

Ethical Pressure and Moral Distress in Middle Leadership: Perspectives from Higher Education in Welfare Professions

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This article illuminates the complex work practices of middle leaders in the higher education sector of welfare professionals. It is based on an empirical qualitative interview study exploring ethics and values dilemmas in the work-life of middle leaders and is methodologically anchored in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which combines hermeneutics and phenomenology with an idiographic approach to qualitative interview research. The empirical foundation consists of five research interviews with middle leaders at university colleges in Denmark, investigating their experience of ethics and values in leadership while being influenced by the complex role of their managerial position, including a particular cross-pressure that originates from hierarchical organisational structures. Building on the informants' narratives, this article offers an extensive analysis of the complexities of middle leadership in the higher education of welfare professionals. Three central topics evolved through a cross-case analysis of the interviews: 1) values and ethical dilemmas in educational middle leadership, 2) cross-pressure and moral distress in middle leadership and 3) trust, corruption and the significance of listening in middle leadership. This article focuses on the first-person perspective of middle leaders, and the analysis reveals how middle leaders reflect on ethical dilemmas in the practice of educational leadership. Based on these empirical findings, how middle leaders experience ethical pressure and moral distress because of tension between professional values and political and organisational governance is discussed.

Keywords: Educational middle leaders, university colleges, ethical pressure, moral distress, values-based leadership

Introduction

It is so classic. They spent three months creating their vision and a new strategy. Then, they spend three days with their bosses. Then, they spent three hours with their middle managers. Then, it's done. Then, they say, 'Now you have to go out and make a plan for how you want to involve your employees', and then our employees say, 'We don't want to spend time on that, because what kind of influence do we have?' or 'You say we have influence, but in reality...' That is how our organisation is structured.

– *Educational Middle Leader*

The current article explores the values and ethical aspects of middle leadership in the higher education of welfare professionals. During the past 15 years, Danish educational institutions for welfare professions—that is, teachers, social educators, early childhood educators, youth workers, social workers, nurses and several other professions—have undergone extensive transformations (Frederiksen 2019; Hjort et al., 2018): The long-standing monodisciplinary educational institutions for each individual profession were transformed into university colleges, later renamed vocational colleges, which contain a large number of welfare training programmes assembled in the same organisation and educational institution. The vision of university colleges is to advance higher education through solid relations to professional practices, offering bachelor's and master's degree programmes that are nationally grounded and aim at international standards (Ministry of Higher Education and Science).

Part of this development is the persistent political strategic implementation of new public management (see Hood 1991, 1995), which has had a significant impact on the higher educational institutions of welfare professionals and the management structure in particular (Hagedorn-Rasmussen & Klethagen 2019; Moos 2017). These changes have resulted in a large number of fusions of previously smaller educational institutions (conceptualised as seminaries), which were traditionally structured in terms of management with a principal, lecturers, students and relatively few middle leaders.ⁱ Hence, the seminaries were characterised by a flat organisational structure that sustained close collaborative relationships, highlighting the value of relational leadership (cf. Liou & Daly, 2023). There were few management layers and few personal contacts between students, lecturers and the principal, and each educational institution had yearlong

traditions, a unique history and a strong institutional identity for each individual seminary. The transition to university colleges—which now house thousands of students and employees—entailed an organisational modernisation of the educational institutions. Bryman (2007) argued that new public management in the university sector appeared because of a lack of trust and confidence in professionalism. New university colleges are built on the basis of a hierarchical pyramid structure with many managerial layers (principal, dean, head of department, head of education, educational leaders, educational coordinators and lecturers), and the new organisational structure fostered several new management layers that can be defined as distributed leadership (see Kjeldsen et al., 2020; Spillane, 2005).

As a result, a central part of the management staff at university colleges is middle leaders, whose work is stretched between a vertical field (based on classic top-down command paths and power structures) and horizontal field, where middle managers must cooperate with other (equal or equally ranked) leaders at the mid-level (cf. Bøje et al., 2022; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2019; Marshall, 2012). The middle leaders are coordinated in teams within each individual professional education, for example, teacher education or the educational programme of social educators, hence demanding high social competencies for middle leaders as well as negotiation skills and the capability to create trust-based working environments (cf. Grimen, 2019; Kovac & Kristiansen, 2010). However, research into new public management indicates that this form of governance has undermined trust in and within societal institutions (Hood & Dixon, 2015a, 2015b). This raises questions about what role value-based management plays in relation to middle leaders standing firm on the values that are connected with and support trust-based relational leadership despite political governance and reforms because these values create specific conditions and dilemmas for middle leaders.

These changes have led to extensive changes in collaboration and in the culture and identity of educational institutions. Regardless of the ideal visions for positive educational transformation processes, it seems that educational institutions are repeatedly organised through rigid structures that detach practices from immanent professional cultures (cf. Daly, 2010; Liou & Daly, 2018). The modernisation of the education of welfare professionals involved a movement away from the close relational socialising culture at the seminars towards large organisations characterised by distance between the

horizontal levels of management, strong top-down governance and an augmentation in economic, political and strategic planning. The establishment of new educational organisations has led to a loss of self-determination among educators and middle managers, which has considerably affected their self-understanding, professional integrity and life worlds. In some cases, this has led to a disarray of values and ethical dilemmas because the new organisational structures have challenged the fundamental ideals and professional ethos, which the educators and leaders had based their work on for several decades at small-scale seminaries educating welfare professionals.

The present article explores the consequences that the transition from seminaries to university colleges has had for middle leaders, focusing on two central concepts—*ethical pressure* and *moral distress*—as they are experienced by middle leaders confronting a series of dilemmas in their everyday practice. The well-researched phenomenon of moral distress is defined as an event in which ‘one knows what is right, but institutional limitations make it almost impossible to perform the right action’ (Jameton, 1984, p. 6). Ethical pressure is a broader social psychological concept that denotes external pressure on professionals and leaders by the state or organisations (Ribers, 2022) and that appears in connection with distributed leadership (Crawford, 2012; Spillane, 2005). Conflicting interests between educational institutions’ strategies, hierarchical levels of leadership and the perspectives and values of colleagues can create ethical pressure. Organisational and political factors are often the cause of moral distress; however, they can be experienced by the individual leader as a personal failure of competence that is associated with guilt when ethical principles and professional values are not adhered to. The two concepts of *moral distress* and *ethical pressure*—which are highlighted in the title of the present article—are existing concepts in many research articles (see Attrash-Najjar & Strier, 2020; Howard & Hammond, 2019; Kolbe & de Melo-Martin, 2023; Prentice et al., 2022; Ribers, 2022). Contemporary research on these phenomena has informed the research interest in the present qualitative study on middle leaders’ dilemmas related to work-life experiences.ⁱⁱ

Because of the complex societal, political and managerial demands (and pressure) influencing educational institutions and leaders, an important aspect of middle leadership is to navigate between external demands and personal values and visions (Tenuto et al., 2016). In line with these perspectives, an empirical exploration of the everyday practices

of middle leaders and training coordinators at university colleges has been established to understand the complexity of leading and organising as middle leaders, where the aspects of values and ethical dilemmas clearly emerge.

Methodology and Empirical Research

The empirical basis is a qualitative interview study, which is methodologically anchored in *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The focus is an exploration of the work-life experiences of middle leaders at university colleges in Denmark, focusing on the inherent values sustaining their leadership as well as the dichotomies, complexities and multiple relational and ethical dimensions that they face in their work. Hence, the empirical data are generated from a qualitative research strategy based on the following perspectives:

Qualitative methods are ideally suited to uncovering leadership's many dimensions. When done well, these methods allow us to probe at great levels of depth and nuance in addition to offering researchers not only the flexibility to explore the unexpected but also to see the unexpected. (Conger, 1998, p. 119)

The empirical material consists of five semistructured interviews of approximately one hour in duration with five informants who all have a middle leader function at a Danish university college: one research leader (*docent*), one educational coordinator (*uddannelseskoordinator*) and three educational leaders (*uddannelsesledere*). The interviews were explorative—albeit based on a semistructured interview guide—in order for new themes to emerge during the conversation; this is a prominent ambition in research based on IPA (see Smith et al., 2022). Middle leaders have different formal and informal responsibilities and functions in the organisation, but their position in the middle of the organisation is equal between leaders of equal or higher rank than themselves as well as between educational staff and students for whom they organise educational programmes.

IPA combines a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach to the exploration and detailed investigation of life worlds and particular experiences via a first-person perspective (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith 2011a, 2011b). Therefore, the method invites the

researcher to interpret the significance of leaders' experiences, hence containing a double hermeneutic dimension in that the researcher attempts to comprehend and interpret the informant's own understanding and interpretation of this specific incident and how it is connected to meaning shaping or loss of meaning (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2022). The empirical findings have been analysed through a cross-case analysis (Smith & Nizza 2022), here comparing thematic issues in the five interviews, and the results are discussed with a prism of existing leadership research. The primary research strategy has been to explore middle leaders' experiences and work-life challenges from a first-person perspective, which is the key feature of IPA (Smith & Osborn 2008) while remaining faithful to a '*sociocultural perspective, the role of mid-level leadership in higher education in relation to educational development*' (Mårtensson & Roxå 2016, p. 247)—that is, exploring the phenomenon of middle leadership in its societal and institutional context.

Hence, the empirical research and article will be founded from the perspective of *exploring the lived experiences of middle leaders*. The analysis of the informants' narratives in the next sections combines empirical findings with theoretical perspectives in current leadership research. Based on the results of the qualitative study, the current article explores the values and ethical aspects of middle leadership in the higher education university college sector. Furthermore, how the informants' experiences involve ethical pressure and moral distress is discussed. The perspectives of the informants will be illuminated under the thematic headlines emerging from the narratives of the interviews (cf. Smith, 2011b; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The focus is on the first-person perspective of middle leaders, who have various forms of formal and informal management responsibility, and the analysis reveals how they deal with and reflect upon ethical dilemmas in practice. Based on the empirical findings, three central topics evolved through the cross-case analysis of the interviews: 1) values and ethical dilemmas in educational middle leadership, 2) cross-pressure and moral distress in middle leadership and 3) trust, corruption and the significance of listening in middle leadership. Under these thematic headlines, the informants' narratives will be presented through *exemplary examples* in the form of quotes from the interviews, that is, statements that well represent general themes in the narratives of the informants.ⁱⁱⁱ These exemplary examples can be longer citations with narratives from interviews or brief assertions that imply metaphors

or metaphorical expressions (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which can be used to identify general thematic trends in the empirical material.

Results and Empirical Findings

A common thematic feature in the interviews is that all five middle leaders have to collaborate with people who are above, below and beside them, and this involves extensive challenges (cf. Duignan, 2014; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2019) and requires particular the needed competencies to maintain legitimacy (cf. Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016), act with integrity (cf. Tenuto et al., 2016; Thoms, 2008), exercise value-based leadership with and remain an authentic educational leader (cf. Avolio, 2010). There are particular ethical dilemmas that characterise middle leaders, here taking a special form of responsibility through their function of distributed leadership (Crawford, 2012; Spillane, 2005), which is in contrast to other leaders in the organisation. There are, to a large extent, special ethical formal and informal issues at stake in connection with middle leaders' role as managers because they must be able to act in a tension between colleagues, educational coordinators, comanagers and leaders of higher rank than themselves. Dialogue, diplomacy, soft power and manipulation (perceived as active forces to achieve results), combined with care, empathy and judgement (as interpersonal competencies), become central themes in practice.

Values and Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Middle Leadership

Middle leaders can be caught in the crossfire between the dichotomy of a *challenging* environment (distributed leadership) and an exhaustingly *stressful* everyday practice (cf. Duignan, 2012, 2014). The dichotomic relationship between the phenomena of ethical pressure and responsibility are closely interconnected, as are the challenges (as they are narrated by leaders in the interviews) and external pressures, which can become hegemonic structures, counteracting authentic professional practice when ethics and policies collide (Hightower & Klinker, 2012).

One of the middle leaders noted that her own background as a professional teacher at a university college means that she understands and identifies with the lecturers' experience of and arguments for what constitutes professionally qualified teaching. These perspectives are not always in line with the strategic measures that come from higher

management levels. At this historic point in the development of vocational colleges, media coverage indicated that the students in the teacher education programme wanted more teaching lessons. This approach was implemented, but when lecturers and educators with many years of experience were asked about their opinion, they had other suggestions on how to improve the quality of the teaching programme for the students and how it would have an improved effect. The lecturers pointed out that the students should have had more supervision, but tutoring hours are far more expensive for the organisational budget, so this could not be accommodated. The middle leader explained this as follows:

I find myself in dilemma-filled situations when it is connected to the fact that there is a strategy or a prioritisation that comes for completely legitimate reasons from a leadership perspective and an organisational rationale. Alterations that are based on evaluations and other existing management tools but clash with the professional and idealistic perspectives that come from below. As a middle manager, you are the one who translates the strategic benchmarks – and why it is truly meaningful that we are going in this direction – and then at the same time tries to listen to the fact that it does not necessarily make sense for the educational staff.

This extract illustrates a central theme in the interviews: A dilemma arises between top-down management and professional educational expertise and judgement based on years of educational practice. Furthermore, the important role of collegial dialogue and community-oriented development based on relationships is revealed because it takes time to create a space for experimentation. The middle leaders explained that some things are easier to achieve in smaller organisations, but there is also something exciting about being in a large organisation, albeit there are far more ethical dilemmas. This circumstance emphasises the need for a focus on people, relationships and learning ‘rather than structures and centrally determined standards for conformance’, as argued by Goldspink (2007, p. 27).

The middle leader quoted above elaborated on how the educators came from a previous organisational structure, one defined by the local culture at the seminaries, where they were asked for advice and their voices heard, and they were involved in educational development and decision-making processes. Her professional career, advancing from a lecturer to an educational leader, provided insights into the experiences of the lecturers:

I had recently been a colleague of my employees, so I reflected: ‘I wonder how long the trust that my employees have in me can last?’ Because I had a good position in the group and no one was upset that I had become a leader. I thought about whether it would be possible for me to come and say, ‘This is the way we have to go!’ when they thought it was the completely wrong way.

Like the other informants interviewed, she emphasised that the middle management function is largely rooted in trust, dialogue and negotiation skills. However, these values and competencies are challenged by distributed forms of leadership and the organisation’s hierarchical structure. Recent research has indicated that high levels of trust improve educational institutions (Daly, 2010). Thus, trust is cardinal to the ethical aspects of educational reform processes; therefore, it is imperative to draw attention to the relational dimension of educational leadership from a social and relational vantage point (Liou & Daly, 2023). As the quote above expresses, the leader experienced that the lecturers’ trust in her was not breached because of her diplomatic negotiating skills but rather because she held inherent values for leadership practice. She elaborated with the following:

I think it’s because as a leader—anchored in my values—I stuck to what I could stand for professionally and at the same time I acted with loyalty towards my own leaders. I tried to maintain an openness, saying to the educators: ‘Yes, there are some of these measures that may feel meaningless right now, but this is the framework we have, and so we must create meaning within that framework’. In addition, I listened to their criticism. I could stand the dissent. I think it is important that the employees had the experience that ‘I could stand there’ and that I accepted their dissent instead of just shutting down and replying: ‘Well, that’s just the way it is!’

Concurrently, she expressed to the team of educators that they did not have an option other than accepting and working with the new initiatives that were implemented by the executive board based on strategic and economic rationales. Hence, the middle leader position is largely characterised by navigating in a field of tension arising in the organisational reform processes, where the top managers and executive board initiate transitions that are often at odds with the deep-held value perceptions shared by the educational staff.

Another example is from an educational middle leader of teacher training, who elaborated on how it is difficult when her team of middle managers has to negotiate what should be prioritised and how they should lead:

We differ in our beliefs about how much we should control when we lead. How much should we define a teaching space? Or how much space should there be for educators to have their own space? My values are being challenged.

She continued by elaborating that the dilemma originates from her doubts about defining the work-life for educators. The uncertainty is whether middle management teams can trust that educators themselves are professionally competent to ensure quality in their teaching. The headline of her reflections is a personal and professional inquiry into taking a stance that could be characterised as a fundamental ontological question: *How can one lead without control?* The structural organisational dimensions challenge educators' ability to didactically create the best educational course. She described that the field in which the greatest challenges arise is in the horizontal management space, where she has had to negotiate with equal middle managers: *'Sometimes, it would have been easier if I only had the top management to fight with'*. She explained that there is an increasing strategic focus on more practice-based teaching and varied teaching methods, among other things, because the new cohorts of students consist of students who have difficulty learning and acquiring academic knowledge as well as those who are completing welfare professional education courses based on traditional didactics.

The transformation of professional welfare education as a whole and teaching methods specifically affect educational middle leaders, who are responsible for implementing strategic change initiatives. For political, societal and research-based reasons, it can be argued that university colleges of applied sciences must change their approach to professional education now and in the future towards an aspiration for corporate social and ethical responsibility—sustaining middle leadership on a conscience-based relational foundation (cf. Pruzan, 1998, 2001).

Cross-Pressure and Moral Distress in Middle Leadership

Research into distributed leadership and middle leaders' experience of their complex work lives involves an important focus on the value tensions that leaders stand in, for

example, when there is agreement between professional and personal values purely in terms of work and when political pressure creates ethical pressure, which manifests as moral distress. How does working in this field of tension affect a middle leader? Which ideals do leaders work from, and when is there a clash between principles? To recognise this, we must embrace that leaders work in a postmodern world defined by ‘pressures, paradoxes and ethical challenges – especially, in a world of standards and accountability for performance outcomes’ (Duignan, 2014, p. 166).

An important example can be seen in the narrative of an educational leader of the profession of social educators. She characterised her position as a middle leader with *cross-pressure*, which implies tension between her own values, the values of her coleaders, and the hegemonic power structures that define her work-life:

The cross-pressure is not reduced by the fact that we have many middle managers; it actually becomes more complex, I think. I actually think it is relatively easy for me to navigate a cross-pressure from above and from below.

Cross-pressure is an interesting metaphor for the position of middle leaders because it encompasses the cross-point in the symbolic cross, which is drawn by two lines: a vertical and horizontal line. The cross-point of middle leadership is the place of convergence, where different groups of employees meet and intersect with each other in everyday educational practice. Concurrently, this sphere is the conjunction of values and ethical innovation, that is, the opposite of ethical pressure and moral distress. Lakoff and Johnson stated that metaphors are one of our most important ways of expressing our experiences and moral practices as metaphors ‘structure the ordinary conceptual system of our culture, which is reflected in our everyday language’ (1980, p. 139). The metaphorical description of cross-pressure is connected to ethical pressure and reveals that there are many dimensions of welfare education and factors connected to leadership and didactics in the higher education of welfare professionals. The cross-point of welfare education encompasses political, organisational, managerial, social and interpersonal dimensions, which ultimately meet in the functions of middle leaders and distributed leadership.

In the vertical managerial hierarchy, there are clearly defined areas of power and paths of command. The educational reform strategies are conceived from the top level and pushed down through the organisation, where they are gradually implemented via

different management levels. This structure provides clarity about the role of top management, but in horizontal management teams, there is complexity '*when we push each other's values*', as an informant expresses it. It follows that negotiation is a distinct competence of distributed middle leadership that is characterised by dialogue, the intention and ability to listen and, to a high degree, the ability to reach compromises through pragmatic resolutions and diplomacy. These are high ethical aspirations that will not always be successful.

In line with this, the interviews revealed diverse educational cultures at Danish university colleges, albeit there being a communal narrative—expressed in various ways—that they became '*totally professionalised hierarchical machines*' with very clear top-down structures. The *machine* metaphor is predominant and emphasises the phasing out of the close human relationships that the informants all express characterised the democratic educational culture and work-life at the old seminaries. Middle leaders have leaders above them from whom they take directives, they have educational middle leaders next to them with whom they must engage in teamwork, and then, they have the educational staff for whom they organise. The lack of *space* is a metaphorical expression of this cross-pressure:

I don't have much space as a middle leader. We talk a lot about having space, but we truly don't have it. I do not get it from the executive board, from my dean or from my head of education. They think I have space, but I truly don't. However, there is still something I can influence. I know what kind of organisation I am a part of and that it entails certain things. Therefore, to avoid having to bang my head against it all the time, there are some things I accept. I think I deal with it by analysing myself out of it.

The informant continues by describing how, through studies of organisational theorists, she gains an understanding of the processes, structures and power relations of which she is a part at the university college.

I can position myself a little outside, and then, I can actually describe what is happening and see what kind of mechanisms are at work. It is an organisation that has certain mechanisms, patterns and certain forced ways of acting.

She went on to explain that she cannot point to anyone in particular who is *'acting with malice'*. In other words, she understands the basic organisational structures of which she is a part and the rationale from which the upper managerial levels act, even though it affects her fundamental values and ethical aspirations. Precisely, this insight into the management hierarchy and organisational dynamics makes her say, *'Therefore, I don't feel like Kafka hit me. I don't feel subject to anything'*.

She elaborated that she can get the impression that the lecturers and educators may be affected by systems in the organisation that do not correspond but that she had learned to move beyond and across the organisational constructions, finding alternative ways to act within the framework: *'There are people within 'that which is' and so I talk to them instead'*. She understood that she cannot change the conditions, but instead, she has found ways to navigate within the existing framework by communicating and relying on the relational aspect. In her case, the experience of moral distress is related to *'the many dilemmas that come with what I cannot make succeed. However, I have found ways to deal with that'*. She noted that her way of communicating with the educational staff is *'by listening to them'*. The phrase that best characterises her narrative is the word *listener*. She explained that she could not always solve the problems but that it helped the educational staff experience the situation that she listened to them—in other words, that they feel acknowledged in their infuriation with the given state of affairs.

When I started as an education leader, I had the experience that I was a target or punching ball for all their frustrations. I am also for my boss. When something doesn't work, it ends up at the middle management level. Because we are the ones who create the everyday practice and we have personnel responsibility. The students damn well can't figure it out either, and I can understand that.

Apparently, listening is the antidote to the frustration associated with the transition from democratic equality-based workplaces, from which a large number of educators have their initial work experience, to the modernised hierarchical construction defining modern university colleges. This narrative she shared with all the other informants, who deliberated that one of the primary skills and ways to create diplomacy is by listening. This is a central exemplary example because it is only in human relationships that you can listen to and create dialogue. The mechanical organisational

framework and rigorous rules that the informants described in several ways (with the metaphor of machinery) are beyond the human realm, where listening can occur in the *sphere of between* (see Buber 1978).

The organisation is divided by vertical pillars, and educational practices are subject to ministerial decisions and legislation. At the same time, the middle management layer is the leader level that is subject to the greatest cross-pressure because it translates the decisions of the top management layer to the wider group of employees. Being in that role can create moral distress because, as a middle leader, one is identified with values that they cannot stand for or decisions that they are not in control of or would not have made themselves.

An informant described creating internal conflict when the educational staff confronts her: *'What are the leaders going to do about this!'* She emphasised the word *leaders* in a way that made it clear that the staff equate her with the organisation itself. *'Being called the management – and yet I am standing right here in front of you – that's a comment I get very often'*. She ended the sentence by emphasising that she disliked this form of projection of power onto her as an individual middle leader. In other words, her experience of discomfort arises when the educators and staff personify her with the higher management layers, the executive board and the organisation's powerful strategic expansions:

You become *the management*. The *substantive*. That unknown size in the system that everyone just has a hard time with. Thus, I am also suspected of exposing employees to everything possible. It is hard. It is just difficult to be a middle leader in every possible way.

When she talked about her work-life, it was clear that she did not feel that she can be responsible for the overall set of decisions, but as a middle leader, she is made responsible for the overarching circumstances and often for the strategic decisions that come from above and go against the educators' experience of agency and freedom—and this creates cross-pressure and the experience of moral distress.

Moral distress is a very extensive field of research globally, while ethical pressure is a newer concept that has not previously been applied to middle leadership research. It can be seen that ethical pressure can cause moral distress. External factors are often the

cause of moral distress, but they can be experienced as a personal failure of competence on the part of the individual and, thus, be associated with guilt. Ethical pressure is a sociological and social psychological term that denotes the external pressure of society, the state and organisations on professional practitioners and leaders (Ribers, 2022). The exemplary examples in the section above illustrate how conflicting interests between political agendas, educational organisations, other leaders, and colleagues can create cross-pressure, which corresponds to ethical pressure.

Trust, Corruption and the Significance of Listening in Middle Leadership

Trust and the significance of listening are elaborated by several informants, albeit being constantly challenged by organisational structures and changes, as exemplified by the following statement: *'It shows that there is not a lot of trust and it says something about the fact that there are enormous changes happening all the time'*. This quote reflects micromanagement, where middle leaders cannot inform educators about everything, and at the same time, they can understand what they are asking for because they too are in a position where they are criticised by colleagues and students and they need to know what is going on. Fundamentally, the struggle is about trust—or lack of trust—in the various management layers, and it occurs in an organisation where it is difficult to communicate effectively to all levels. *'That is how it is when an organisation grows, and grows, and grows. In addition, people just want to talk to a human being'*. In all the informants' narratives, the dichotomy between the large-scale organisation, which is characterised by impersonality, and the longing for close relational human encounters is expressed, for instance, in this way: *'I think the educators would say that my management function is based on trust'*. Hence, educators react when they are faced with frequent shifts of middle leaders because the relationship takes time to build up. At its core, leadership is relational (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). According to the empirical findings, there is a paradoxical clash of values between training welfare professionals for future work with living beings, children and adults alike and a domain of education characterised by alienation and long lines of command that move away from direct human relationships.

The words *'trust'* and *'relationships'* were mentioned several times by all the informants throughout the interviews, and it appears that the experience of moral distress erupts when they are criticised for their motivations and actions and when, in reality, they

are acting on behalf of the organisation.^{iv} It is painful when the human foundation of basic trust is shattered (see Løgstrup, 1997) because of organisational structures because the middle management function is ultimately based on trust, even though it takes time and confidence to preserve trust in human relationships.

They feel that there is a whole lot of their social capital or value, which is born by the fact that there is someone who appreciates them. That there is someone who knows that they are capable, that there is someone who knows that they have done all these things over the years.

In the interviews, there were repeated stories about how the educators who had been at the old seminaries and taught students for 25 years reacted to being deprived of everything that they had created. Because of the new organisational structures, they lost their professional integrity and agency, and middle leaders became a symbol of the lost paradise.

After all, I am a representative of everything the organisation does that disrupts their work. Therefore, it is a dual role that I have. In addition, that's what it's like to be a middle leader. I know that, and I think they know that, too, and it helps when we know that.

It is easier to maintain a conflicting atmosphere when people know each other's roles. This middle leader described that there is a sphere of management that is her own—metaphorically described as a *room*—although she used the phrase *engine* with her workspace (*room*), which corresponds with the machinery metaphors illustrated in the sections above:

There is also that other room where my bosses at all levels mingle. They are down, messing around in my engine room. I think that is difficult. I think that is truly difficult. In addition, that's where I think being part of such a large organisation is where I'm most challenged.

When she is identified as equal to the top-down management by the other employees, it is in reality because her managers are '*down in her engine room*', as she put it—she has become the manifestation of the organisations' top-down leadership because, as a middle leader, she is closest to the educational staff. Who decides how teacher education should

be created? It is a difficult space to be in, and it requires high levels of cooperation between the administration and the political layers; in this process, ethics and policies collide (Hightower & Klinker, 2012).

When the informants were asked during the interviews (as a form of exercise in thinking in ideal utopias) what they would do if they had the chance to be a leader in their own way, based on their own values, the answers reflected a humanistic relational aspect of listening as a key component in leadership: *'I think leaders should listen more. There are simply some layers in such an organisation that need to listen more'*. She elaborated that her boss is not very good at keeping her mouth shut: *'She talks a lot, and when you talk, you can't listen'*. A large-scale organisation results in distance. *'However, that's how it is the farther away you get. She doesn't know our world. You get corrupted somehow by being a leader. You become less understanding'*. The feeling of leaders being corrupted by their distance from the realities of practice, the feeling of being misunderstood and not listened to, are examples of ethical pressure that deteriorates values in the culture of higher educational organisations, ultimately leading to moral distress among middle leaders, which has been described in this article.

The middle leaders, who were once educators themselves, have valuable perspectives with them to understand and sympathise with the educational staff, but the informants argued that, when leaders remain in a place from which they do not move, they lose these perspectives. The informants emphasised that if one can listen and create a space where people listen to each other, then it is actually possible to create something good, but *'those spaces are hard to find'* because of time pressure and lack of opportunity to coordinate and cocreate.

The informants described the potential of cocreation processes, where there is time for the involvement and creation of professionally qualified education, but simultaneously, there is always a concern that the product will become a rigid strategic document serving managerialism. If it is to be a foundation for the deep-held values shared by the educational staff, it must be a dynamic document, as stated by this middle leader:

However, there is suspicion, and I can truly understand that. It is new public management that has rolled its systems over our heads. Therefore, in a little while, it will become a strategic management document. In addition, I can feel that my boss would also like that

and my research manager would also like that and some of my colleagues would also like that because what the document states is what you have to do. Therefore, I say, but there is no development in that. Let us stop turning development documents into strategic management documents. We have many governance documents. In these discussions, I can feel that I am getting into trouble with myself because I can feel that I am getting annoyed that everything is becoming so rigid, so management oriented.

The argument that distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005) does not automatically lead to empowerment (Fuller, 2012) is a perspective for middle leaders' counteractions. Thus, ethically based management is a political and relational matter. Research into the new forms of administration concludes that efficiency, strategy and control- and documentation-based new public management methods for quality assurance have deteriorated the institutions of the welfare society (see Hood & Dixon, 2015a, 2015b; Moos, 2017). Throughout the interviews, the informants were engaged in identifying their moral sensitivity and the ethical nature of their work as middle leaders, defining underlying values, recognising eloquent virtues and using moral imagination as they reflected upon their practice as leaders (cf. Bezzina 2012), and they expressed feelings of moral distress. This process has led to critical stances towards the current organisational structure and ethical pressure it places on middle leaders, a realisation that, in and of itself, is an important aspect of developing ethical perception.

Discussion

The empirical findings show the central fields of tension between the respective external pressure from politically driven organisations through strategically based developments (Gavino & Portugal, 2013) and internal leadership potential based on value-based leadership. Middle leaders' values may conflict with, or be undermined by, the managerial system within which they must work, hence placing the focus on their ability to foster human values. This qualitative study focused on the dichotomies of middle leadership and the complex constellation between visions and realities, including the multifaceted dynamics of distributed leadership. An aspect of this is when the middle leaders seek a balance between the endeavour of surrendering power—expressed in the notion of *leading without* control—and their unavoidable exercise of power. Because the traditional form of management (solo leadership) has been replaced by new distributed

management structures, which are described as leading through leaders, it involves actors and collaborative partnerships in the organisation (Crawford 2012). Hence, an important research perspective is the relationships between the different management levels critically perceived in relation to the entire educational institution.

The qualitative data shed light on the perspectives of middle leaders on how to lead from a visionary stance and how to delegate management tasks to a larger group of people. This interesting development, ethically speaking, involves a number of dichotomies (Duignan, 2001; Hightower & Klinker, 2012). According to Fuller (2012), there may be one managerial vision towards emancipatory potential, but there is no guarantee that distributed leadership results in democratic processes, cooperation and participation. Thus, the transition to new university colleges and new forms of welfare education reinforce the need for leaders to develop moral perceptions and the capability for ethical reflection. Moral perception is an important competence for middle leaders. All levels of management will be involved in identifying their ethical character as leaders, determining underlying values, assessing realities and identifying relevant professional character traits (cf. Bezzina, 2012).

Values are not static but rather involve a constant flow of construction and revision; hence, leaders must be able to engage in critical, ethical stance taking and move from mental abstraction to ethical perspective shifts in practice (Harrison, 1994). Therefore, adhering to deep-held values as a leader involves moral imagination (Bezzina, 2012) and engaging in visionary prospects for future practice. The middle leaders in the present study articulated their visions as a desire to spur change and success and create co-responsibility through the distributed form of leadership, despite the ethical pressure coming from top-down managerialism. Management, which can be understood as the distribution or delegation of leadership tasks and responsibility, however, involves relinquishing direct power and control. Therefore, the middle leaders in the present study have been forced to consider how they cooperate in teams. It is central that coordinators and educators are involved in a timely manner because management projects rely on trust and dialogue about change processes to create the necessary co-ownership (Avolio, 2010); this is stressed by all the informants who participated in this qualitative study. The dichotomous relationships between the phenomena of ethical pressure and leadership responsibility are closely interconnected, as are the life-giving encounters (as narrated by

leaders in the interviews) and external pressures that originate in hegemonic structures, counteracting authentic professional practice.

Qualitative research on educational leadership is intensive and complex (Conger, 1998), and this interview study with five middle leaders, on which the current article is based, has provided new insights into middle leadership through a prism of perspectives, many of which could be investigated further or elaborated further upon. Avolio (2010) argued that prospective developments in leadership should, and will, emphasise the focus on processing and reflecting upon self, behaviour, ways of leadership and interactions with staff and stakeholders rather than following a particular style or behaviour. Hence, the objective of using the strengths of qualitative research through this IPA (Smith et al., 2022) of middle leadership has been to gain access to the subjective experiences and life worlds of middle leaders (cf. Bryman, 2004; Bryman Stephens & á Campo, 1996; Conger, 1998; Nizza et al., 2021).

Concluding Perspectives

The present article has illuminated how five middle leaders at university colleges experience their roles and tasks in educational organisations and what values and ethical considerations they reflect upon. The domain of middle leadership is dichotomous because leaders and educational staff are caught in cross-pressure between a demanding organisational environment based on distributed leadership and an exhaustingly stressful everyday practice (Duignan, 2001). Middle leadership is ethically grounded, here through its anchoring in social relations, human development and cooperation. Drath et al. (2008) have advocated for a new management ontology based on three basic values: direction, alignment and commitment. Therefore, ethical visions, ethical challenges and ethical learning processes are important elements of higher education management. Middle leaders are on the front line in terms of setting the tone for culture change, which includes establishing and maintaining ethically sound leadership awareness and organisational philosophies, as highlighted by Avolio (2010), Pruzan (2001) and Thoms (2008). International research has indicated that ethics and the handling of ethical dilemmas are essential for well-functioning cultures in organisations that have professional human relationships at the core. Leadership is largely defined by the ability to create an organisational ethos; hence, reflexive leadership and ethical reflection on values are

crucial (Alvesson et al., 2017). To act with professional integrity, middle leaders' reflections on the relationships between themselves and others are inevitable. The capacity to examine one's core values as a leader in a professional context is imperative, and the informants' narratives reveal that they possessed this capability. Several of the stories told in the interviews reflect a search for conscience, albeit the situations they portray as examples are often connected with that which is immoral or obstructs their visions for good leadership practice, such as the space for listening and genuine dialogue with lecturers and educators. This finding emphasises that a high set of ideals and deep-held values for the creation of eudemonic work-life will expose a leader to the experience of moral distress because aspirations are difficult to attain within the framework of hegemonic organisational structures.

Postmodern welfare societies constantly change higher education and welfare institutions via neoliberal strategies (Moos, 2017), transforming the social, cultural and political context. Wahl (2011) has described how Nordic countries have dismantled the ethos of the welfare state, seeing results in the form of a brutalising tendency in the workforce. Ethical pressure, which can be understood as a lack of opportunity to live up to one's own and the profession's standards, can lead to moral stress. Today's educational reforms are loosely coupled in complex systems that, in contrast to rationalistic and market-driven logics, reinforce a necessary ethical focus on human relationships (Goldspink, 2007). There may be ethical considerations and potential unethical outcomes connected with distributed leadership. The implementation stems from a top-down approach to management, despite its collective design, and represents a basic ethical challenge, namely one leading to cross-pressure between new public management mechanisms and professional values (cf. Hood & Dixon, 2015a).

After postmodern welfare societies change, educational organisations and welfare institutions are transformed, and the focus on the context in which leadership is enacted becomes stronger (Avolio, 2010) as all leadership is relational at its core (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Liou & Daly, 2023). When questions about organisational and managerial support for the social and relational aspects of leadership and educators' wishes are raised (Daly & Liou, 2018), an important prospect for future research in educational leadership is to bridge the gap between leadership research and practice (Liou & Daly, 2023). The next important step—or a future prospective—for research in the practice of middle

leaders will be investigations into how moral perception is developed and simultaneously challenged, along with how, or whether, ethical awareness takes root in practice. Liou and Daly (2023) have stated that leadership can be regarded as social influence anchored in social relationships, which corresponds with the central perspective of the empirical investigation sustaining this article. Essentially, communities of ethical leadership are built around ethical learning processes and anchored in the ability to *listen*, embrace frustrations among employees and manage the role of middle leadership in a constant field of tension. Ethical positions are fixed but not rigid. The relationship between the ideal level and real level—the ethical demand and the ethical challenges—is pervasive in all leadership.

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Notes

ⁱ The Danish term for seminary is *seminarium*, etymologically anchored in the Latin origin of the word. For decades, the education of teachers, social educators, social workers, youth workers, early childhood educators and similar professions took place in either a teacher seminary (*lærer seminarium*) or pedagogy seminary (*pædagog seminarium*). These seminaries were closely connected to either an educational, pedagogical or philosophical thinker, for instance, Frøbel Seminariet, Zahles Seminarium or Montessori Seminariet – or to the place in which it was placed, i.e., København Pædagog Seminarium, Blågård Seminarium or Vordingborg Seminarium. Thus, these higher educational institutions had a strong identity connecting the subject area of professional work, with its knowledge base and theoretical positioning.

ⁱⁱ These two concepts *ethical pressure* and *moral distress* have not been changed in this article to correspond with the existing research literature (see Attrash-Najjar & Strier, 2020; Kolbe & de Melo-Martin, 2023; Prentice et al., 2022; Ribers, 2018). Furthermore, the purpose of this article is not to discuss the difference between *ethics* (origins in the Greek tradition) and *morality* (origins in the Roman tradition) because these two concepts are used interchangeably in the *modern professional ethics literature* and research environment. Banks and Gallagher (2009) choose to abolish the distinction between ethics and morality and focus instead on what characterises professional ethics as a concept of practice and as a field of research: ‘Whilst some theorists distinguish the domain of the “ethical” (values concerning the nature of the good life, which may be culturally relative) from the domain of the “moral” (concerning universal norms of right action), we use the two terms interchangeably’ (2009, p. 16).

ⁱⁱⁱ A note on the meaning and purpose of *exemplary examples*, which is an inventive presentation of the empirical qualitative interview research data. I have chosen not to name the informants with pseudonyms but instead to highlight exemplary examples in the form of interview quotes, which highlight general thematic derived from the cross-case analysis of the five informants’ narratives (cf. Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Exemplary examples may be direct quotes from the interviews or short statements that entail metaphors or metaphorical expressions which pinpoint general themes in the interviews (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

^{iv} Professional ethics in practice has been defined as ‘the norms of right action, good qualities of character and values relating to the nature of the good life that are aspired to’ (Banks & Gallagher, 2009, p. 16). In line with this perspective, this qualitative study has revolved around questions on how middle leaders experience their role and responsibilities in the educational organisation and what values and the ethical considerations they perceive as significant.