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Professional agency, identity, and emotions while leaving one's work organization

Abstract: This study investigated the enactment of professional agency in an emotionally troubled work context emerging from a conflicted relationship between the professional and the work organization. Narrative interviews with Finnish educators were utilized. The findings indicate that the enactment of agency was in part framed by the educators' rational interpretations of the relationship between themselves and their employer, plus their work history and future prospects. However, it was simultaneously embedded with contradictory emotions, such as a sense of being undervalued, fear, and a sense of empowerment. Within this framework, multifaceted professional agency was enacted particularly via leaving the organization. This was also a means of upholding one's professional identity and resisting the organization's work practices. The paper contributes to the theorizing of professional agency, particularly regarding its emotional dimension, and elaborates the significance of an emotional relationship between professionals and their organizations.

Keywords: career, educators, emotions, meaningful work, narrative research, professional agency, professional identity

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Professional work includes specific ethical norms and professional responsibilities. Professionals have a lengthy academic education and specific expertise, and they have tended to have considerable autonomy in deciding how to work and how to use their competencies (Brock, Leblebici, & Muzio, 2014; Buch & Andersen, 2013; Flisbäck & Lund, 2015). However, contemporary working life frequently offers contradictory demands, expectations, and resources for professionals. Professional working environments are heterogeneously populated by various actors (managers, clients, colleagues) and they are characterized by diverse socio-cultural conditions (such as the guidelines for the work, the management culture, and the equipment). Hence, professionals need to navigate a complex work context (Buch & Andersen, 2013; Humle, 2014; Kira & Balkin, 2014). The social expectations have become more uncompromising, since new management principles have tended to limit professionals' autonomy. This is also the case in the Nordic countries, within creative and human-centred professions such as education (Funck, 2012; Karlsson, 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). In addition to dealing with social constraints, professionals are expected to be innovative, to be actively involved in organizational development, and to collaborate across professional and organizational boundaries (Alasoini, 2011; Buch & Andersen, 2013). In this sense, professionals function as leading agents in developing contemporary work organizations and society (Brock et al., 2014; Scott, 2008). In parallel with these expectations, professionals face increased demands for continuous individual career and identity negotiations when their work

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practices (practices that comprise work tasks, activities, and ways of working) and organizational structures change (Kira & Balkin, 2014; LaPointe & Heilmann, 2014). All these aspects challenge professionals to reach sustainable decisions concerning their work, identity, and career.

Work organizations are increasingly receiving recognition as emotional spaces (Kidd, 2008; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). Although work can be an important source of positive meanings, work organizations do not always offer an environment imbued with meaningfulness (Buch & Andersen, 2013; Humle, 2014; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006). Troubled work situations, including negative emotions, can emerge especially in contexts where the employees' professional identities (including their professional interests and values, and their perceptions of professional competencies and responsibilities) are threatened by socio-cultural conditions (Kira & Balkin, 2014). To find a sustainable solution in these situations, professionals need to *enact professional agency*. Professional agency can be understood as enacted through influencing and making choices in ways that affect one's professional identity, career, and work practices (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Harteis & Goller, 2014). According to this definition, *professional* refers to the actor and the focus of agency: professionals enact agency which is directed at professional phenomena (such as one's professional identity), as opposed to issues beyond one's professional work. Although we have some understanding of how the enactment of professional agency relates to individual backgrounds and social affordances, we need more empirical evidence on professional agency as a multifaceted phenomenon, and on the significance of emotions for agency.

The study reported here aimed to investigate Finnish educators' professional agency in an emotionally troubled work context, involving a conflicted relationship between the professional and the work organization. Professional agency was here investigated in terms of individual actions and decisions directed at professional identity, career, and practices. We utilized interviews with two highly qualified educators. They had a strong sense of their professional identity, and they had decided to leave their organization because they had perceived organizational limitations on their professional identity, competencies, and ways of working. The paper describes how the educators enacted a variety of forms of professional agency in this kind of emotionally troubled work context. They changed their career path by leaving their organization (a form of *transformative* agency), and yet maintained their professional identity (a form of *upholding* agency). They did this while expressing opposition towards the work practices (a form of *resistant* agency). This paper further illustrates how the enactment of professional agency is linked to employees' professional history and anticipated future, and how emotions play a significant role in agentic enactment. Thus, we suggest that professional agency should be conceptualized as an emotionally, relationally, and temporally embedded phenomenon, manifested in various intertwined forms. Furthermore, we suggest that recognition of the emotional nature of the relationship between the professional and work organization provides a perspective on what makes work meaningful for employees, with implications for their organizational commitment.

Theoretical notions of professional agency

Notions of professional agency are helpful in conceptualizing how employees make sense of and act out their lives within their working life. The enactment of agency has often been connected to making a change in one's professional identity, career, and work practices (Billett, 2011; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). However, some recent studies have suggested that professional agency is enacted through activities whose aims range from maintenance to transformation, as applied to one's professional identity and career (Brown, 2004; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006;

Vähäsantanen, 2015), and to professional structures and practices (Tomlinson, Muzio, Sommerlad, Webley, & Duff, 2013). Agency has also been seen as manifested via taking a critical stance and resisting the practices and power relations within organizations (Karlsson, 2012; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2011). Although these recent studies have revealed some different forms of agency, there is a need to elucidate further how the various forms of professional agency are intertwined in different work situations.

To date, various perspectives have been adopted on the influence of socio-cultural contributions on professional agency. The strong importance of social conditions and of other professionals has been emphasized in relation to the negotiation of professional identity (e.g., Paloniemi & Collin, 2010), and the decision on whether to leave an organization (Regts & Molleman, 2013) or to remain with one's employer (Govaerts, Kyndt, Dochy, & Baert, 2011). However, there have also been proposals regarding the interplay between individual backgrounds (including professional identity) and social conditions in the enactment of professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In line with this, the negotiation of professional identity has been regarded as a process which occurs in the relationship between individual aspects (e.g. professional values and experiences) and workplace settings and interactions, with the process being mediated by agency (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The process of engagement with the workplace has also been conceptualized as shaped by active actions, which are grounded on a relational interdependence between the individual and the social world (Billett, Newton, & Ockerby, 2010). In this paper, too, we adhere to the notion that the enactment of professional agency is related to the interplay between socio-cultural practices and individuals' professional preferences. Thus, we see individual resources and social conditions as framing the enactment of professional agency. Moreover, we understand that professional practices can be formed through the exercise of agency, since agency can be directed at shared work practices.

In addition to the above, some authors have emphasized the temporal perspective of professional agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest that a temporal approach should be included in the thematization of agency, situating it within the continuity of the past (past influences and habits), the present, and the future (the fears and desires of those concerned). LaPointe and Heilmann (2014) further argue that making a career change occurs by juxtaposing past and present work in terms of setting, status, meaning, pace, and workload. However, in the case of professional agency framed by the individual and by social contexts, a purely temporal perspective seems insufficient. Sieben and Wettergren (2010) suggest that emotions represent a constituting link between social structures and the individual actor in working life. This perspective offers novel means of investigating professional agency, bearing in mind that agency has often been seen as a more or less rational entity in research on working life.

Diverging from the mainstream, some studies have nevertheless indicated the extent to which emotions enter into professionals' decision-making concerning their professional career and identity. Thus, according to Kidd (2008), positive emotions (e.g. delight, excitement), negative emotions (anxiety), and a contradictory mixture of the two are strongly connected with significant career experiences when employees navigate their careers. Along similar lines, the negotiation of professional identity has been seen as imbued with both negative and positive emotional experiences concerning, for example, one's work role and interactional relations (Kira & Balkin, 2014). In particular, researchers have observed that tensions and mismatches can be related to the negotiation of professional identity (e.g., Buch & Andersen, 2013). When employees feel that their identity is threatened and tensional, they may start to either identify with or distance themselves from the professional behaviour and culture of the organization, even if they stay within the organization (Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006). Alternatively, they may try to find a fit between their identity and

their work via transforming their professional identity or their work practices (Kira & Balkin, 2014). Despite these findings, it seems important to elaborate further on how emotions inform professional agency within tense professional situations, and to identify the emotions that emerge from the enactment of different kinds of agency.

The general understanding of emotions is that they are not “just” mental states; rather, they are situated in the social world and work organizations. Emotions are experienced, framed, and negotiated within social practices and interactions. In the work context, emotions can be understood as individually perceived reactions to organizational events, work situations, and social interactions (Lord & Kanfer, 2002; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). Emotions may emerge as the antecedents of work (behaviour) and as the consequences of completing work tasks (Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). Emotions are often manifested rapidly, and the emotional process often occurs outside awareness (Lord & Kanfer, 2002). In the present study, we considered emotions through the verbal expressions. Emotions in question could be thus understood as more or less conscious, since they were verbally constructed and expressed after authentic situations. The present study addressed the enactment of professional agency and emotions among educators who had decided to leave their work organization because they had experienced limitations in their opportunities to perform their professional identity.

Aim of the study

We aimed to investigate the enactment of educators’ professional agency in an emotionally troubled work context, where the emotions emerged from a conflicted relationship between the professional and the work organization. In recognizing the various features of professional agency outlined above, the following research questions were framed:

- 1) What forms of professional agency did the educators enact in the emotionally troubled work context?
- 2) What kinds of individual and social resources in the temporal continuum were involved in the educators’ enactment of professional agency?
- 3) How were emotions related to the educators’ enactment of professional agency?

Methods

Data collection

For the purposes of our study, we selected two educators as our informants. Their interviews were drawn from two research projects involving interviews with fourteen vocational teachers, and with five adult educators working as private entrepreneurs. Although the projects were undertaken in different professional contexts, they shared similar purposes in so far as they sought to understand educators’ professional identity, agency, and work.

In accordance with Mabry (2008) and Stake (2000), we took the view that by focusing on specific interviews, one can address the complexity of the case (i.e. the phenomenon investigated). Using purposive sampling, the two interviews were selected for their capacity to contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of professional agency (Mabry, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Thus, the interviews encompassed professional agency (in terms of decisions and actions related to professional identity, career, and work practices) in a troubled work context. In our larger sample many other educators had also considered leaving the organization; however, these considerations had not at that point led to any concrete actions and decisions

(Vähäsantanen, 2015). For example, one teacher had experienced many constraints on her professional identity; yet although this situation was a threat to her professional well-being, her financial situation had not allowed her to enact professional agency in terms of actually resigning. She merely hoped that in the future there would be better opportunities to implement her professional interests. Like this person (and like most of the other educators interviewed), the selected interviewees had a strong sense of their professional identity. The difference was that they had actually decided to leave their work organization because their professional identity was challenged. In this sense, the selected informants were not a representative sample of the educators, while nevertheless contributing to a theoretical picture of professional agency.

The first educator, Emily (a pseudonym) was a 52-year-old vocational teacher. She had worked for 23 years as a teacher in a vocational school (upper secondary level), and had a degree in higher vocational education. Emily was interviewed in the spring of 2007, at a time of extensive curriculum reform. The reform had strongly affected the students' learning practices and the content of Emily's work. Considerable changes had also occurred in the structure and management culture of her vocational institution. Emily had resigned just before the interview; she was moving to another educational organization after the interview. The second educator, Alice (a pseudonym), a 40-year-old adult educator with a bachelor's degree in communication sciences, was working as a self-employed educational entrepreneur. She was interviewed in the spring of 2009. Alice had gained about five years of experience of working as an educator in the field of continuing adult education before becoming an entrepreneur. She had been working as a private entrepreneur in the field of adult education for several years prior to the interview.

During the interviews, the educators were encouraged to talk openly about themselves, their work, and their work organization. Told narratives have the potential to reveal expressions of emotion, while producing a rich body of knowledge on interpretations, sense-making, and meanings beyond individuals' actions and experiences (Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010; Humble, 2014; Riessman, 2008). Although narrative interviews allowed considerable space for the interviewees' narratives, the interviews must be understood as socially constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee. Furthermore, told narratives are always temporal constructions created through a certain sense-giving framework, at a certain point of time after real situations (Riessman, 2008). They can thus be used to justify one's work practices and choices. Given the retrospective approach employed (Kidd, 2008), one must also remember that over time, individuals' interpretations of their actions and emotional experiences can change, and they can forget some matters. Thus, narratives should be treated as versions of events rather than as objective descriptions of reality (Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, the retrospective approach implies that the authentic emotional reactions might have been forgotten, or might have changed (Saldaña, 2013).

Data analysis

We utilized narrative (Goodson et al., 2010; Riessman, 2008) and thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) methods to analyse the transcribed interviews. During the first part of analysis, we analysed the interviews thematically in a holistic manner, including comparisons between the interviews. In addressing our research questions, we first investigated the enactment of agency, involving the actions and decisions of professionals directed at their professional identity, career, and practices. Afterwards, we compared the two interviews for differences and similarities concerning their agentic enactment. As a result, we identified three forms of professional agency. Thereafter, we identified individual and social resources and their interplay for the enactment of

agency in a temporal continuum. We focused on the experiences, meanings, and interpretations which the interviewees indicated as having a relationship with their professional agency.

At a further stage, we focused on the emotions that the educators mentioned in their accounts. After reading the interview transcripts several times, we noticed that the emotional expressions were differentially related to the enactment of agency. Thus, we finally coded the expressions of emotions (Saldaña, 2013) in terms of how they initiated the enactment of agency, how the emotions functioned in the process of enacting agency, and how the emotions emerged from the enactment of agency. In relation to these perspectives, we identified different kinds of emotional expressions, including both negative and positive ones. In fact, a variety of perceived positive and negative emotions (i.e. contradictory emotions) emerged simultaneously, related to some specific situations and processes in the enactment of agency. The emotions were here considered and named on the basis of the accounts of the educators (Saldaña, 2013).

During the first part of the data analysis, we also identified and extracted those parts of the interviews which illustrated the enactment of and resources for educators' professional agency, including the interpretations and emotions they expressed regarding their decisions and actions. For the second part of the analysis, we synthesized these data elements in a narrative manner, forming a coherent chronological account (Riessman, 2008). This meant that we temporally integrated data elements related to the various phases (before, during, and after) of enacting professional agency in the context in question. Below, the narratives linked to Emily and Alice are provided with a view to pointing out the features of their professional agency, including quotations from the data. After setting out the narratives separately, we shall give an overview of the main findings.

Emily's career pathway from restrictive to enjoyable work

Restrictive work and professional agency

Emily's enactment of professional agency, in relation to her professional career and identity, stemmed from a dramatic change in her opinions of her work and of the organization where she was working. Previously, she had had opportunities to express her professional interests, to apply creativity to her work, and to continuously develop her professional competencies without external control. However, during the past year, she had witnessed radical changes in the management culture of her organization, especially in terms of the organization exercising more control over her work. For example, the organization had restricted the contents of her core work both inside and outside the organization (including collaboration with external companies). In this situation, she was unable to carry out the responsibilities she wished to perform, and was thus unable to work in accordance with her professional identity. Emily thus became aware of a changing management culture which limited her autonomous way of working, and she felt this to be extremely oppressive and disagreeable:

The change in the management culture has been the worst thing. Previously, there was a kind of open management culture in which people were trusted and there was room for manoeuvre and freedom. It created a feeling of enjoyment in the work, of success and learning. It became so oppressive when the doors closed that you couldn't do anything without first asking permission. I think that such a horrible degree of control is not good management in an organization of experts.

Since the organization was exerting more control over her work, Emily further found that she could not use or develop her professional competencies as she had been able

to previously. The situation evoked unpleasant emotions, such as of being undervalued:

I found that the management culture was definitely not supporting creativity or innovation at this time. I found it to be all about control. I had the feeling that the most important task of the administration was to control what the staff were doing. I mean that there was no freedom for me, and that was a bad thing. I also felt that I was learning nothing here, and as for expertise in the areas I'm strongest in, the organization didn't need it. It's really oppressive if you feel that the organization doesn't value your competencies.

In a similar vein, Kidd (2008) has found that negative emotions emerge when employees are not able to do what they desire, and when there is a lack of recognition and learning opportunities.

On encountering the restrictive work and learning culture, Emily had started to reflect on the kind of future she would like to have, and her possible future in the present organization. She came to have purely pessimistic thoughts about her future in the organization; she did not believe that her employer would offer better conditions for working in accordance with her professional identity. She did not want to adapt to the current situation, but it was not feasible to change external matters, or to transform the organizational conditions in the context of an over-controlling management. As a result, she determined that she was unable to work in the organization. Thus she enacted agency by making the decision to leave the organization.

Overall, it appears that the organizational landscape (current and envisaged) challenged and restricted Emily's professional identity, competencies, and ways of working to such an extent that she felt impelled to enact her professional agency in a transformative way – which involved deciding to make a change in her career path via leaving the organization. Through this decision, she further enacted professional agency in terms of upholding her professional identity. This was an alternative to subordinating or changing her identity in order to correspond to the work practices. One could also say that through her agency, Emily further resisted her organization's work practices, even though she did not decide to transform them.

Towards more enjoyable work – feeling sad but satisfied

After recognizing that she could not stay in the organization due to the threats to her professional identity, competencies, and autonomous ways of working, Emily considered some alternatives for the future. This search included investigating the situation in the local higher education institution (polytechnic), where she had previously done some part-time teaching. Overall, Emily saw the polytechnic as an attractive workplace, and thus she decided to move to the polytechnic.

Emily's final decision on transforming her career pathway enabled her to maintain her professional identity, since the emotionally most attractive factors of the polytechnic were the opportunities to learn and to be creative. These aspects were an important part of her professional identity, with possibilities to use and develop her professional competencies:

It feels quite wonderful to me to have opportunities to learn new things and to be again on a rapid learning curve. And on top of everything, I'll be able to use my creativity and be more involved in work connected with companies. Indeed, I'll be able to use my own skills really creatively and even add to them. [In the original organization] I was put in a situation in which I could no longer use or develop my particular skills... In the polytechnic, the situation is quite different, since there I can update and develop my own particular know-how quite freely.

Similarly, Kidd (2008) has found that positive emotions, such as excitement, emerge when subjects decide to move to a new organization in which there are better opportunities for autonomous working and learning. Emily further felt pleased that in the polytechnic she would be able to carry out various tasks in collaboration with various external companies, and to work as the kind of teacher she desired to be via using collaborative teaching methods, in line with her professional identity.

At first glance, the enactment of professional agency via making a career change seemed to be a fairly rational and systematic step for Emily to take. When she saw the work and learning culture of her original organization as being in total opposition to her preferences, she did not perceive any option other than to move to a more supportive organization. However, making this change was emotionally difficult and tinged with sadness. She had worked in the organization for over twenty years; she had good colleagues, and she had been strongly engaged in developing the organization and its education.

Although the process of putting the old things behind her was sad and difficult, Emily came to be extremely satisfied with her decision and with her future prospects. The enactment of professional agency via a career change was also an empowering act, since Emily felt that she had taken responsibility for meaningful work and a satisfying professional identity, rather than remaining at the mercy of a restrictive organization. She described the matter thus:

It was obvious from my point of view that my future in the organization, managed as it was now, didn't look good; in fact, it looked very unpleasant. In a sense, I'm now making that better future for myself, and it's entirely down to me how good that future is. There [in the original organization], it wasn't dependent purely on me; there, you couldn't do anything, since the restrictions were so tight. In the polytechnic, I'll be able to create that better future for myself.

Overall, Emily felt enthusiastic about her future in the new organization, since she felt that she would be able to cultivate and maintain her professional identity and competencies without any limitations.

Looking at Emily's situation in its entirety, her decision to move to the new workplace and to uphold her professional identity illustrates a solution to troubled relations between individual preferences and organizational affordances in a specific management culture – a solution evoking strong and contradictory emotions (sadness and satisfaction). We can further suggest that Emily's previous professional contacts served as resources for moving from one workplace to another, since she was moving to a fairly familiar organization.

Alice's career pathway from repressive to autonomous work

Repressive work context and professional agency

Alice's move towards enacting professional agency in relation to her professional career and identity occurred when she began to consider her work to be repressive in multiple ways. During her career, it had been important for Alice to develop her professional competencies, and her special expertise had become an important part of her professional identity. Furthermore, her individualized way of working was important to this identity.

When Alice talked about her original organization, it became clear that she had seen the entire work culture of the organization as totally opposed to her preferences. An important factor in this was that her individualized way of working was not in accordance with the collaborative work culture favoured in the organization. Her individualized work practices included a need to work alone and to have professional

autonomy without external regulations or management. Co-working, and particularly what she saw as pointless communication, evoked emotions including nervousness and even anger, as she indicated:

Alice: Yes, the factors that influenced me were maybe those that I didn't like to be in, since I'm not that kind of team worker. I am responsible and hard-working, but I can't stand that kind of messing around with issues... I had been thinking that it would be better for me to work alone, because co-working even in a pair makes me nervous. I think that all the needless meetings are such a waste of time. And I don't like it if somebody starts to manage or limit my work. This is, speaking honestly, how I think, even if it actually sounds quite awful.

Interviewer: To me, it doesn't sound awful at all.

Alice: I'm a worker who works very independently, and I bear a lot of responsibility, and then it starts to make me angry if somebody raises unimportant issues... and then there was the culture in the organization that you should somehow be a member of the community.

In line with the study of Kidd (2008), this example illustrates the importance of autonomy for professionals, and how anger can emerge when it perceived to be at risk in an organization.

Alice also felt that the organization and its collaborative culture posed a threat to her professional expertise. She placed a high value on the special competencies that she had developed during her career. Within her work, she had used competencies involving drama methods in adult education and in organizational development. However, Alice felt that the organizationally-prescribed standards for collective working exploited and subordinated her expertise. She felt that she was unable to use her skills in the way she desired, and that she was being required to relinquish her expertise to the organization. As she put it:

Then there was the habit in the organization that you should somehow be a member of the community. And even if I could be a member somehow, I couldn't do it in such a way that my special expertise was exploited; it's not something that I'd give away to anybody else. That special expertise is somehow such an important part of my own identity, created and constructed through such hard work that it's not going to be buried under the label of an organization. I have this sort of idea that, damn it, nobody's ever going to take this away from me.

Overtly, it was Alice's strong sense of her professional identity, expertise, and work preferences as being in conflict with the collaborative culture of the organization that pushed her to consider leaving the organization. However, an even more powerful reason emerged from problematic organizational and interpersonal relations. According to Alice, inflamed human relations and leadership problems had influenced her emotionally to the extent that she found it extremely difficult to work there. These difficulties had dramatic consequences for her well-being, since she had become exhausted and disheartened:

I was close to something, if not actually close to burnout, something else. So, I could say that I was completely disoriented, and I felt obliged to leave. It was a bit as if in order to survive, I had to leave that workplace. And then I was reduced to a situation where nothing was helping me.

In a situation that challenged her professional identity, competencies, ways of working, and general well-being, Alice saw no way of changing her work practices, or of solving the conflicts, other than by leaving the organization. In enacting professional

agency via deciding to leave, Alice further went through an agentic process of upholding her professional, competence-based identity and ways of working.

Towards autonomous work – feeling fearful but pleased

After realizing that it was impossible to continue working in the organization, Alice finally decided to become a self-employed educational entrepreneur. However, this move was not an easy, rational, or systematic step for her. Rather, it was highly emotional. In the interview, Alice gave a rich description of her feelings about the jump away from the organization. She had strong feelings of fear and even horror concerning her future as a private entrepreneur. She was especially afraid that if no clients sought her services, she would never be needed for any kind of work:

So, at that stage, there was a lot of fear that my own wings would not be able to carry me. So, it was an awfully frightening process to resign from a safe employment relationship, even if I knew at the same time that it was somehow the only possible solution for surviving. And then I remember that I said at that time to one of my friends, “What if nobody wants me anymore? If I don’t get any contracts or projects, then I’ll be totally finished.” Becoming a private entrepreneur was what actually emerged from a situation of horror, so that for me, at least, it wasn’t some lovely rosy story of rebirth but rather a sudden event filled with horror—rather, all through this there was great fear and horror, wondering whether I could do this or not, and if not, what then...?

Although Alice had a rational understanding that she could manage as an entrepreneur, given her competencies and a work history dealing with similar tasks, she had (as she regarded them) irrational fears about her future. Thus, although moving into a new role or career pattern can evoke positive emotions, such as excitement, there can also be emotions of anxiety and nervousness (Kidd, 2008).

For Alice, the enactment of professional agency in terms of making a change in her career was indeed imbued with intense emotions, including fear amounting to horror. She further indicated that she needed real courage to leave her fairly safe work position. Yet, although she perceived her risk-taking as emotionally demanding, the negative emotions did not cancel out her decision to leave the organization—a cancellation that would have remained an option (Vardaman, Allen, Renn, & Moffit, 2008). In Alice’s situation, the negative emotions related to threats to her well-being and identity were more powerful than fear-instilling risks, and these threats motivated her to quit. In so doing, she also enacted professional agency in terms of resistance: she did not want to submit to organizational limitations concerning her professional identity and ways of working. Since transforming her career path, Alice has been pleased and satisfied, and at the time of the interview she had been working for several years as an entrepreneur.

Overall, it seems that Alice’s professional identity and her determination to use and maintain her special competencies and autonomous ways of working played an important role in her career change. To take the decision to leave her organization, she needed a strong sense of trust in her expertise, especially in a situation involving many negative emotions.

Summary of the findings

The main findings are presented in Table 1. It indicates that the professional agency of both educators was enacted through decisions which led to a career transformation, and to the maintenance of professional identity. The latter means that the educators decided to uphold their professional identity. They were not willing to enact agency

via transforming identity. Despite this, in line with recent views of professional identities as dynamic and changeable (Buch & Andersen, 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015), one could suggest that identities might indeed change over the time, within a new work context. In the present study, it was possible to identify forms of *transformative* agency (focusing on one’s professional career) and *upholding* agency (directed at one’s professional identity), and these were intertwined. However, it is also possible for employees to leave an organization in order to change their professional identity (Brown, 2004). Note also that when the educators made a career change in order to uphold their professional identity, they were expressing resistance towards their work practices. In showing *resistant* agency, they did not assimilate or accept the organization’s work practices. Nor did they attempt to change their professional identity to make it correspond with the organization’s standards, or to transform social practices which appeared to threaten their identity. All of these actions can emerge as reactions to restrictive organizational suggestions (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006). In the present study it appeared that with regard to specific management and work cultures, the educators saw no opportunities for customizing their work to fit their sense of what the job should be.

Table 1
Forms of professional agency, plus resources and emotions related to agency.

	Emily	Alice
Forms and directions of agency	<i>Transformative</i> agency: professional career. <i>Upholding</i> agency: professional identity. <i>Resistant</i> agency: the organization’s work practices.	
Resources for agency	Professional <i>relations</i> achieved in the past. Current perceptions of and imagined future prospects for the relationship between the employee (involving <i>professional identity, competencies, and autonomous working</i>) and the work organization (with its <i>work and management culture</i>).	Professional <i>competencies</i> achieved in the past. Current perceptions of the relationship between the employee (involving <i>professional identity, competencies, and autonomous working</i>) and the work organization (with its <i>work and management culture, and social interactions</i>). Future prospects for professional success in the work.
Emotions bound up with agency	Negative emotions (e.g. of <i>being undervalued and oppressed</i>) triggered the enactment of agency. The process of enacting agency included emotions, e.g. <i>sadness</i> . The enactment of agency led to emotions such as <i>satisfaction and a sense of being empowered</i> .	Negative emotions (e.g. of <i>being disoriented</i>) triggered the enactment of agency. The emotions that emerged from the enactment of agency included, e.g. <i>fear, horror, and self-doubt</i> . The enactment of agency led to <i>pleasant</i> emotions.

The findings further indicate that the enactment of professional agency was grounded in various individual and social resources *over time*. In particular, professional agency was embedded in the educators' interpretations of the opportunities and constraints within their employment contexts—both currently and possibly in the future—as these applied to the utilization of their professional competencies, identity, and way of working. Interpersonal difficulties further played a powerful role in Alice's decision to leave the organization and in her desire to maintain her professional identity. Along similar lines, Regts and Molleman (2013) have emphasized the significance of interpersonal relationships for employees' turnover intention. Another interpersonal resource for Emily was the historically formed contacts with the organization to which she was moving.

Although the enactment of agency included rational considerations based on social and individual resources, it was strongly related to both positive and negative *emotions*, and in fact, to a contradictory mixture of these. In line with Kidd (2008), we found that the troubled relationships between the employee and the organization may evoke many emotions, such as a sense of oppression. It was largely these emotions that brought about the enactment of agency, and indeed, the entire process of finding a solution was imbued with emotions. Emily felt sad at leaving an organization to which she had made a long-term commitment, but afterwards, she was relieved and enthusiastically oriented towards the future, due to the opportunities to uphold and reinforce her professional identity and her competencies. For Alice, the process of becoming a self-employed entrepreneur was demanding, due in particular to her many fears about her future work and her professional success.

Discussion

Although the study was limited to two interviews, we see it as contributing to recent theoretical discussion and the conceptualization of professional agency. The findings agree with previous notions that professional agency should not be understood merely as making a change (i.e. as transformative agency); it should also encompass the maintenance of a state of affairs, including professional identity and practices (Day et al., 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2013). The latter form of agency might aptly be termed upholding agency. In demonstrating that professional agency is multifunctional, the study further suggests that the different forms of agency are intertwined. Emily's and Alice's desire to maintain their professional identity and competencies triggered actions aimed at transforming a career path and resisting work practices determined by the organization. Shared work practices were resisted (a form of resistant agency), but the educators made no effort to transform them.

Both sociocultural conditions and individual backgrounds in the temporal continuum can resource and direct the enactment of agency. This study emphasizes that the enactment of professional agency is related to professionals' work histories, and to consideration of both their current and their future prospects for a resourceful work context—all via a solid appraisal of their professional identity, competencies, and ways of working. This implies that the enactment of agency is a process in which the past is contextualized and utilized, and in which the future is envisaged within the contingencies of the present moment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998); hence, it does not include merely past and present perspectives (LaPointe & Heilmann, 2014).

The findings further indicate the rich emotions linked to agentic enactment, even if such an enactment encompasses rational interpretations relating to individual and social resources. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have mentioned the significance of emotions for agency in connection with an individual's future. The present study supports the view of these authors, and extends it by suggesting that (i) professional agency is emotionally directed and infused in a temporal continuum, (ii) its manifestation can be due, in particular, to current emotional tensions between the employee

and the employment context, and (iii) it further involves the employee's emotional history and emotions in relation to the future. Overall, the enactment of agency is not merely a rational act but an emotional process which itself gives rise to different emotions.

In theorizing the findings, one can suggest that professional agency can be viewed as (i) *multifaceted* (exhibiting transformation, upholding, and resistance), (ii) *relational* (involving the interplay of individual and social resources) *in a temporal continuum*, and (iii) *imbued with emotions*. Here, we would wish to emphasize the ways in which professional agency and emotions mutually interact: emotions that result from the work have consequences for the enactment of professional agency, and this enactment leads to further emotions.

Implications for practice and future research

This study showed that the educators decided to leave the organization when their meaningful work (including opportunities to pursue their professional identity, competencies, and a meaningful ways of working) was emotionally threatened. So far, Mastekaasa (2011) has found that interesting work and workplace social support appear to be more central to job satisfaction than autonomy. In a similar vein, we would say that restrictions on autonomous working are not necessarily negative *per se*, and do not in every case imply a lessening of organizational commitment. However, together with restrictions on professional identity and competencies, such restrictions can indeed diminish one's sense of doing meaningful work and one's organizational commitment. Thus, we suggest—in line with Kira & Balkin (2014)—that meaningful work is fostered by practices, tasks, and collaborations that are aligned with the employee's preferred identity and competencies, and by opportunities for professional development that match this identity. Overall, an understanding of the emotional relationship between the professional and work organization could enhance our awareness of what makes work meaningful for employees and influences their organizational commitment.

Although, as indicated above (see also Funck, 2012) the effects of restricted professional autonomy may not always be unambiguously negative, our findings suggest that rigid management principles which restrict an employee's professional identity, learning, and autonomous working, may well pose a threat to the employee's professional identity and commitment to the organization (see also Govaerts et al., 2011). A situation which limits possibilities to utilize professional resources could create a threat to both individual and organizational performance, and to organizational productivity in general (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Ramstad, 2014). Alternatively, one could suggest that in a case of Alice it was her strictly individual and autonomous work style which worked as a barrier to her professional work and collective work performance.

As a practical conclusion, we would emphasize the importance of enhancing employees' opportunities to influence the content of the work and to participating in decisions related to shared professional issues. Among some employees, it will be important to share ideas and make constructive suggestions for modifying shared work practices, including discussions with leaders concerning the work and the direction of the organization. This would have the potential to promote organizational development and achieve a balance between organizational needs and employees' professional aspirations.

In addition to our findings, further research is required on professional agency as it is manifested in a range of professional contexts and situations. Such research could also lead to an understanding of other forms of enacted agency, for example, in terms of how professionals creatively and innovatively modify their work practices and culture within an organization. Since professionals are institutional agents

(Scotts, 2008), professional agency should be also explored more in terms of the organizational and societal practices and conditions that are in play. Future research could further focus on collectively negotiated forms of professional agency relating to organizational development and resistance.

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