Constructing managerial manoeuvring space in contradictory contexts

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper discusses manoeuvring space and demonstrates how autonomy, power and discretion need to be understood as constructed and integrated behaviours where managers manoeuvre between dilemmas in their own management practices. Twenty-seven Norwegian police managers were shadowed and interviewed. We found that constructions of manoeuvring space presupposed that managers balanced dilemmas. We identified three different strategies through which managers constructed manoeuvring space by navigating between dilemmas and actively constructing demands and constraints. These strategies were (1) decoupling, (2) sensegiving and (3) strategic positioning. Our findings add to the managerial discretion literature, arguing that constructions of manoeuvring space are central to managers' development and to how they create opportunities and possibilities to make choices that balance conflicting dilemmas in contradictory contexts.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore the intentional influence of managers and their responsibilities for deciding what actions to undertake and how to implement them, as described in the leadership literature (Hemphill & Coons, 1957; House et al., 1999; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Rauch & Behling, 1984; Yukl, 2013). The rationale for our study is grounded in the gap between theory and practice in relation to managers' actions. Despite the abundance of leadership studies, managerial practices have been little studied (Tengblad, 2012). Recent studies of managerial practice have mapped managers' everyday work tasks and interactions (Tengblad, 2012), but fall short of explaining managers' autonomy in making choices about which activities to engage in. We argue that this represents a gap in our understanding of managerial practice that is important to address. In the literature, managerial discretion is treated as a given. This is unfortunate because it does not capture the fact that managers can understand discretion differently and it does not explain that some managers not only passively react to discretion, but also actively construct it.

Managers' autonomy, delegated power and managerial discretion are known to influence the demands, constraints and choices of activities of managers (Espedal & Lange, 2005; Stewart, 1982, 1989). An example is discretion that exists when managers face a range of choices and there are no constraints and means-ends ambiguity (Espedal, 2009; Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Stewart, 1982, 1989). However, even though the literature underscores the subjective dimension of discretion (e.g. Espedal, 2009; Espedal, Kvitastein, & Grønhaug, 2012; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987), most studies of managerial discretion overemphasize discretion as something managers formally have or should be given, as static and individual ownership, and underestimate the development of managerial practice as processual and dynamic in context-dependent relations between managers and employees in everyday activities (Cunliffe, 2001; Erden, Schneider, & von Krogh, 2014; Geilinger, Haefliger, von Krogh, & Rechsteiner, 2016). The majority of management action involves skilled, improvised in-situ coping in managers' day-to-day practice and routines (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Whittington, 1996). Discretion needs to be explored in relation to what actually happens in these managerial practices (Espedal, 2017; Strand, 2015) as discretionary behaviour (Key, 2002), where managers' ability to learn and their knowledge capabilities influence discretion (Espedal, 2017; Filstad, Karp, & Glomseth, 2020). Our aim is to contribute to the literature by exploring discretion as processual and dynamic in managerial practices, as discretionary behaviours, as possible ongoing processes of manoeuvring between different challenges and dilemmas to construct a room or space for one's own management practice. In

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this way, we seek to unfold what constitutes and characterizes discretion as management constructions of behaviours as processual and dynamic in everyday management practice, instead of discretion as the given property of individual managers. We argue that a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) provides meaningful concepts to understand how this active construction of manoeuvring space occurs through noticing and attending to cues, making interpretations, engaging in action and learning (Matilis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 2009).

As opportunities for discretion are argued to be greater in more complex, contradictory and ambiguous contexts (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987), our choice of empirical setting is police managers in the Norwegian Police Service (NPS). The NPS is based on bureaucratic organizational structures, which in the public administration literature are argued to reduce middle managers' choices to make a difference (Kickert, 2014; McNulty & Ferlie, 2004; Van Der Voet, 2014). Public contexts are also characterized by a multitude of demands (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2005) with severe constraints on managers' choices, but where their possibilities for discretion are under-researched. The main focus in the discretion literature has been on top managers (Van Wart, 2003; Hambrick, 2007; Wangrove, Schepker, & Barker, 2015), or street-level bureaucrats (e.g. Lipsky, 1980) and in the police culture literature on street cops' discretion (Cockcroft, 2013). Our purpose is therefore to add to the literature by focusing on a more comprehensive range of managers, including top managers and middle managers and hence, the characteristics of police managers' constructions of discretionary behaviours. We address two research questions in this paper: How do managers describe their range of possible choices, and how do they construct manoeuvring space in contradictory contexts? In exploring these questions, we contribute to the discretion literature by discussing the term manoeuvring space and showing that it captures the dynamic and constructive practices of managers, and we identify three ways in which managers construct manoeuvring space.

First, we provide a literature review addressing managerial discretion and link this to public and contradictory organizations. Second, we describe the NPS context and research methods used. We then present our findings together with our analysis under the results and discussion. Finally, we conclude with our contributions, theoretical implications and calls for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Managerial discretion

The managerial discretion literature describes discretion as the extent to which managers are free to make choices and therefore concerns the range of choices that managers can make (Espedal, 2009; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Stewart, 1982, 1989). Managers, however, are not necessarily aware of the choices they actually have (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). Hence, the argument is that there is a formal and a subjective dimension of managerial discretion. The formal dimension describes the organizational and individual factors that constrain and enable managers to choose goals and means. The subjective dimension, on the other hand, draws attention to how managers understand and enact their latitude of action, and is therefore argued to exert the most influence on managers' choices and behaviours (Espedal, 2009; Espedal et al., 2012). The subjective dimension suggests that jobholders with similar jobs could do the same job differently (Stewart, 1982). Thus, even though managers in the same organization have the same formal responsibilities, the same demands and constraints, their managerial practice may diverge. This is helpful in mapping the subjective dimensions of discretion by focusing on how

managers understand the demands and the constraints on their choices, and hence, acknowledging discretion as constructed differently by managers. These choices need to be investigated through studies of what managers actually do (Espedal, 2017; Key, 2002; Strand, 2015).

The formal dimensions of constraints, demands and choices are perceived to shape and influence the manager's own discretion (Strand, 2007). This implies that the characteristics of managers might also influence their perceptions of their own discretion (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). Key (2002) investigated perceived discretion, not only as subjective discretion but also as how the formal and subjective dimensions of discretion are combined (Carpenter & Golden, 1997; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). Key's quantitative study (2002) supports the correlation between control over the environment and the sense of discretion within the environment (locus of control). Individual and organizational demographics (age, gender, education, type and size of business, etc.), which previous literature has hypothesized repeatedly as important for discretion, did not, however, determine perceived discretion. Neither interactions nor situations influenced discretion in this study. Only organizational culture in Key's (2002) study was found to influence perceived discretion.

Research on managerial characteristics and discretion does not map out managerial practices. Focusing on managerial activities, as suggested by Stewart (1982, 1989), seems a promising path forward. Managerial activities vary as to how much discretion they include (Finkelstein & Peteraf, 2007) and it is at the activity level that 'economic thinking opens up the question of how managers might evade or minimize constraints imposed upon their actions' (Finkelstein & Peteraf, 2007, p. 237). The focus on managerial activities lends itself to an analysis of the construction of managerial discretion, rather than to the antecedents and consequences of discretion. This is particularly important in contradictory contexts because the activities that managers engage in could, formally or subjectively, alter constraints and demands and thus limit or expand their discretion.

We argue that treating the subjective dimension of discretion as a perceptual measure tied to the individual manager's cognition represents a rather passive approach to discretion where managers react to given constraints and demands. While this has contributed to our understanding that managers with the same constraints and demands may make very different choices, it underestimates the possibility that managers may actively frame and negotiate constraints and demands. Instead of viewing discretion as static and as a quality managers have or are/should be given (e.g. Finkelstein & Peteraf, 2007; Wangrow, Schepker, & Barker, 2015), focusing on managerial activities may identify a dynamic dimension of discretion that aligns with studies suggesting that discretion may change over time (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2013) and across contexts (Peteraf & Reed, 2007). Although discretion research draws attention to the subjective dimension of discretion by documenting that perceptions of managerial discretion may vary, there is a need for more knowledge about the construction of the subjective dimensions of discretion.

To enhance our understanding of how managers actively construct manoeuvring space through their managerial practice and not only passively react to or interpret demands and constraints, we apply a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking describes a process where people seek to understand issues or events that are new, ambiguous or confusing (Matilis & Christianson, 2014). This suggests that sensemaking is particularly relevant to an exploration of how managers relate to contradictory contexts and how they make choices within demands and constraints. Following Matilis and Christianson (2014, p. 67), we define sensemaking as follows:

A process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn.

In this study, we are concerned with managers' understanding of choices, with particular interest in action as one outcome of sensemaking processes. Maitlis (2005, p. 21) argues that sensemaking creates 'rational accounts of the world that enable action'. This action is important because it enacts the environment that people try to understand (Weick, 1995). How managers attend to cues about demands and constraints, how they create meaning from these cues together with colleagues, and how they construct their opportunities for choice are processes central to the understanding of how they construct manoeuvring space. A study of how managers construct manoeuvring space answers the call for research on discretionary behaviour (Key, 2002) and how managers in the public sector relate to their latitude of action (Karlsson, 2019).

2.2. Discretion in contradictory contexts

The NPS provides a research setting for exploring how police managers manoeuvre between contradictory demands, for example, between the opposing logics of bureaucracy, hierarchy and standardization on the one hand and operations, culture and local adaptations on the other hand (Cockcroft, 2013; Johannessen, 2013). Organizational culture could limit managers' choices because structural demands may be perceived as overwhelming or impossible to comply with in practice. Incompatible demands may thus limit or expand managers' subjective perceptions of discretion; this will depend on whether they understand opposing demands as a phenomenon they cannot influence or one where the opposites can be integrated and united but requiring well-informed choice (Frimann & Keller, 2016). Contradictions or dilemmas are not objective, but are interpreted and enacted by the individuals who experience them, and therefore, managers' interpretations of dilemmas are social constructions (Frimann & Keller, 2016). In ambiguous contexts, there are several possibilities of loose coupling (Orton & Weick, 1990) between contradictory demands suggesting that managers can construct discretion based on how they relate to, or ignore (Schaefer, 2019), certain demands and constraints. In fact, discretion has been hypothesized as a direct effect of loose coupling (Orton & Weick, 1990). This resembles the much debated issue of decoupling between policy and practice, defined as situations when intended changes do not become implemented or are violated (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Instead of treating decoupling as a major limitation for organizations, managers could intentionally decouple to buffer core activities and protect internal interests (Bromley & Powell, 2012). This means that managers can strategically distance themselves from demands and constraints in their internal and external environment and enhance the range of choices available to them. Such strategies allow managers to navigate between dilemmas and competing logics. Discretion can therefore be understood as ongoing construction. We argue that this active social construction is not reflected in the discussions of subjective discretion, and suggest that the term manoeuvring space better reflects these efforts.

Police work, for instance, is embedded in a public sector context, a sector that is argued to be quite contradictory and 'characterized by multiple objectives and diffuse power structures, often extending beyond organizational boundaries' (Denis et al., 2005, p. 449). At the time of this study, the NPS was implementing a reform which accentuated this contradictory context. Hence, the characteristics of public sector contexts make change implementation particularly challenging for managers responsible for implementing change (Karp & Helgø, 2008; Isett, Glied, Sparer, & Brown, 2013; Van Der Voet, Kuipers, & Groeneveld, 2016) in performing certain activities and displaying certain behaviours or roles on behalf of themselves and their employees (e.g. Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). The expectation that managers can contribute substantially to the implementation of organizational change reflects an implicit assumption that these managers have not only the necessary competencies (Battilana, Gilmartin, Sengul, Pache, & Alexander, 2010), but also the necessary discretion to choose the means of implementation (e.g. Espedal, 2017). Multiple and competing expectations, however, may constrain managers' choices and thus their discretion.

3. Methods

3.1. Research setting

The NPS has been heavily criticized since the terror attacks of 22 July 2011 at Utøya/Oslo, where 77 people were killed and many others injured. After the terror attacks, several critical evaluation reports called for substantial changes to the police force, with a special attention to the need for change in the leadership culture, values and attitudes (Vanebo, Bjørkelo, & Aaserud, 2015). The NPS is a national police service with about 18,000 employees (police officers, lawyers and civilians). In 2015, the Norwegian parliament passed the Police Reform, which consisted of two parts: (1) a structural reform reducing the number of police districts from 27 to 12 and (2) a reform to ensure quality through developing knowledge-based police services. The aims of the reform were to ensure the protection of Norwegian society against new forms of crime and to meet the general changes in society. The implementation of this 'community policing reform' (in Norwegian: 'Nærpolitireformen') was to take four years from 1 January 2016. The reform is the most comprehensive police reform ever enacted in Norway (Ellefsen, 2018).

The NPS reform's main goals are to change the leadership culture and standardize the police services by reducing the number of local offices and merging police districts to create centres of expertise. Hence, many police leaders have applied for new leadership positions made available by the police reform. Smaller geographical units are now organized in centralized units, resulting in new police practices. New priorities for police services have been implemented, with the goal of providing uniformed police services for the whole of Norway. Police leaders are therefore facing increased responsibilities for police services and a greater number of employees to manage. Others have lost their leadership position or have experienced major changes in both their staffing and responsibilities for police services. These changes in leadership positions are due to the substantial reduction in the number of police officers locally; instead, police employees have been transferred to larger, centralized units in the 12 new police districts. This is in line with other police reforms in Europe that have called for greater centralization, efficiency and structural rationalization of the police services (Christensen, 2018; Fyfe 2013). The ambitions and overall goal of the police reform are to establish: (1) increased availability, (2) increased quality and uniformity of the police services throughout Norway, (3) goal-oriented police services with regard to crime prevention, crime investigation and counter-terrorism, (4) the NPS as a knowledge-based and learning organization, (5) increased efficiency, and use of new methods and new technology and (6) good leadership and active followers, with the establishment of a police culture characterized by openness and trust.

The Norwegian Police Reform fits well into a description of a contradictory context. For example, the reform includes opposing organizational ideologies or logics to influence the implementation

of change (Johannessen, 2015). On one hand, the reform centres on bureaucratic practices, relying on an instrumental rationale in which leadership is about governing and administrating through control, predictability and stability. On the other hand, the reform highlights leadership through operational work and understanding groups in practice, with all the dynamics and relationships involved. Managers' autonomy to choose practices in the dilemma between bureaucratic and operational practices is especially important because the discourses surrounding the reform suggest that professional discretion should be reduced through stronger organizational control (Gundhus, 2017). These characteristics of the contradictory context that police managers operated in during the early phases of the reform implementation make this a well-suited research setting in which to explore how managers construct manoeuvring space.

3.2. Research methods

Bryman (2011) notes that little has changed since Conger's (1998) call for greater use of participant observation in the study of leadership, acknowledging that leadership studies are over-reliant on questionnaires. However, we feel that recent leadership studies benefit from increasing diversity in methods and research questions, as well as a growing acceptance of qualitative methods. Bryman (2011) also observes that it is surprising that observation is rarely used, given that leadership studies are largely about managers' behaviour. Participant observation is clearly time- and resource-consuming, as well as demanding for the researchers *in situ*, but we regard observation as the method that provides the best information on what managers actually do, the interplay between contextual factors and leadership, and insights into the dynamics of leadership processes. This is because we are seeking to understand a phenomenon, not a population. Our empirical mode was thus intended to bridge the gap between theorizing and lived experience by illuminating the details of organizational life on the ground (Orlikowski, 2010). However, this method is challenging. It is one thing to observe managers and their activities, but observing how they create manoeuvring space is a different endeavour. In some instances, it may be obvious, while less obvious in others. Our corrective measure was to test our observations through different interpretations, as well as having three members in our research team, allowing us to compare notes.

We ended up shadowing 27 Norwegian police managers in their everyday work during the spring and summer of 2016, the early implementation phase of the police reform. There is scant research on how managers construct manoeuvring space, and we therefore chose to observe a rather wide variety of police managers on one of their working days (from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.) to gain insight into the phenomenon. We signed a confidentiality agreement and were granted full access; we followed formal and informal meetings, management by 'walking around', desk working, chats with colleagues, patrols and operations. We selected police managers strategically from six police districts. The police managers worked at various management levels (see Table 1). The participants were aged 38–60 years (average 49.4 years), and there were nine women and 18 men. All participants had completed further managerial training after their initial police education. The police managers who participated in our study had office jobs. Only one of the participants was involved in highly demanding physical tasks and active police operations. We did not aim for special days and specific activities when booking days for observations. We were thus able to observe normal working days, and the managers' everyday interactions with colleagues, employees and superiors. The participant observations were followed by 60–90-min semi-structured interviews with each observed manager, which

Table 1
Overview of participants.

Informant No.	Area of responsibility	Leader level
1	Investigations	3
2	Administration	3
3	A police station	2
4	Administration	2
5	A police station	2
6	Policing	3
7	Investigations	3
8	Investigations	3
9	Intelligence	3
10	Policing	3
11	A police district	1
12	Project management	4
13	Investigations	3
14	Policing	3
15	Operations	3
16	A police station	2
17	A police district	1
18	A police station	2
19	A police district	1
20	Investigations	3
21	Policing	3
22	A police station	2
23	A police station	2
24	Policing	2
25	A police station	2
26	A police district	1
27	Organized crime investigations	3

allowed us to ask structured questions and debrief, interpret and discuss observations. For the interviews, we developed a guide, while the shadowing was open-ended; here, we made notes on all activities we observed, without making interpretations of these activities. We transcribed the interviews and the notes from the shadowing and imported the data into the qualitative analytical tool NVivo.

We adopted an inductive approach, giving us the flexibility to study what unfolded, and obviously also presenting challenges in terms of structure and analysis. We applied grounded theory principles and looked for emerging patterns in the data. The data from the shadowing and the in-depth interviews, together with the researchers' interpretations of the observed material, were analysed using reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2004). Reflexive methodology involves shifting between different perspectives and levels of analysis for (i) raw data, (ii) interpretations and (iii) context analysis. We organized the data accordingly, some of the data being included in several categories, to ensure open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The collected data were categorized and analysed for its relevance (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Thus, we generated codes that we later developed into the themes described here. Targeting the first research question, we searched for the participants' descriptions of discretion and discovered that they used the term 'manoeuvring space' when talking about their latitude of action. In addition, they described manoeuvring space as something they created. Then, to address the second research question, we probed the data for descriptions and explanations as to how manoeuvring space was created. We identified three such strategies: decoupling, sensegiving and strategic positioning.

4. Results and discussion

The police managers' practice depended in a variety of ways on actions and interactions, their interpretations of expectations, demands, constraints, dilemmas and possibilities, and the development of local solutions in constructing their own management. This description of practice can be understood as sensemaking

processes (Matilis & Christianson, 2014) where the police managers noticed and interpreted cues about demands and constraints, which actively informed their choices and actions. They interpreted cues as they addressed the police mission, adjusted to the 'dos and don'ts' of the management culture, responded to events in a heads-on manner and mastered and learned 'their way' of management. They engaged in a range of actions. For example, they facilitated and made decisions, handled interpersonal relationships and solved possible conflicts, influenced boundaries to achieve autonomy, performed in different managerial roles, self-managed, created an identity as a manager to ensure legitimacy and focused on being a role model. In addition, we found that being strategic was often about fighting for resources and manoeuvring between dilemmas between e.g. structural requirements and local adjustments. In relation to their everyday practice as managers, we found differences in how they balanced dilemmas, how proactive they were, and to what extent they talked about missed opportunities for creating own local adjustments and behavioural choices.

The subjective dimensions are evident in our study due to the diverging perceptions about the range of managerial activities (choices) available to the participants as they worked to implement the reform. In this section, we will first present the participants' notion of a manoeuvring space and discuss how this differs from discretion as described in the literature. Second, we will describe and discuss how police managers navigated between dilemmas to construct manoeuvring space. The data show how the participants constructed discretion by engaging in activities that reduced the demands (e.g. by assigning them to others) and the constraints on their choices (e.g. by starting to plan local adjustments to the reform despite lacking necessary information). Our analysis identified three ways in which the police managers constructed manoeuvring space in a contradictory context: (1) decoupling, (2) sensegiving and (3) positioning.

4.1. The notion of manoeuvring space in a contradictory context

The participants often referred to what is best understood as manoeuvring space (Espedal, 2009), not discretion and not quite similar to discretionary space, in our interpretation of our data. Instead of using terms, such as autonomy, power or decentralization, they talked about taking and creating a 'space' or 'room' where they could take actions to manoeuvre between dilemmas to meet diverging managerial expectations. The informants described manoeuvring space as something they actively created, and that this was a necessity, rather than something that was given to them. The following quote illustrates this idea:

You must have the ability to create manoeuvring space and you have to be a bit strategic as a leader, I think. I have to try to take on necessary manoeuvring space for us to succeed with the police reform, and make it ours. (P17).

In everyday speech, this would be referred to as having room to manoeuvre. Following Espedal (2009), we have chosen the concept of manoeuvring space to describe this phenomenon. However, we extend Espedal's (2009) discussion of manoeuvring space as something managers construct. In the following sections, we will show three ways in which the managers in our study constructed manoeuvring space. Our data showed that the managers strongly believed that their ability to construct manoeuvring space was vital in a contradictory context. We recognize that manoeuvring space is closely related to the theoretical construct of discretion, but discretion does not necessarily acknowledge the 'space' created and how managers continuously have to manoeuvre between dilemmas (not being able to choose one over the other). This includes manoeuvring between constraints and demands to create possibilities for managing good policing.

The subjectivity in police managers' constructions of manoeuvring space is evident in divergent beliefs about whether they perceive their manoeuvring space to be small or large. Some of them explained:

The manoeuvring space is perhaps too large. Many find it too small. It is very limited as far as budgets go, but everything else is wide open. As a police leader, you have wide authority to change both culture and structure … But it's also in the manoeuvring space not to do so. (P14).

When I see the plans … I find that my manoeuvring space is getting even smaller … just to perform and for others to make the decisions. I've thought about that a great deal. (P18).

These quotes illustrate that the perceptions of possibilities for constructing manoeuvring space varied among the police managers and concur with the idea of discretion as a subjective phenomenon (Espedal, 2009; Espedal et al., 2012; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Stewart, 1982). Some of our informants talked about creating and developing their own manoeuvring space, while others were more concerned about what was given to them. We argue that this is in the core of our argument concerning the difference between discretion and manoeuvring space, where manoeuvring space is dynamic and continuously needs to be developed. Yukl's (2013) terms 'high locus of control' (managers believe in their own ability to influence) versus 'low locus of control' (managers believe they have no influence) are relevant regarding whether the police leaders are proactive actors in creating their own manoeuvring space or passive 'victims', not believing that they have influence. Police managers led reform work in a contradictory setting where the police reform largely relied on a bureaucratic logic, while established police practice relied on an operational logic (Johannessen, 2015). The constructions of manoeuvring space were therefore largely a question of how to lead when combining these logics. However, combining diverging logics was not always easy or feasible and challenged police managers to cope with a range of dilemmas. The core dilemma reflected the diverging expectations placed on police managers to perform their daily work, while at the same time preparing for reform implementation. When analysing in more detail, we found that this core dilemma consisted of several sub-categories of dilemmas: standardization versus local adjustment, top-down implementation processes versus local involvement, central versus local loyalty, and new priorities versus local priorities. Our approach to dilemmas concurs with Frimann and Keller's (2016) interpretation that dilemmas represent two or more possible contradictions that a manager needs to deal with; they are not objective, but rather interpreted and enacted by the manager who experiences them. The dilemmas created demands and constraints on police managers' choices (Stewart, 1989) to fulfil the expectations of creating change in their organizational units. The freedom to choose strategies is stated to be central to the leader's manoeuvring space (Espedal, 2009), where the police leaders addressed choices as possibilities for priorities. Contrary to what we would expect when choices are constrained, however, we found that police managers manoeuvred (or tried to manoeuvre) within these demands and constraints to increase their manoeuvring space, some of them more proactively than others. Hence, we found that, in a police context, it was seldom the case that managers had several alternative choices without constraints and the 'right' to choose or not to choose (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Stewart, 1989). Neither is police managers' discretion understood as static or as a quality of managers that is somewhat independent of contexts and practices, as argued in the discretion literature (Wangrow, Schepker, & Barker, 2015). Instead, we found that this could be better understood as constructions of managerial manoeuvring space and we now turn to describe three strategies to construct manoeuvring space revealed in our data.

4.2. Constructing managerial manoeuvring space by decoupling

The informants experienced a tension between the official arguments for the reform and their own understanding about the situation in the police service. The criticism of the police culture, leadership culture and attitudes that basically led to the police reform was challenging for the informants to comprehend. They simply did not recognize what to change from, which influenced their constructions of manoeuvring space with a focus on local adjustments. Correspondingly, their sensemaking of possibilities for constructing manoeuvring space in reform work was perceived as constraints and demands that hindered local adjustments. Our argument therefore is that their sensemaking of the police reform influenced their constructions of manoeuvring space, but in a way that maintained established practice rather than changing it. This concurs with the notion of decoupling (e.g. Bromley & Powell, 2012; Orton & Weick, 1990). Instead, several of them called for someone to explain to them what they were doing wrong. To implement the new reform, leadership is crucial, especially at front-line and middle manager levels, as was the case for our participants. They needed self-confidence in how to perform as change agents, but the criticism inherent in the reform did not support this. Two of them explained:

I'm not sure where we don't have a good leadership culture. The terror at Utøya, and the police waiting before taking action, and then concluding that there's bad culture in the police? I don't find that to be coherent and fair. It's also about our training and what we're able to predict. (P15).

It's this talk about culture, lack of leadership, lack of administration. I find this criticism of the police to be very general, and I don't think we find that it refers to us. It doesn't result in a feeling of crisis. You can call it maximizing a feeling of crisis to ensure changes, but the crisis isn't accepted throughout the police. Many people say we're ready for change, but change is also being forced on us. I'm very worried. (P23).

These quotes illustrate that the informants actively made sense of intentions of the reform but decoupled the official arguments of the reform from their own implementation work. By doing this, they constructed manoeuvring space by reducing demands. They admitted that change was challenging and that the police did not have much tradition of change, but they did not perceive that this was part of their responsibilities. Rather, they felt that others were responsible for following this up. This is evident when informants raised concerns that the reform was too complicated and overwhelming and that things were going too fast:

I'm a bit afraid of things going too fast, at the expense of involvement. This may give a poorer result than we could have had. Things need to take much more time. We should have spent more time on the introductory phases. (P25).

I support the reform. What I'm afraid of is the complexity. That it's too much and we find that there's just one thing to do after another. Now they're organizing working groups, but at the same time our work is piling up with more and more serious cases. The same people are supposed to produce by solving cases and contributing in these working groups. (P24).

The data show that the informants constructed manoeuvring space by informally assigning or transferring some responsibilities to someone else. We argue that this is an example of behavioural discretion as a direct effect of loose coupling (Orton & Weick, 1990). The data in this study were collected in the first implementation phase of the reform. Decoupling strategies may, however, have opposite consequences for manoeuvring space in later implementation phases. For example, we would expect that failure to deliver on goals would initiate increased managerial controls which reduced manoeuvring space. This illustrates that manoeuvring space is a dynamic phenomenon under continuous construction.

4.3. Constructing manoeuvring space by sensegiving

Managers' construction of their own manoeuvring space also involved facilitating activities, motivating employees and helping them in their processes of making sense of the reform, i.e. being involved in sensegiving activities (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) or the management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). The findings demonstrate that constructions of manoeuvring space were more than just a question of controlling resources and budgets, they were also strongly influenced by how the managers influenced their employees' sensemaking, which is argued to be essential in the role of managers in implementing change (Filstad, 2014). The managers acknowledged the need for change to meet new forms of criminal behaviour and serious challenges, such as acts of terror and cybercrime. However, they feared that the police reform with its standardization of police services would not acknowledge the complexity of policing or address necessary local solutions and priorities. Thus, the managers needed to direct employees' sensemaking towards what Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p. 442) describe as 'a preferred redefinition of organizational reality'. Our data show such sensegiving activities related to two themes.

First, we identify sensegiving activities in situations where the police managers lacked information about the police reform at an early stage of its implementation. The police managers prepared for change (demands) in the absence of relevant information (constraints). This might have constrained their manoeuvring space. Even though they waited for orders and were unable to influence decisions, some of them were quite active in constructing possibilities for manoeuvring space when engaging in preparations and solving practicalities at the local level. We argue that these efforts can be described as sensegiving activities with the clear intention of helping employees to cope with the demands and constraints of the reform. These activities were not only cognitive, but also involved practical preparations. Some of the informants explained:

We have spent a lot of time on both practical and mental preparations for the fact that things will be hectic. (P17).

The time we have at our disposal to carry out changes through good processes is getting less and less. I'm a bit nervous about that. But I try to tell my staff, okay, we're going to be a bit frustrated and things are going to be very different from what we're used to, but it will be better. (P4).

As stated here, they were proactive, for example, when buying themselves more time, when picturing different scenarios of possibilities and preparing for the worst, when addressing frustrations and when planning for a hectic period ahead.

The second theme in which sensegiving activities are evident in the data was related to the control of communication. Key to sensegiving activities is communication and the control of communication. Even though our informants engaged in sensegiving activities towards their employees, they were concerned about communication in connection with the reform, feeling that this constrained their manoeuvring space. For example, one informant explained that the Police Directorate sent important information to the whole staff by e-mail instead of involving the local managers. This, the informant argued, constrained the local managers' sensegiving efforts of communicating the messages in a way that considered local factors. The informant felt that the local managers needed to get the information first, to decide how to communicate it to staff. Other participants made the same point, expressing their frustration over information by e-mail from the Police Directorate with short deadlines for response, leaving less time for planning how to balance everyday work and reform work. Two explained as follows:

My focus is the police mission and the 'deliveries' to the Police Directorate. But at the same time I try to look after my staff, as I think they're the key to our success. (P3).

I want to be a facilitator for my staff, to see what they need and provide that. That's extremely important so that we can reach our goals and be efficient. We cannot end up as simple tools for upper management. (P4).

Despite the informants' concerns that top-down communication constrained their manoeuvring space, they actively engaged with their employees to adjust the responsibilities of their organizational unit in the reform implementation. We argue that this is an example of managers navigating between dilemmas (e.g. standardization versus local adjustment) and constructing manoeuvring space by sensegiving.

4.4. Constructing manoeuvring space by strategic positioning

In addition to decoupling and sensegiving, we found that the informants strategically positioned themselves and their organizational units to make sure that local considerations were taken into account. Their efforts at strategic positioning helped to construct manoeuvring space as they voiced local concerns and cognitively prepared for the future. One of the informants explained it in this way:

We have to be prepared and we have to make sure that our point of view is heard and that we work politically on all levels. To be mentally prepared will make us better equipped through the reform period … without any big personal disappointments. (P6).

One way the managers engaged in strategic positioning was to be very positive towards being involved in pilot schemes, project teams or resource groups. All of them claimed to be proactive in suggesting that their police station test out reform work, which gave them a voice for concerns about demands and constraints. Several of them expressed their frustration at not having any choice in certain issues, for example, complaining that the HR department of the Police Directorate was making the decisions even though they were not the ones with the best understanding of policing. Thus, involvement seemed to be an important way of strategic positioning through which the informants constructed manoeuvring space. Two explained:

I consider myself to be very lucky, as I've been part of a reference group in the Directorate for one year. I've been given the opportunity to have influence. We've had the chance to, very early in the process, to start our own processes before the others. This has been very important for our district. (P15).

I try all the time to suggest that we should be used as pilot projects. We want to be, but we always get a negative response. Then we could have had more resources too. We have piloted projects before, which was very successful, but in this reform it is the HR department at the Directorate that decides, and who are they to decide? (P21).

Their manoeuvring of possible space to solve the contradictions between reform work and everyday work was therefore often about being proactive and ensuring necessary resources for local practice.

Prioritizing resources is an example of managerial choices that concerns managers' loyalty to the hierarchy on the one hand and to the local police operations on the other hand. All participants had a strong sense of loyalty to decisions made higher up in the hierarchy. For instance, when priorities or standardized police services were decided, they followed up on those orders and postponed or abandoned previous local priorities even though it was not in their perceived best interest. In fact, the delays in local priorities came at quite a high cost. They explained:

I have to be loyal to decisions made, that's easy for me. Then I think I have to try to make necessary manoeuvring space to ensure that we succeed with the police reform. (P17).

It's difficult now with all the priorities. We have to put aside our priorities with the result that it will be too late if something happens. The non-stop 'political jumping about' is a problem. My task is to balance what we've built up and at the same time be loyal to the Police Directorate. (P16).

They were worried about moving the police from local districts, claiming that local knowledge is needed to provide good police service. Nevertheless, they remained loyal to the reform. This can be explained by the established characteristics of the NPS as bureaucratic with clear lines of order. Even though they struggled to make sense of how and why to standardize police services, they were motivated to serve in the best interest of the police mission. We also found that being proactive and motivated was linked to their positioning and the local police station. They were competing with other districts on deliveries and resources, and found this important in balancing central and local loyalty. Our notes from the shadowing reveal, for example, that P25 talked in a telephone conversation about the importance of positioning oneself to avoid responsibilities in being moved to another district. P21 had several meetings with his staff concerning unexpected budget cuts that did not make sense when they compared them with another police station. They talked about being better at 'keeping their cards close to their chest' to prevent the same thing from happening again. P1 explained that there were power struggles because they were fighting over the same resources and tasks and competing to position their people in important roles in order to position their own police force. These power struggles, serve as examples of police leaders balancing local priorities with reform priorities, where they decouple from the reform by creating necessary manoeuvring space for their employees to be able to continuously work with local priorities. Hence, police leaders in our study continuously communicated their loyalty to 'deliver' on the reform to their employees, as a necessary strategy to ensure good policing adjusted to local responsibilities.

Ensuring loyalty centrally and locally at the same time may constrain manoeuvring space. However, we found that the police managers engaged in a range of activities to help them to navigate between central and local expectations, including involvement in power relations and political activities to protect their own practice. The foundation for these activities was the police mission. As long as they felt that the police mission was attended to, they created manoeuvring space by positioning local interests and acting politically while still delivering on priorities determined centrally.

5. Conclusion

We have explored the intentional influence of managers related to possibilities for autonomy, power and discretion, where we have contributed findings that support the term manoeuvring space. The term manoeuvring space, we argue, covers the dynamics and processual aspects of managers' constructions, and integrates autonomy, power and discretional behaviours in these constructions of managers in practice, and not as something given or owned by managers. In contradictory contexts such as that of the NPS, dilemmas are the rule more than an exception to be managed. Hence, in contradictory settings, management is about constructions of space to manoeuvre between dilemmas and balance them. In our study, the police reform also provided a dilemma between reform work and everyday performance. The data show that the managers manoeuvred between the contradictions (they made choices) rather than accepting contradictions. They were used to contradictions between the two dominating logics of bureaucratic and operational practices (Johannessen, 2015), so it was more a question of balancing the two to ensure their own practice. However, sensemaking was of importance in how to manoeuvre dilemmas and thus also in how to prepare oneself and others and how to prioritize resources. This shows that a sensemaking perspective

was beneficial to understand how managers created meanings that informed and constrained actions (Weick et al., 2005).

The participants constructed manoeuvring space by engaging in a range of managerial activities that allowed them to relate to the contradictions inherent in the reform. We interpret these activities as choices in the demands—constraints—choices framework (Stewart, 1982, 1989), and we identified three strategies the managers used to create manoeuvring space: decoupling, sensegiving and strategic positioning.

Hence, our findings suggest several expansions on previous literature on discretion and also the importance of manoeuvring space in change management. First, our understanding of discretion needs to be extended to include managers' active and social constructions of manoeuvring space. We identified that managers constructed manoeuvring space by navigating between a number of dilemmas, including dilemmas between operational everyday work and simultaneous change implementation. Second, management is about proactivity, which helped the managers manoeuvre between dilemmas, buying them time, resources, power and legitimacy, unlike being passive or being a 'victim', as two opposed strategies (high versus low locus of control). We identified three such strategies that managers employed to construct manoeuvring space. Decoupling meant that they distanced themselves from one of the options of the dilemma, either by informally transferring the responsibility to someone else, or by defending the local and operational aspects. Sensegiving was a more active strategy that, for example, set the local agenda and helped the managers focus on reform implementation locally even though important information was lacking. Strategic positioning was the most active strategy. Some choices, such as managers' participation and involvement in reform work, enabled them to bring local concerns into the decision processes and gave them a head start in reform implementation by changing the demands or constraints. Third, the study contributes to a central theme in the leadership literature by focusing on why managers act in the way they do. The choices of action available to a manager have traditionally been studied as a relatively static phenomenon, where dilemmas have been approached as needing to be solved or avoided, instead of being balanced and navigated. Hence, the management literature should focus more on subjective constructions of manoeuvring space as central to management performance.

We call for further studies of managers' construction of manoeuvring space, as our study was limited to 27 police managers at a given point in time within a particular context. Because the construction of manoeuvring space is processual and contextual, it should be explored over time and in other contexts. The police culture characterized by loyalty to follow orders may explain why the managers actively constructed manoeuvring space in order to comply with contradictory demands. It would be interesting to pursue similar studies in other parts of the public sector where the loyalty to orders and lines of command are different, for example, in hospitals. We also encourage future research to explore why managers construct manoeuvring space to various degrees. The three strategies that we identified varied in terms of how actively the managers approached the dilemmas they were facing. It would be interesting to probe whether locus of control could explain this finding.

Our study shows that managers working under comparable demands and constraints act differently depending on their understanding, interpretation and motivation of these factors; here, sensemaking and sensegiving are important and dilemmas require manoeuvring space in order to be balanced. This suggests that managers' ability to construct their manoeuvring space should receive more attention in day-to-day work, particularly in contradictory contexts, and needs to be included in management training as an important competency.

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