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Introduction

In the field of workplace studies, emotions – including what they signify and how they are important – have gained considerable attention in recent decades (Ashkanasy, 2015; Cascon-Pereira and Hallier, 2012; Petitta and Naughton, 2015; Rausch *et al.*, 2017). Given the ever-changing landscape of organisations, with concomitant challenges to organisational practices, individual employees and – very strikingly – leaders, it is no coincidence that concepts of emotions have emerged strongly. Demands for increased productivity and pressures arising from global competition have led organisations to constantly transform their practices. Increasingly, in seeking maximum profitability, organisations aim to exercise strong strategy-oriented control and demonstrate accountability with a focus on centrally imposed standards (Hansen and Jacobsen, 2016; Maroy, 2009). The recent rapid enactment of neoliberal economic policies and new public management (NPM) practices has led public sector organisations (e.g. in education and health care) to adopt new strategy-oriented managerial models (e.g. Halvarsson Lundgvist and Gustavsson, 2018; Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2014). This has exerted pressures to reduce the workforce, increase productivity and create new monitoring systems.

Such organisational restructuring has forced leaders to adopt new orientations towards their work. This has been especially challenging for leaders working in middle management in public sector organisations (e.g. Gleeson and Knights, 2008). For them, organisational restructuring has meant enlarged roles, increased responsibility for decision-making and human resources management and greater emotional stress (Gatenby *et al.*, 2014; Parris *et al.*, 2008). Middle management leaders are expected to be flexible, innovative, ready for continuous learning and eager to implement the visions and regulations introduced by upper management (Döös *et al.*, 2015; Kempster and Gregory, 2017). They are also key actors in organisational transformations, since they must interpret the strategic decisions made by higher management

and implement them at the level of the actual personnel (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2002). At the same time, employees expect leaders to fight for their resources and act as their advocates against what they see as the unreasonable demands of upper-level managers – a group of persons viewed as applying inflexible standards, tightening accountability beyond what is reasonable and exercising strategy-oriented control (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2015). Thus, middle-management leaders are expected to implement decisions issued from above while dealing with the complaints, fears and even anger of the personnel, all within a transformational situation (cf. Huy, 2002). Overall, it could be said that leaders are required to reshape their professional identity and role. In so doing, they are obliged to enact active professional agency in coping with the new issues connected to their work. Furthermore, they must understand the new demands placed on them and find solutions in the face of continuous changes (Hökkä, *et al.*, 2019; Gatenby *et al.*, 2014; Tian *et al.*, 2015).

Although there has been an increase in studies on professional agency and identity in the workplace (e.g. Vähäsantanen, *et al.*, 2017a; Tomkins and Eatough, 2014), few of these studies have examined the role of emotions in the practice of agency at work. However, there have been calls for studies considering emotions and agency at work. For example, Sieben and Wettergren (2010) argued that emotions form a link between the social and material conditions of the workplace and individual actors and their agency, and this phenomenon should be studied. In particular, there is a lack of research on the nature of emotions in the enactment of professional agency in the work of leaders (Cascon-Pereira and Hallier, 2012). There seems to be a particular need to understand the emotions that leaders perceive when they enact their professional agency in an effort to shape their professional identity at a time of rapid transformation and intensifying global competition (Hökkä *et al.*, 2017; Ramstad, 2015; Tian *et al.*, 2015).

The present study addressed leaders' emotions within their enactment of professional agency and considered their emotions through their communication, including their accounts of emotions connected to their work. Despite the variation in ways of understanding emotions, scholars broadly agree that emotions can be characterised as situational and intense, involving some kind of physiological response to an event, entity or person (Beal *et al.*, 2005; Gooty *et al.*, 2010; Zelenski and Larsen, 2000). This means that emotions are dynamic and context-specific constructs stemming from social interactions (Lazarus, 2000), and they give important information and energise individuals, influencing whether to proceed, retreat or stall in social interactions (Ashkanasy *et al.*, 2000). Following the above lines, we understand emotions as situational and dynamic experiences or reactions to events, entities and persons and agree with Dirkx (2001), according to whom emotions are an inseparable part of interpreting and making sense of everyday life.

The study was conducted in the context of a one-year leadership coaching programme aimed at supporting and enhancing leaders' professional learning and agency at work. The data were collected before and after the coaching programme. The focus was on the accounts of middle management leaders, who were facing new pressures due to rapid transformations in the workplace. Thus, the study was aimed at investigating how leaders working in the emotionally burdensome setting of education and health care organisations talked about their emotions while enacting professional agency. The subsequent sections of the paper address the theoretical framework of this study – namely, the concept of professional agency and emotions in leaders' work.

Professional agency in the work of leaders

In the field of workplace studies, the concept of *professional agency* is gaining increasing attention. Professional agency is seen as fundamental for influencing at work and for the learning that takes place through and for work (Billett, 2011; Goller and Paloniemi, 2017; Smith, 2017). In its most positive connotations, professional agency is seen as closely connected to creative work practices (Collin *et al.*, 2017; Sawyer, 2012) or innovative work behaviour (Messmann and Mulder, 2017). Professional agency can also be seen as a collective construction that manifests as shared endeavours to develop and transform work practices or organisational structures (Hökkä *et al.*, 2017; Raelin, 2016).

Due to their position, leaders have – at least officially – the power to act and influence, and they are undoubtedly expected to exert an influence in their workplace. Initially, the concept of agency was introduced in the social sciences with reference to those rational actions of individuals that can lead to social consequences (e.g. Giddens, 1984). In line with this, agency refers to the idea of power, but in the sense of the *power to do* something rather than *power over* something. Thus, power is seen as a positive element in achieving goals. Implied in this notion of agency is a view of individuals as having control over their lives rather than merely reacting to externally regulated situations (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Collin *et al.*, 2011).

It is also worth noting that the meaning of agency in leaders' work has recently been raised in terms of imbalanced power relations between leaders and personnel (followers). According to Tourish (2014), the dominant approaches in leadership studies stress the agency of leaders, but neglect that of personnel, thus legitimising the unequal decision-making of managerial elites. This inequality means that when the personnel's agency and their power to affect organisational matters is lost, so are their alternative viewpoints, dissent, creativity and innovation. Consistent with this, Hökkä *et al.* (2019) introduced the idea of agency-promoting leadership, which refers to the notion that in organisations seeking to develop and learn, one of

the leaders' main responsibilities is to support the personnel's professional agency. This requires that the leaders be able to support the identity renegotiations and professional agency of their staff. Furthermore, agency-promoting leadership means that the leaders seek to increase collaboration, interaction, innovation and creativity within the organisation.

As shown above, professional agency is enacted within organisational practices and in social relationships. In recent discussions, professional agency has also been viewed as closely connected to *professional identity* (McAlpine and Amundsen, 2009; Smith, 2006; Tourish, 2014). In the turbulence of working life, professionals are often forced to reshape their professional identity, and it has been noted that this requires agency (Vähäsantanen, 2015; Billett, 2011). It is widely accepted that one's professional identity is shaped and reshaped in a close intertwining of the individual and the social (Eteläpelto, *et al*., 2013; Billett, 2007; Fenwick, 2008). This means that to understand professional identity, one should take into account social aspects (roles, memberships, positions and groups) on one hand and individual aspects (ontogenesis, commitments and ethical norms) on the other hand. Thus, professional identity is not the mere adoption of externally set social roles; rather, it is continuously constructed (and negotiated) via interactions with individuals' prior knowledge, work history and future expectations, commitments, goals, ideals and ethical considerations (Billett, 2007; Tourish, 2014).

In theoretical terms, there are different approaches that emphasise different aspects in conceptualising agency at work. The *disposition perspective* refers to a highly individualised understanding of agency stressing the meanings of individual capacity, dispositions, competencies and personality. Thus, agency is seen as individual characteristics that allow individuals to exert control over their own work and professional development (Goller, 2017). Understanding agency through the *behaviour perspective* relates to concrete actions,

participation, decision-making and influencing one's own work and shared work practices. This approach stresses the meaning of innovative and creative aspects of agency and thus refers to its transformational nature and orientation to the future (e.g. Damsa *et al.*, 2017; Kerosuo, 2017). In the current literature, agency is also understood as a *relational phenomenon* underlining the contingencies between the individual and the situational affordances provided by the environment (Edwards *et al.,* 2017).

In recognising the theoretical notions presented above, the understanding of professional agency in this study was based on a *subject-centred sociocultural approach* (SCSC) (Eteläpelto, 2017; Eteläpelto, *et al.*, 2013), which turns attention to the subjects' enactment of agency at work and to the shaping of their professional identity. This approach underlines behavioural aspects of agency and sees agency foremost as something that people do in order to develop their work and reshape their professional identity. We understand the practice of agency to mean that leaders actively exert an influence, make choices and take stances on their work and professional identity. This means that professional agency is manifested as processes of identity actualising and reshaping that involve practical and discursive influences on work practices, the work community and organisational issues (Eteläpelto, *et al.*, 2014). These manifestations do not appear in a vacuum; they are always resourced and restricted by the socio-cultural and socio-material circumstances within which they are situated (e.g. Eteläpelto, *et al.*, 2013; Billett, 2007). Professional agency can be manifested, for example, in leaders' initiatives to develop new work practices or in new understandings of their emotions and of themselves as professional actors amid organisational challenges.

In this paper, we see professional agency as involving how leaders can influence their work while simultaneously actualising and reshaping their professional identity (hence applying *identity agency*). In looking at how they influence their work, we focus on two issues: (i) leaders'

relationships with personnel (involving interacting with, motivating, inspiring and empowering employees) and (ii) *organisational* tasks (such as organising strategies for mastering routines, issues, planning and budgeting; see e.g. Northouse, 2010). Thus, in this study, professional agency was operationalised through the following three aspects: (1) *identity agency*: how individuals actualise and reshape their core commitments, values, ethical standards and competencies at work; (2) *relationship agency*: how leaders lead and support the work, interaction and learning of their personnel; and (3) *organisation agency*: how leaders act when faced with administrative issues and strategic instructions coming from upper management.

To date, professional agency has been conceptualised mainly as a goal-oriented, rational activity; consequently, researchers have neglected to focus on the role of emotions in enacting professional agency. Challenged by this, this study was aimed at elaborating the nature and quality of emotions and how they might be connected to the enactment of professional agency. Next, we will priefly frame how emotions have been studied in the field of leadership and organisation studies.

Emotions in leaders' work

Workplaces were once seen as (ideally) devoid of emotions, demanding an emotionally neutral performance from employees and especially from leaders. This paradigm was based on the assumption that human behaviour in organisational settings follows rational rules and is mainly guided by rational plans and calculations based on cognitive processes (e.g. Ashkanasy *et al.*, 2000; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002). However, recent research has shown that emotions are an extremely powerful force in workplace settings, organisational behaviour and leadership (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002; Barsade *et al.*, 2003; Thiel *et al.*, 2012). Thus, it is now clear that

emotions play an important role in decision-making and in leading processes (Barsade and Gibson, 2007; Loewenstein and Lerner, 2003).

In leadership and organisation studies, one notable trend has been examining the roles of both positive and negative emotions in leadership (e.g. Barsade and Gibson, 2007; Härtel *et al.*, 2005; Kearney and Siegman, 2013). A crucial aspect has turned out to be leaders' ability to express and regulate their positive and negative emotions. In general, positive emotions have been seen to support leaders' effectiveness and the performance of personnel. For example, leaders' propensity to experience emotions such as pride and gratitude has been observed as positively related to behaviour manifesting social justice and altruism (Michie, 2009). In transformational situations in particular, positive emotions and affective expressiveness on the part of leaders have proven to be essential (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000). There is also evidence that leaders who display positive emotions are likely to build trustful relationships with employees and are thus able to construct shared visions for the future (Koning and Van Kleef, 2015). Leaders also play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining a positive organisational atmosphere. Such an atmosphere has been shown to have a powerful effect, for example, on the well-being of personnel and on the productivity of the organisation (Gooty *et al.*, 2010).

However, the significance of leaders' negative emotions has proven to be more complex than in the case of positive emotions. There is evidence that negative emotions affect leader–subordinate relationships through the spread of negative energy among a group (Barsade, 2002), or that they can even poison the entire organisational culture (Aquino *et al.*, 2004). A recent study by Vuori and Huy (2015) showed that the shared emotion of fear among top and middle managers can hinder future-oriented development through a focus on short-term innovation at the expense of long-term development. However, emotions that can be labelled as negative can also lead to constructive actions, for example, by energising people to oppose injustice and unfair

situations within the organisation. In line with this thinking, Clancy *et al.* (2012) observed that disappointment is connected to the dynamics of blame in organisations, but that when fully appreciated, it can act as the basis for organisational learning. Furthermore, in some cases, the emotion of anger can lead to positive organisational outcomes (Barsade and Gibson, 2007).

Although research on emotions in workplaces has expanded, there is still no comprehensive theoretical understanding of emotions – that is, of the ontology of emotions (e.g. Askhanasy *et al.*, 2000; Zembylas, 2007). Emotions can be understood as *discrete*, referring here to universally shared, basic emotions, such as anger or joy, that correspond to specific facial expressions (Damasio, 1999; Ekman, 2016). Another approach has been to understand emotions via the *dimensions* of pleasant–unpleasant (i.e. valence) and low–high intensity (i.e. arousal) (cf. Ekman, 2016; Harmon-Jones *et al.*, 2016). Emotions are then characterised in terms of valence, referring to the subjective feeling of pleasantness or unpleasantness, and arousal, referring to the subjective state of feeling either activated or deactivated (Feldman Barrett, 1998).

Emotions can also be understood in line with the socially oriented view underlining the interpersonal nature of emotions as entities that structure social interaction and its consequences (Hareli *et al.*, 2008). According to this way of thinking, emotions are socially produced categories and/or concepts that have a weight of tradition and everyday experience behind them (Damasio, 1999; Dirx, 2001; Russell, 2003). This *socio-cultural understanding of emotions* recognises that emotion is not a simple end product of an individual's internal state but a communicative expression that can be seen as part of the dynamic process of meaningful experiences (Zembylas, 2007).

Despite the variation in ways of understanding emotions, scholars broadly agree that emotions can be characterised as situational and intense, involving some behavioural and physiological responses to an event, entity or person (Eteläpelto, *et al*., 2018; Beal *et al.*, 2005;

Gooty *et al.*, 2010; Zelenski and Larsen, 2000). Emotions also give important information; thus, they can energise individuals and their actions, influencing whether to proceed, retreat or stall in social interactions (Askhanasy *et al.*, 2000). In this paper, we understand emotions as emotional experiences that relate to the work and identity of a leader. Since we derived the main data in our study from interviews, we were unable to track the leaders' transient and situational physiological or behavioural responses. Therefore, we could not know what the leaders were actually 'feeling' at any particular point in time; nevertheless, we were able to take into account the verbal expressions of emotions[1] and thus observe emotions in the form of culturally coded social entities. In accordance with the subject-centred sociocultural approach adopted to understand professional agency (SCSC), this study adopted the socio-cultural approach to understand emotion (Zembylas, 2007). We agree with Hareli *et al.* (2008), who emphasised the interpersonal and interactional nature of emotions. Thus, in this study, we considered leaders' emotions through their communication, including their accounts of emotions connected to their work.

Research task

We sought to elaborate leaders' emotions (regarding their work and identity) in the context of a leadership coaching programme. Thus, we focused on leaders' accounts of their emotions in their enactment of professional agency. This led us to frame the following research task: What kinds of emotions did the middle management leaders express in relation to identity agency, relationship agency and organisation agency at the beginning and end of the identity coaching programme?

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[1] In this paper, we use the term 'emotional expressions' to refer to the transcribed phrases that allowed the researchers to identify emotions at particular points in the interviews. The term does not indicate, for example, paralinguistic indicators of emotions (voice pitch, volume, gestures, etc.).

Methods

Participants and research context

This study formed part of a larger research project aimed at understanding how professional

agency is practised and how it can be promoted through multilevel interventions in education and

health care organisations (Vähäsantanen, *et al*., 2017b). The project involved three kinds of

interventions with the aim of supporting work-related learning and professional agency at the

individual, work community and organisational levels: (i) an identity coaching programme for

employees, (ii) a leadership coaching programme for leaders and (iii) a dialogical work

conference for the entire work organisation. The research project was conducted within a multi-

method framework using a longitudinal strategy with various data collection methods

(observations, field notes, questionnaires, video recordings, interviews and documents).

The sub-study discussed in this paper focused on the leadership coaching programme,

which was implemented as one intervention within the larger research project. The participants

were leaders working in middle management in two types of public sector organisations –

namely, (i) a hospital (in which the subjects were ward managers, i.e. nurses and leaders from

general services) and (ii) a university (in which the subjects were department leaders and

pedagogical leaders). These organisations were selected because of the rapid and extensive

organisational restructuring that was occurring within them. The context of the sub-study was a

leadership coaching programme conducted over a one-year period in 2012–2013. It comprised

12 workshops, each of which lasted 6–8 hours, and the total duration of the programme was 72

hours. In total, there were 11 participants (8 females, 3 males), all at the middle-management

level. The participants' mean age was 48 years, with the age range being 33–62 years. Six

participants were from a university and five were from a hospital. The programme was led by an experienced coach with a high-level educational background.

In seeking to support the participants' professional agency, the main goals of the programme were (i) to support the professional identity and well-being of leaders, (ii) to empower the leaders to support the identity work and well-being of the personnel and (iii) to coach the leaders so that they could develop agency-promoting leadership practices within their work organisations (Mahlakaarto, 2014). In this sense, the programme was aimed at supporting the leaders' own identity work and their competencies to support their followers' professional agency and identities. Thus, the programme underlined that leadership is an ongoing communicative process based on interactions among organisational actors instead of universally implemented best practices that can be taught in development programmes (cf. Tourish, 2014).

The programme utilised participatory and arts-based methods in an effort to raise awareness about embodied and tacit (non-articulated) knowledge as opposed to discursive knowing (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). In arts-based education, the general idea is to learn experientially through transformative aesthetic experiences, developing the kinds of capabilities and self-knowledge that can cultivate knowing and awareness (e.g. Sutherland, 2012). In the leadership coaching programme, the aim was to create an interactive, safe and creative learning context with the participants that would open up new understandings (cf. Gallagher, 2008). The practical methods included drawings, discussions, drama methods, sociometry and sociodrama. For example, one arts-based learning method was the so-called professional body method that combines both individual- and collective-level processes in exploring professional identity and its relation to work. This method involved the participants developing as a homework their own professional bodies on a piece of paper corresponding to their real-size bodylines and shapes. They could utilise different materials to create these bodies (e.g. photos, pictures, drawings,

fabrics), provided they visualised and addressed their professional life-histories, ideals, commitments, ethical principles, values and future expectations. These professional bodies were presented and collaboratively elaborated using different drama methods (e.g. mirror-techique) in the workshop. The participants experienced this kind of shared drama-based identity learning as a particularly powerful method that offered new insights and understanding of themselves as professional actors (see Vähäsantanen, *et al*., 2017b).

Data collection

The data collection method for the study consisted of in-depth semi-structured pre- and post-interviews with the 11 leaders who had participated in the programme. The interviews were conducted according to an interview guide (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2002) that listed the questions to be talked through in the course of the interview. This allowed the interviewer to build a conversation while focusing on predetermined research topics.

In the *pre-interviews*, we were interested in leaders' accounts of their work, including its main challenges. The interview guide included five main themes: (i) professional identity and work; (ii) challenges in the work; (iii) personal developmental challenges in the work and in being a leader; (iv) general experiences and future expectations concerning being a leader; and (v) expectations for the upcoming coaching programme. Within these overarching themes, there were precise questions aimed at opening up the conversation and directing the interview. The *post-interview* focused on assessments of the coaching programme, but there were also questions on the participants' everyday work. Here, the main interview themes were (i) personal learning and development as a leader; (ii) evaluation of the coaching programme; (iii) ideas for developing the programme; (iv) experience of the research conducted as part of the programme; and (v) ideas for developing one's own work. The duration of each interview varied from 45

minutes to 1.5 hours. The total data amounted to 24 interviewing hours, equivalent to 378 pages of transcribed text.

Researchers have argued that self-report is the most common, and potentially the most suitable, method for studying an individual's emotional experiences (e.g. Diener, 2000; Pekrun, 2016; Robinson and Clore, 2002). For studying emotions, the self-report method is convenient and not limited to current emotions. Individuals can freely talk about their emotional experiences including, for example, how they felt in the past and how they think they would feel in a particular situation (Robinson and Clore, 2002). Self-reports are needed when aiming to provide differerianted and nuanced descriptions of emotions (Pekrun, 2016). Interviews are used as an application of self-report data especially when the objective is to understand emotions in social contexts and to meet the requirement of being sensitive to contextual factors (deMarrais and Tisdale, 2002). Especially in socio-cultural research, self-reports, such as interviews, are seen as justified and ideal for gathering data to understand the interpersonal and interactional nature of emotions (Zembylas, 2007).

Data analysis

The data were analysed via qualitative content analysis (e.g. Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2013) and utilising researcher triangulation (Hastings, 2010; Saldaña, 2013). In the analysis, we aimed to systematically categorise the content of the pre- and post-interviews (in total, 22 interviews). We applied an abductive construction process using both data-driven and theory-based interpretations (Patton, 2002). In other words, in our analysis, we constructed a theory-driven coding frame that focused on categories representing the leaders' identity and expressions of their work including references to relationships and to the organisation. Within these categories, we concentrated on the leaders' individual perceptions, experiences and accounts,

including elements that represented emotional expressions. However, we also looked for common elements that recurred across the interviews; thus, the aim was to produce general characterisations of the exercise of professional agency in the leaders' work.

As the first step of the analysis, the data (i.e. verbatim transcriptions) were transferred to the ATLAS.ti program. The transcriptions were then coded by the three researchers conducting the study and by each one individually according to the theoretically pre-set categories of (i) identity, (ii) relationships and (iii) the organisation. This included the coding and naming of emotional expressions (e.g. joy and frustration) within each main category. After that initial pilot phase, the researchers discussed the data and compared the individually produced coding categories. The aim here was especially to investigate selective perceptions and to understand the multiple ways of seeing the data (cf. Hastings, 2010; Patton, 2002). This was necessary because the aim of coding expressions of emotions was to label the feelings that the participants *may* have experienced (Saldaña, 2013). Hence, the identification and naming of emotions was neither an explicit nor unambiguous process. This study was based on interview data, based on subjects' self-reports, talk and accounts of their emotions. In this sense, inevitably, there were analytical limitations insofar as we were concerned with the transcribed verbal expressions of emotions, which were taken to represent feelings that the interviewees may have experienced.

To check the reliability of the coding procedure, the initial categories were elaborated, the initial coding frame was revised and explicated and the final coding rules were defined. Only the coding categories with 100 per cent intercoder agreement (Schreier, 2012) among the three researchers were used. Thereafter, the first author re-coded all the material in accordance with the final coding rules. This process was iterative in the sense that it included elaborations and conversations with all the researchers throughout the analytical process. After the final coding process was complete, we quantified the most prevalent emotional expressions in each main

category, noting the emotions (both the total number of expressions per category and the number of individuals mentioning the emotion in question).

As the second step of the data analysis, we identified how the named emotional expressions were connected to the various accounts of agency. At this point, we focused on explicit emotional expressions and how each emotion was connected to the expression of professional agency at work. The particular focus of the analysis was on how the different emotional expressions were connected to the possibilities of the participants acting and exerting an influence on their work as leaders or on their professional identity. We sought to identify the main patterns and common elements that recurred across the interviews. We also compared leaders' accounts in the pre- and post-interviews and were able to trace patterns of continuity and change in their talk. We endeavoured to produce general characterisations of the connections between the participants' emotional expressions and their perceived agency. For ethical reasons and to ensure anonymity, the study manuscript was sent to the interviewees prior to final editing and submission.

At this point, it should be noted that in conducting the leadership coaching programme and in collecting the data, our initial interest was not specifically the emotional aspects of the leaders' work. It was only after conducting the entire programme and initial analysis that we noticed the clear need to focus on the relationship between emotions and professional agency in leaders' work.

Findings

After completing the first step of our analysis, we were slightly surprised at the intensity and number of emotional expressions in the interviews. The interviews were loaded with expressions of emotions connected to the leaders' work. Below, we present the kinds of emotional

expressions articulated before and after the coaching programme. In presenting the findings, we focus on emotional expressions connected with identity agency, relationship agency and organisation agency. The most reported emotional expressions are presented by the total number of mentions for a given category, followed by the number of participants mentioning the emotion in question (separated by a slash [/]).

Emotional expressions before the coaching programme

Identity agency: The emotional expressions connected to identity agency manifested an abundance of positive emotions. Most commonly, the participants reported joy when they talked about their work as leaders, their core commitments, their values and their ethical principles. Joy was mentioned 16 times and by eight leaders. In addition, the emotion of meaningfulness (10/6 mentions) was expressed.

The autonomy of the work was frequently reported as a particular source of joy. In addition, the diversity of the work, with no two days being the same, was perceived as a source of positive emotions. In this connection, the participants indicated their enjoyment of working with different kinds of people, and with different groups, networks and communities. As one participant expressed it:

> *I enjoy the tasks through being in a situation where one is interacting with other*
> *people and, for the most part, interacting with nice people. So the pluses and minuses*
> *maybe crystalise to a large extent in the circle of colleagues one is doing the tasks*
> *with. Of course it does bring me a kind of positive feeling and sense of succeeding*
> *and enjoyment, the fact that I can use my experience, my know-how, now, so that we*
> *can achieve something.* (Leader 3)

These positive emotions were closely connected with a sense of professional agency. As the extract above shows, the sense that the individual could use his/her expertise and experience (as a part of one's professional identity) to support shared efforts created powerful emotions of joy.

However, just as much as joy, the interviewees expressed emotions of inadequacy (16/ 7 mentions) in connection with their identity agency. The feelings of inadequacy were especially linked to the fact that they were not able to work according to their own commitments and ethical principles. They described the workload as overwhelming on occasion, so that it was impossible to do every task in the manner expected or as they themselves would have wished. They indicated that in everyday work they were often forced to undercut their own standards, and this caused continuous emotions of inadequacy. In this regard, the participants' identity agency was subjugated, preventing them from working according to their own ethical standards:

> *A sense of inadequacy, a continuous feeling of inadequacy, that one would like to do things so very much better, but it's just that one doesn't have time, doesn't have the energy, just can't . . .* (Leader 5)

Relationship agency: In contrast to identity agency, emotional expressions linked to social relations at work mainly reflected negative emotions. Here, too, a sense of inadequacy was emphasised (14/9 mentions). The leaders indicated that in hectic everyday work there were often situations where confrontations and interactions with personnel created misunderstandings and unintended friction. Employees were perceived often to load their own dissatisfactions onto the leaders. Such manifestations of employees' anxiety were reported to increase in recent years due to the rapid changes in the work organisations. They gave rise to feelings of leaders being used as a spittoon or waste basket for the work community. In this connection, instances of distress (9/6 mentions) were expressed.

I've never met people who react so strongly, so strongly as they do here, and they're always getting steamed up about things; some people have been put in positions that were wrong for them and it's not fair, and then when you try to sort it out with them, you get a reaction again . . . so to begin with that was, when I came here it was a bit like I had to grit my teeth and do the job. Yes, grit my teeth, not give in, and I was a bit feeling like sobbing sometimes, and certainly it was like people were attacking me directly sometimes, spitting right in my face. (Leader 7)

The leaders also reported that it was challenging to persuade employees of their goodwill and sincerity as leaders and to gain a trusted leadership position among the personnel.

However, the leaders also reported positive emotions in connection with the practice of relationship agency. The emotion of joy was mentioned most frequently (7/5 mentions). The emotions of joy were particularly connected to situations where the leaders could work collectively and make progress with the personnel. These situations involved a sense of community and of social sharing with colleagues and employees.

Organisation agency: In contrast to identity and relationship agency, all the emotional expressions connected to organisation agency reflected purely negative emotions. Expressions of positive emotions did not appear at all. Inadequacy was mentioned 13/6 times, frustration 15/8 times and exhaustion 7/4 times. These negative expressions were related particularly to the administrative instructions and regulations issued by upper management. Particularly burdensome elements included the economic situation, with pressures to raise efficiency and productivity at a time of continuously decreasing resources. In parallel with the drive to achieve targets and a culture of accountability, they found it particularly exhausting to respond to

multiple assessments and external evaluations and to compose administrative reports. One leader described the situation as follows:

> *Well it drains your energy this kind of pointless, pointless bureaucracy, or pointless . . . so much of it, the way we now have an incredible amount of these training evaluations and these . . . so, yes in their own way it's intended that they would move development forward, but they are just SO, SO, SO time-consuming. If they could just somehow be done on a smaller scale. And it's just overwhelming when they bring you some kind of 10-page questionnaire, like a whole catalogue of all sorts of things that you have to respond to, so that . . .* (Leader 4)

The findings imply that the leaders' position relative to upper-level management was subjugated and that their agency in this regard was weak. The participants indicated that in recent years many structural and/or organisational transformations had been implemented according to upper-level instructions, without any real possibilities to make suggestions or affect matters.

> *. . . sometime you wonder why you're doing something, when for two years here there's been this kind of; it definitely takes away quite a lot of your energy, and your night's sleep too, especially when there's all sorts of reorganisation of the information systems, they're changing all the time, and right now there's probably five major issues on top of each other, things to organise and do.* (Leader 8)

The above extract illustrates the emotion of inadequacy, connected to the lack of a way to influence the instructions coming from upper-level administration.

Emotional expressions after the coaching programme

After the programme, the participants' emotional expressions differed considerably from those reported at the beginning of the programme. The most obvious difference was a shift from a sense of inadequacy to expressions of courage, confidence and strength. In particular, the emotional experience of leniency towards oneself was strongly present when the participants talked about their work as leaders. In addition, the talk was much more analytical and reflective in nature, and it also encompassed elaborations on the emotions of employees and of other people.

Identity agency: After the programme, the expressions connected to professional identity were strictly positive in nature. As the most general and shared emotion, leniency was mentioned 34/9 times, confidence 28/9 times and courage 17/8 times. One leader reported the emergence of leniency to oneself as follows:

> *. . . well towards myself, that feeling of forgiving myself and that strengthening of a little bit of agency definitely increased. Quite often I've had these inner conversations with myself, thinking, hello, what am I doing here, why did I react in a certain way in these situations, why do I feel bad about myself right now, why did I react JUST THAT WAY, what went wrong here . . .* (Leader 5)

The above extract also illustrates the interrelation between leniency to oneself and perceived agency. By reflecting on their own emotions with greater leniency to themselves, and by having inner conversations with themselves in tense situations, the participants seemed to gain a stronger sense of agency. Leniency was connected to understanding and accepting their own limitations and imperfections and perceiving ways to act accordingly.

> *My approach to this leadership is actually this, that though I'm a leader I'm also human, and no doubt this human side will appear in other things as well, both in my*

weaknesses and in my good points, so I don't imagine that I would be anything like

perfect or not make mistakes, and in my opinion that's quite an important message to

the whole crowd, that one just has to put one's hand up and say, I could have done

that better, if at that moment I had been wiser, but maybe another time I WILL be

wiser. (Leader 1)

The above extract illustrates how accepting one's own imperfections can support leaders' agentic actions in interactions with personnel. This accepting of imperfections was related to the broader issue of understanding and accepting oneself with one's own strengths and weaknesses (i.e. having a strengthened professional identity).

In the extract below, the emotion of confidence is bound up with increased agency, expressed in a determination to lead through one's own commitment to leading and not for example through externally set roles.

In managerial work, understanding people and accepting that people are different is

an important part of leading. You have to know yourself as a leader and also accept

yourself and find your own way of leading through your personality. This leads to

accepting differences in co-workers and subordinates as well. (Leader10)

Relationship agency: Here, the most obvious difference from the pre-interviews lay in the fact that the leaders were less inclined to be caught up in their own personal emotional experiences. In the post-interviews the emotional accounts were analytical and reflective. The leaders now tended to mention the general significance of emotions at work, based on a clearer picture of the importance of discussing and processing emotions at work. Furthermore, they indicated that their understanding of social relationships – and especially their own skills in dealing with socially challenging work situations – had improved.

So in difficult situations [there are] one's own feelings, and we have to face another

person's emotional reaction. Like now this year there's been so many of these

meetings where [we have to say] unfortunately your employment can't be continued,

so it's been somehow, a useful tool in one's work, going into these situations, the fact

that one has been able to get one's head round it in advance, or at least try. There

are always, like . . . at that moment, but in a way one remains ONESELF as an

individual, more strongly [than before], and maybe doesn't get swept along in

another person's emotional reaction, just accept that it belongs to the stage we're at.

(Leader 1)

Clear expressions of personal emotions included mentions of confidence (19/8 mentions) and

leniency to oneself (18/6 mentions). The leniency was connected in particular to challenging

social situations in the work community. Furthermore, leniency to oneself was seen as

strengthening the notion that criticism from others was not directed particularly at the leaders as

individuals but mainly at their role as leaders. The participants indicated that their feelings of

being a general 'waste basket' had diminished.

An important issue connected to confidence involved agency in terms of setting limits in

the work. The participants indicated that the work required the strength to set limits to the work

and the workload – and particularly limits for themselves and for the expectations they set for

themselves.

. . . er . . . maybe in this leadership work now, it's in a way as if . . . to some extent I

can be in my position more firmly or I don't sort of take it to heart so much, all that

stuff that comes from there [the personnel], because I know very well that it will

happen, that when I leave the room [where people are talking] . . . then the matter

will continue [laughs], and they'll be sounding off about me, but in a way it doesn't

bother me . . . in that way I've grown above it, so I can't please everyone, and I do my best, and it's enough, and I want to be up-front about things, and then when I've got something to say I'll say it . . . saying exactly why, and constructively, I'll try to get the matter out into the open. (Leader 11)

Organisation agency: Contrary to the other domains of agency, the organisation accounts showed no change from the pre-interviews. There were hardly any positive expressions. Most of the mentions connected to administrative issues reflected negative emotions. The emotional expressions reflected exhaustion (13/6 expressions) connected to the inability to resist instructions from upper management, in a context of economic stringency.

And then, all the same, when you have to see the matter as a whole, you have to take into consideration all these limitations and resources, and these, so how . . . so although we have fine strategies and fine plans and fine aims, you have absolutely NO chance of carrying them out, or well, you can't quite say there are no possibilities to do it, of course there are to some extent but it's TERRIBLY, well, it's so limited by the resources so that it's truly miserable. (Leader 4)

The findings demonstrated the importance of emotions in the leaders' work. Table 1 summarises the main emotional expressions before and after the programme. At the beginning of the programme, the leaders reported that the most common emotion related to their work was a sense of inadequacy. As compared to the expressions at the end of the programme, the major change in the leaders' emotional expression was the change from the emotion of inadequacy towards leniency in the areas of identity agency and relationship agency. By contrast, the emotional expressions regarding organisation agency remained emotionally loaded after the programme. In

particular, the emotion of exhaustion was strongly connected to organisation agency during the entire programme.

Overall, the findings showed that emotions are closely connected to leaders' perceived agency at work. The study also displayed how leaders working in middle management suffer from multiple tensions in their work. Occupying a position between top management and personnel was shown to be emotionally burdensome. The leaders indicated that they were often left alone, without the resources to implement the decisions laid down by upper management. Their task was to implement management decisions and to deal with the dissatisfactions, complaints, fears and even anger emerging from the personnel caused by continuous transformations. However, through reflecting on and processing their own professional roles, relationships and work tasks, they were able to reshape their professional identities towards a professional self that was more empowered and confident. In this reshaping, the role of emotions was salient.

Place Table 1 here

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that the work of leaders working in middle management is infused with contradictory emotions, which are closely related to their enacting of professional agency. Although based on a small-scale qualitative investigation, our findings suggest that in the work of leaders, the role of emotions in enacting professional agency is significant. When leaders were able to influence their work and thus practice professional agency, positive

emotions, such as joy, emerged. Weak agency, for its part, seemed to be connected to negative emotions, such as inadequacy and exhaustion. The theoretical and practical implications of our findings are taken up below.

Theoretical conclusion: towards emotional agency

As a theoretical conclusion, we suggest that in order to understand the phenomenon of professional agency, emotions must be seen as embedded in and intertwined with agentic practice. Generally speaking, most theories still see agency as a goal-oriented, rational activity aimed at influencing a current state of affairs (cf. Giddens, 1984; Haapasaari *et al*., 2016). However, the findings of this study suggest that enacting professional agency is by no means a matter of purely rational actions. Emotions seem to play a powerful role in enacting professional agency. We would thus argue that professional agency should be reconceptualised in such a way as to acknowledge the importance of emotions (one's own and those of one's fellow workers) in practising agency within organisational contexts. This is especially important for leaders working in middle management and thus responsible for promoting interaction, learning and innovations in their work organisations.

In changing organisational settings, the work of middle-management leaders has become emotionally challenging (Cascon-Pereira and Hallier, 2012; Parris *et al*., 2008). Especially in tense situations, it is essential for leaders to recognise the information conveyed by emotions and to see how they can harness this information to serve constructive decision-making (cf. Kempster and Gregory, 2017). Our study revealed that in the context of additional support provided by the leadership coaching programme, leaders' emotions of inadequacy were changed towards having leniency towards oneself, i.e. acceptance of oneself with one's own strengths and limitations. This strengthening involved the participants' professional identities as leaders and also their

perceptions about leadership practices (in terms of motivating, inspiring and empowering others and aligning people to create interactions, teams and coalitions). It also involved an understanding of the (sometimes unreasonable) external expectations set by upper-level management and administration. Our findings also emphasised the importance of setting limits and having the courage to encounter emotionally challenging situations, notably facing the dissatisfactions, fears and anger of the personnel. Thus, emotions seem to play an important role in balancing the external and organisational expectations and roles, together with the leaders' own individual ideals, goals and commitments.

In order to elaborate leaders' work, we suggest the use of *emotional agency*, which refers to awareness, understanding and finding a balance between personal emotions and externally set expectations/roles and for acting accordingly in everyday work practices. Consequently, emotional agency does not mean performing or managing emotions according to expected norms or strategic goals, or in favour of managerially or economically prescribed standards (cf. Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002; Fineman, 2000). Nor does it merely imply emotional regulation or the faking of emotions in socially accepted ways (Hochschild, 1983). Instead, emotional agency means understanding and considering authentic emotions – one's own and those of others – respecting them, utilising them in decision-making and taking them into account in the practice of professional agency. Emotional agency allows leaders to construct balanced relationships, for themselves, for the personnel and for the work and organisation. It has the potential to release energy and to promote joy, hope and faith for the future.

We would therefore suggest that leaders' emotional agency at work means enhanced awareness, understanding and skills in the emotional domain. We see it as encompassing the following components: i) understanding the importance and power of emotions (one's own and those of others) in workplace settings; (ii) accepting that there are certain emotionally difficult

issues that one cannot influence; iii) leniency to oneself and to others – understanding imperfection and accepting it as inevitable; iv) setting limits to oneself, to the work and – as far as practicable – to administration; and v) supporting joy, enthusiasm and hope among one's fellow workers and employees.

Overall, we would argue that leaders need emotional agency to cope with their work. It can promote their own and also their personnel's resources in such a way as to maintain enthusiasm for the work and to support wellbeing. It can also enhance learning and innovations; since it includes notions of accepting imperfection and giving a degree of leniency, it permits experimentation – with possible incompleteness and failure. In supporting the wellbeing of personnel, it enhances the likelihood of organisational success and of overall 'flourishing' (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). Moreover, we suggest that emotional agency is needed in light of recent calls for developing leadership theory towards a deeper understanding of personnel's agency (cf. Tourish, 2014).

This study was based on pre- and post-interviews with 11 leaders. Adopting a socio-cultural approach, we utilised the interview data to obtain nuanced and authentic descriptions of the leaders' emotional experiences at work. However, interviews have clear limitations and biases that need to be stressed. First, memory bias is common when studying emotions in a given context retrospectively through interviews (Mauss and Robertson, 2009). Second, human tendency towards impression management (especially among professionals such as leaders) is always present in the social context of data gathering (Azevedo *et al.*, 2016). In addition, this approach does not capture unconscious emotional processes (e.g. Winkelman and Berridge, 2004). However, in the socio-cultural approach, the focus is not on understanding the internal or unconscious nature of emotions but on exploring interpretations of emotions as a communicative experience (Leavitt, 1996; Zembylas, 2007). All in all, the aim of this study was not to produce

generalisable results but to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of agency and its emotional aspects.

Practical implications

As a practical conclusion, we suggest that emotional agency can be learned and enhanced through group-based interventions. The findings of this study indicate that professional agency can be supported through reflecting on and processing one's own professional roles and work. Thus, ways can be found to deal with complex issues and social relations within the work organisation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in this study, in relation to organisational tasks (involving administration, implementing strategic decisions and budgeting), the emotional expressions did not change during the coaching programme; thus, the interviews at the beginning and end of the programme included emotions of inadequacy, frustration and exhaustion. This was probably due to the fact that the coaching programme mainly focused on the leaders' identity and on work community relations rather than on organisational (management/upper-management) relations. It seems that although professional identity and leadership practices can be promoted through a coaching programme, for organisational transformations and for the broader improvement of management practices, this kind of intervention is unlikely to be sufficient. Thus, to achieve organisational and structural change, there would be a need to implement broader, organisation-level interventions.

Another practical conclusion drawn from the results of the current study involves leaders' identity work. In fact, several studies have underlined the importance of supporting employees' identity work (e.g. Brown and Coupland, 2015; Kira and Balkin, 2014). The results of our study suggest that this applies especially to leaders working in middle management (see also Croft *et al.*, 2015). Under the current circumstances, leaders working in middle management require time

and space for identity work, and – especially in fields such as education and health care – we would argue that the promotion of leaders' emotional agency is indispensable. Middle management leaders in particular suffer from multiple emotional tensions, and our evidence suggests that their emotional agency is currently a critical issue. Their position between top management and personnel is emotionally burdensome. They are often left alone, without the resources to implement the decisions issued by upper management. Furthermore, the work of leaders is deeply involved with human relations, and it cannot be predetermined by externally set role expectations. Every leader must find her/his own personal way to lead, encounter and interact with fellow workers. This requires identifying one's own personal strengths and weaknesses and reconciling these with social expectations (i.e. norms, roles and responsibilities). Through reshaping their professional identity, leaders may, at best, be able to encounter, adapt to and assume different identities and, further, support the employees' identity reshaping (see also Cascon-Pereira and Hallier, 2012; Tourish, 2014). We suggest that by offering support for leaders to discuss, share experiences and interact with colleagues, they can gain new understandings about themselves and their work; in other words, they can reshape their professional identity.

The promotion of emotional agency can support leaders in confronting the new demands placed on them and in reshaping their professional identity. It is also possible that emotional agency can help leaders support the agency of their personnel. For the future, we need more research on the processes and interventions that can optimally promote leaders' emotional agency. Insights gained from a fuller understanding of emotions in the workplace could also help organisations in their current challenging circumstances and highlight ways of implementing organisational transformations. Furthermore, rapid technological development has produced new kinds of measurement technologies for real-life situations that involve physiological data (e.g.

electrodermal activity [EDA] and *heart rate variability* [HRV]). Thus, it is expected that future studies on emotions at work will have research designs that combine self-report data with real-time measurements.

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