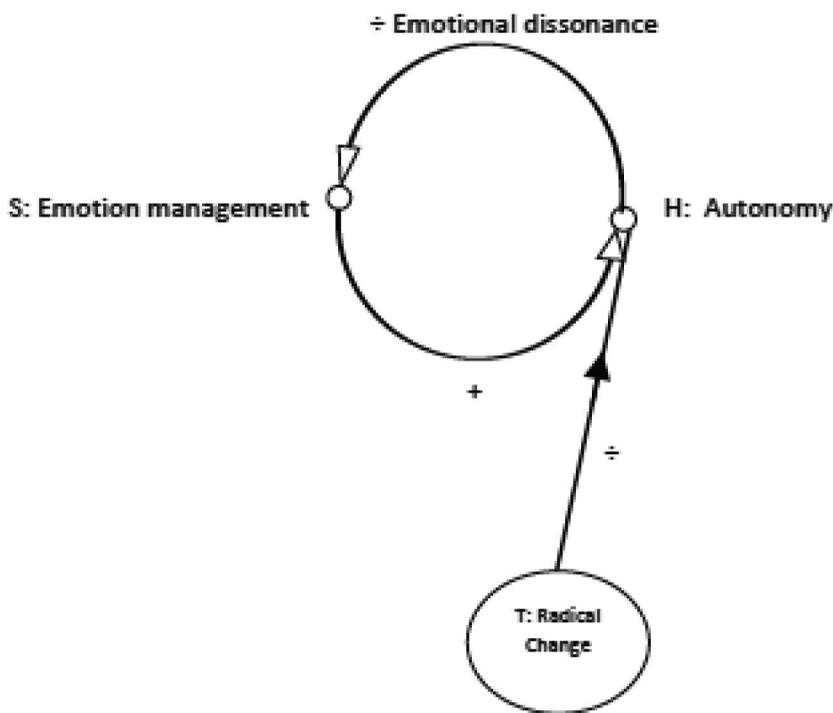
In this way, Stinchcombe and Merton's model can be used to summarize the main findings from our data. This synthesis illustrates that middle managers in welfare professions apply emotion management in order to maintain needed autonomy during organizational change. However, one could claim that these strategies are not just a part of their responses toward this particular change. After all, managers in welfare professions deal with complicated contextual factors that demand efforts of emotion management on a daily basis. The strategies of emotion work and emotional labor are likely to constitute important components of their managerial tasks under regular circumstances. Examples

of this are dealing with heavy workloads, frequent exposure to negative and/or traumatic episodes, safety threats, or insufficient client resources (Lee et al., 2011). Nevertheless, although basic social work includes executing techniques of emotion management, the managers of the current study say that the tension created by the change has increased the pressure on professional self-presentation and accurate emotional displays in their job. Thus, although the department managers in Norwegian child welfare are accustomed to managing their own and others emotions as a regular part of their managerial role, the impact of radical change appears to expose them to even further need for emotion management. This reflects a strengthened focus on correct emotional displays, combined with tighter restrictions on discretion in decision-making.

Maintaining autonomy—three different combinations of emotion management strategies

The managers in this study provided rich descriptions of how they work on their own, and their employees' emotional responses during the change process. Their explanations contain examples that resemble all three basic strategies of emotion management. However, the ways in which they emphasize these strategies differ. Our findings indicate that the middle managers seek to maintain autonomy in organizational change through three different approaches to emotion management. All three response sets include emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing in different combinations.

The first type of response set is to 'log on' to the change process and contribute to the best possible outcome. This approach appeared to empower the middle managers, and to decrease the impact of emotional dissonance. The explanation may be that the middle managers who 'logged on' succeeded in making the change project their own in an autonomous manner. They appeared to adopt agency in their response. They engaged in the change, while simultaneously enacting the strategies of both emotion work and emotional labor. Their ability to shift between complying with social and organizational expectations in any given situation appeared to increase their ability to conduct emotional balancing, and decrease the impact of emotional dissonance during the change.

The second response set compares with to 'log into' the emotional impact of the change. This refers to taking in all the frustrations from the employees and refraining from empowerment as a token of downward loyalty. The department managers who responded in this way described feelings of emotional exhaustion due to long-term experiences of emotional dissonance. The middle managers who resorted to this approach tended to view emotion work and emotional labor as negative aspects, and expressed higher levels of emotional dissonance than those of their colleagues who chose a different approach. However, they upheld their efforts of emotion management, and expressed that it was easier for them to remain autonomous in situations when they had time to prepare themselves before facing their employees.

The third response set resembles to 'log off' the change and its emotional impact, limiting to a minimum the focus on the process. The managers who 'logged off' expected their employees to focus solely on their primary tasks, and limited their efforts of emotion management to emotional labor and emotional balancing during information meetings.

The approaches of 'log off,' 'log on,' and 'log into' might reflect to which degree the managers 'wanted' or 'felt the need' to maintain their autonomy. For as Stinchcombe and Merton (1968, p. 82) state (in their explanation of indications for the use of functional imagery), 'when someone really wants something, he is willing to put forth more effort when getting it is harder.' Hence, the more the middle managers need to sustain autonomy, the more they are willing to address their feelings and work on their emotions in order to achieve it. This could suggest that the managers who chose to 'log off' did not experience as high a threat to their autonomy as those who 'logged on' or 'logged into' the emotional impact of the change. Yet again, our impression is that the middle managers who 'logged into' the emotional responses were exposed to higher degree of emotional dissonance than the ones who managed to 'log on.' Nonetheless, these three different combinations of emotion management strategies indicate that, although the middle managers experienced different degrees of impact on their autonomy from the change process, their common response was still some sort of adjustment of emotional displays.

Conclusion

The middle managers in Norwegian child welfare appear to play the role of the mediator as a tightrope artist during the organizational change (Goffman, 1959; Huy, 2001). They are handling their own and others' experiences of emotional dissonance through nuanced emotional displays, compassionate behavior, and motivational efforts in the organization. This enables them to maintain their sense of autonomy. However, the costs or benefits of this process are dependent on the conditions for emotion management. According to our findings, important conditions appear to be the following: (1) to have the opportunity to prepare before delivering a change message. (2) The access to participate and the acceptance for expressing emotional responses and professional concerns toward the change. (3) To have a support system where they can discuss challenges related to the task performance and challenges caused by the change process. (4) The freedom to choose when to apply emotion work out of respect, or emotional labor in order to motivate, in interactions with the employees. And, finally (5) the ability to empower themselves in emotion management through 'log on' and to contribute to the best possible process for all parts of the organization.

Implications for further research

The purpose of this study was to explore how middle managers in welfare professions handle constraints in autonomy and emotional dissonance during organizational change. Our findings indicate that middle managers conduct emotion management in order to maintain a desirable level of autonomy in their mediator role. They typically apply the three strategies of emotion management that involve emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing. Further, it appears that managers emphasize these strategies in different ways. We have suggested that the different combinations of emotion management strategies can be summed up to three separate response sets: 'log off,' 'log on,' and 'log into.' Furthermore, the recognition of these three response sets raises the

question whether different combinations of emotion work, emotional labor, and emotional balancing can contribute to varying degrees of stress during the process described in our model. Another question is whether different levels of emotional dissonance, due to strong or weak threats to autonomy, can explain how middle managers emphasize different strategies of emotion management during organizational change.

This study is based on qualitative data within a sector that has some specific characteristics; one of which is that the majority of employees and managers are women. Yet another is that the tasks of this sector can be claimed to constitute a context that is particularly emotionally challenging. Thus, an investigation of whether our findings are context specific or if our theoretical model can apply to other sectors could be interesting for further research.

Acknowledgment

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End note

[1] This study is registered at the Norwegian Social Science Data Service, and has the project number: 27292. Moreover, all participants received formal invitation to participate. The invitation entailed information about the project, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study. It was also made clear that the middle managers who participated should do so in their own free will, and that they should not feel any pressure to give their consent. All the participants were asked to agree in writing before they became involved in the data collection for this study.