MIDDLE MANAGERS' WORK IN RECESSION AND AUSTERITY: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

ABSTRACT

Although researchers have explored the impacts of structural changes on managerial work, few insights have been generated into whether the turbulent economic environment induced by a recession and/or an extended period of austerity accelerate known changes to managerial work and/or whether recession/austerity are revealing or causing previously unknown effects. This article explores and analyses middle managers' reflections on how, if at all, their work is fundamentally changed by economic pressures such as recession and/or by choices of executives to impose such pressures during and post-recession (commonly referred to as 'austerity measures'). The findings suggest that middle managers responded to the recession and on-going economic austerity in a differentiated manner, with the initial responses being largely positive. Responses became negative over time, with examples of disillusionment and cynicism as middle managers believed that their superiors were using the disguise of recession and austerity to introduce changes that impacted profoundly on their working lives and those of their subordinates.

KEYWORDS

Middle managers
Recession
Austerity
Managing in austerity
Management practice

INTRODUCTION

Managerial work has been a key topic that has been studied since management became a recognised profession and research field. Our concern in this article is the work of middle managers. As we explain later, our conception of middle managerial work includes not just their tasks and responsibilities, the ways they accomplish these tasks and the context in which they perform their tasks, but extends to understanding the ways they reflect on and interpret what they do and what they are required to do. Although the debates and perspectives employed so far have been wide-ranging, most contributions have centred on exploring the theorised expectations and realities of managerial work and whether either the content or the context (or, in some cases, both) has changed and, if so, theorising on the nature and magnitude of that change (e.g. Farrell and Morris, 2013; Tengblad, 2006; 2012). Specifically, while many researchers have argued that the substance of managerial work has remained relatively consistent (e.g. Hales, 1999; 2002; Watson, 1994), others have contended that change has been radical, with evidence of what they view as a move from traditional forms of organising (characterised by the bureaucratic form) to more flexible and innovative approaches which are viewed as post-bureaucratic (e.g. Grey and Garsten, 2001; Kanter, 1989).

Although these debates have remained strong and on-going, some scholars have suggested that other potentially interesting issues have been relatively overlooked. For example, Hales (1999) has theorised that the desire to identify differences in managerial work has discouraged researchers from exploring the commonalities. Other scholars have also pointed to the dangers in assuming one extreme or the other in interpreting developments in managerial work (e.g. Clegg *et al.*, 2011; du Gay, 2005; Hales, 2002). Acknowledging the impacts of hyper-competition linked to globalisation and rapid developments in technology, researchers note that while changes in the work of managers have been evident, these are not necessarily indicative of the end of bureaucracy. Instead, they argue that bureaucracy has been replaced not by post-bureaucracy but by neo-bureaucracy, a hybrid form that embodies many aspects of traditional bureaucracy (e.g. Tengblad, 2006; Sturdy *et al.*, 2016).

A potentially complicating factor in understanding these dynamics is the impact of extreme economic stressors such as recession and austerity. However, although some scholars have identified the potentially destructive forces of economic recessions (see Hassard *et al.,* 2012; Worrall and Cooper, 2012; 2014), few have provided extended analyses regarding these implications. In the context of existing and on-going transformations, the recent economic recession and the ensuing austerity choices (in many advanced economies, but especially in the UK for the purposes of this article) have added a new dynamic to studying managerial work. However, although valuable insights have been generated regarding the theorised expectations and realities of managerial work (e.g. Tengblad, 2012) and into the evolving nature of the context of managerial work (e.g. Hales, 2005; Tengblad and Vie, 2015), the impact of recession and/or austerity and the choices executives make on the ensuing austerity measures have been relatively neglected. The absence of critical scrutiny of the impact of economic recession in the management literature is a concern that is broadly shared by Latham and Braun (2011), who bemoan the shortage of reflective management research into the recent recession and the on-going period of economic uncertainty. In this regard, few insights have been generated into whether the turbulent economic environment induced by a recession and/or an extended period of austerity accelerate known changes to managerial work and/or whether recession/austerity are revealing or causing previously unknown effects.

Consequently, the aim of this article is to explore and analyse middle managers' reflections on how, if at all, their work is fundamentally changed by economic pressures such as recession and/or by choices of executives to impose such pressures during and post-recession (commonly referred to as 'austerity measures'). In order to generate deeper and richer insights into the extended effects of recession and austerity, we aim to elucidate the 'lived organisation lives' of middle managers and differing effects over an extended period utilising a longitudinal design. This approach to studying managerial work is useful in providing depth and understanding and is consistent with that advocated by a number of scholars (e.g. Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hassard *et al.,* 2012).

Our concern goes beyond documenting the changes and categorising these as characteristic of traditional or new ways of managing. Indeed, we argue that central to understanding managerial work should be uncovering the reflections of managers to events around them and analysing these over time. Thus, we document and analyse the reflections of middle managers on their own actions and behaviours in reaction to changes that may be linked to the recession but also to developments resulting from the choices of executives in imposing particular regimes and extending austerity measures. Indeed, the compelling impetus for investigation into these issues can be seen in the work of researchers who position the recent economic recession and the ensuing austerity measures in many countries as causing the most important and sustained global economic shock since the 'Great Depression' of the 1930s (see Roche and Teague, 2012: 1335; Worrall and Cooper, 2014) and further in the work of those who describe such contemporary pressures as the period of the 'Great Recession' (see Latham and Braun, 2011:111).

THE WORK OF MANAGERS

Following the pioneering work of Fayol (1916), interest in understanding what managers do has blossomed with a history of eminent scholars (e.g. Burnham, 1945) and practitioners (e.g. Barnard, 1936) addressing this topic. However, it is arguable that Mintzberg's (1973) work provided the impetus for the sustained research interest in managerial work in the period following Fayol's work. While the debates have been wide-ranging, it is possible to highlight two aspects that are pertinent to the concerns of this article: the gap between the theorised expectations of managerial work and the realities, and the debates on change and stability in managerial roles. The contributions in these two areas are discussed briefly below.

There is a long-established discussion in the literature on whether the theorised expectations of managerial work match the realities. Many early conceptualisations of managerial work presented a set of theorised role expectations of managers. The best example of this is the work of Fayol (1916), whose detailed prescription of managerial roles formed the foundation of management work. However, later works have questioned the prescriptive nature of Fayol's 'principles' and have argued that managerial work is inherently different from the Fayol-inspired models that have dominated management textbooks and conceptualisations (e.g. Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000). A recent edited collection by Tengblad (2012), which discusses these issues in detail, attributes the differences between the theorised expectations and the realities of managerial work to the absence of practice-driven research to guide conceptualisations. We concur with Tengblad (2012) and Tengblad and Vie (2015) that delineating features of managerial work is best achieved through empirical understanding. Thus, our conception of middle managerial work includes the responsibilities of middle managers, the ways in which they undertake their tasks and not only the context for, but also their interpretations and reflections on, these activities.

The second debate relates to whether managerial work has remained relatively static or whether it has changed over time. Again, while the overall starting point of researchers is commonly the role descriptions of Fayol (1916), many have sought to distinguish the roles they observe from those uncovered by Mintzberg (1973). For example, Tengblad (2006) studied the work of executives in Sweden and argues that while there are some similarities between his findings and those reported by Mintzberg (1973), there are also some differences that he attributes to prevailing management discourse on organisational culture, leadership and structure. A different study of CEOs by Matthaei (2010) highlights the intensifying work demands, with the executives in the study working an average of 65.5 hours per week. However, a detailed empirical evaluation by Hales (2005) concludes that while some aspects of managerial work have changed and evolved, there remains a certain level of consistency in their work. This line of reasoning is consistent with the argument of Tengblad and Vie (2015) who suggest that factors such as national culture and gender are contributing to changing managerial roles, although the substance of the work has remained relatively stable (see also Hales, 1999; Tengblad, 2012).

THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF MANAGERIAL WORK

Research interest in managerial work commonly focuses on externally-driven forces and on the ways in which these changes affect the work of managers. The underlying rationale is that organisational environments remained relatively stable for several decades but became turbulent by the 1970s and 1980s. The ensuing competition encouraged many organisations to change their structural arrangements (see Kanter, 1989) and many have explored the impacts of these changes on managerial work. The over-riding argument has been that the emergence of innovative organisational forms signalled a move from hierarchical bureaucratic forms to an eclectic mix of innovative forms which are characterised by increased speed and versatility of operations (see Farrell and Morris, 2013). These developments have encouraged many to suggest that new forms of organising have heralded the death of traditional bureaucracies (e.g. Mintzberg, 1998) and ushered the post-bureaucratic form (e.g. Grey and Garsten, 2001; Vie, 2010). However, rather than celebrate the demise of bureaucracy, many argue that these 'new approaches' continue to embrace elements of traditional bureaucracy, leading to the suggestion that the term 'neo-bureaucracy' is appropriate for describing the hybrid nature of these structures (Sturdy *et al.,* 2016; Tengblad, 2006).

Organisational interests and responses in structural transformation are argued to be driven by three inter-linked developments: rapid advances in information and communication technologies, the unparalleled internationalisation of human and economic capital and the globalisation of markets (see Farrell and Morris, 2013; Hassard *et al.,* 2012). As these developments continue, managers (especially middle managers) have had a pivotal role in implementing organisational systems and processes, and have been at the forefront of these transformations. Thus, it is not surprising that managerial work intensification has been an on-going theme in the literature. Recent contributions have explored the impact of structural and competitive pressures on the expectations of organisations, and a common finding is that organisational expectations of their managers have increased significantly in line with competitive intensity (see Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hassard *et al.,* 2012).

Interestingly, by over-emphasising external forces, many studies of managerial work can be criticised for adopting an 'implicit determinism', in that they overlook (or pay little attention to) internally generated actions. This contrasts with theories of strategic choice which argue that decision-makers in organisations play a major role in shaping the context, conditions and outcomes of organisational decisions (see Child, 1972; Miles and Snow, 1978). We draw on decision-making theory, in not only because decision-making is central to the role of managers, but also because of the importance of understanding the consequences of the decision choices of executives on their subordinate middle managers. Thus, while decision-makers (executives in this case) are typically faced with competing alternative courses of action, the key question is related to the factors that influence the choices they make. Here, we are guided by power and control theorists who commonly point to the importance of understanding the desire of executives to extend their power and control over their subordinates and all aspects of the work process (see Anthony, 1977; Willmott, 1997). With executives theorised as occupying a similar position as owners of capital, middle managers can be viewed in much the same way as frontline employees in terms of their role in the production process (see Braverman, 1974). Incorporating these issues helps to explore how middle managers are impacted by the choices that executives make on austerity in the aftermath of recession.

In summary, the context in which managers work is changing and these changes are having an impact on the nature of managerial work. Key changes include economic turbulence, structural organisational changes and the increasing power and control imperatives of executives.

MANAGEMENT AND THE 'GREAT RECESSION' AND AUSTERITY

Several decades ago, Schumpeter (1936; 1950) offered the highly influential argument that economic recessions play an important role in business renewal. Recession being defined in the UK as a reduction in economic activities leading to two consecutive periods of negative economic growth (see H. M. Treasury, 2010), the Schumpeterian school argues that economic recessions can have a transformative effect by encouraging new and innovative firms to emerge, and through ushering in new business practices such that inefficient organisations are eliminated. In this sense, the post-recession environment will be characterised by the existence of more efficient organisations in a manner that completes (albeit until the next recession) the so-called process of 'creative destruction' (see Perelman, 1995; Tripsas, 1997). However, despite the earlier technical definition of recession, most recessions last for around two years (see also Latham and Braun, 2011; Tripsas, 1997). In this regard, it is the on-going austerity in the aftermath of many recessions that can have a major impact on even the most efficient organisations and their managers.

The most recent UK economic recession was linked to the global economic crisis that started in 2007/2008. Although official economic statistics suggest that the recession ended in 2009 (Allen, 2010), successive governments have maintained their policies of curtailing public expenditure to try to maintain financial probity (see Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). This political choice has in some respects been mirrored by the strategic choice of many organisational executives to embark on austerity-driven cost reduction strategies which have had profound implications. However, while such strategies have contributed to an extension of austerity in a manner unknown in recent economic history, the additional impact on middle managers and the ways in which they carry out their work has remained relatively overlooked beyond a few surveys of managerial work that incorporate the impact of the recession. One example of these studies is found in the series of surveys on the work of managers by Worrall and Cooper, of which the most recent includes questions on the impact of the recession on managers (see Worrall and Cooper, 2012). Worrall and Cooper (2014) explore developments in managerial practice from their previous survey data and conclude that managers are experiencing significant changes that are having a negative impact on their physical and psychological well-being. However, whilst the series of studies by Worral and Cooper generate considerable insights via their independent, sequential surveys, their design precludes the study of individual informants and effects over time. Our study complements and builds on their work by focusing on the longitudinal study of managers' reflections and interpretations.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

We began data collection in 2012, a time during which the UK economic recession was believed to be at an official end but which was also a few years into economic austerity. Although we collected data in the intervening years, the second key phase of data collection was in the autumn of 2016, a period in which economic austerity had been extended by uncertainties arising from the EU-exit referendum (commonly known as Brexit).

We adopted an exploratory research design while our philosophical underpinnings are akin to the ontological and epistemological perspectives of constructivism in that our approach is inherently interpretivist (see Denzin, 1989). Our intention therefore was to understand the meanings and interpretations that participants assigned or attributed to their organisational lives, experiences and activities (and how these experiences and interpretations change over time). We deemed qualitative methods, in the form of in-depth interviews, the most appropriate means of data collection.

In Phase 1, we conducted 47 in-depth interviews of middle managers drawn from the alumni of a large UK-based university. We define middle managers in this study as experienced managers who have responsibility for managing organisational groups, divisions or business units. The job titles of participants range from manager to business unit head and even director in some cases. However, the major distinguishing point is that these managers are not main board directors. The managers were drawn from a broad cross-section of UK industries and were broadly representative of the UK management gender and ethnic make-up. Thirty managers worked in service industries, 39 worked in the for-profit sector and 25 worked for large to very large firms. The majority of managers were male (32), most had at least an undergraduate degree (43 – 4 having no first degree but an MBA) with the average length of management experience around sixteen years.

As part of our desire to adopt a longitudinal approach, we tried to maintain contact with all the participants following the initial interviews. We emailed them regularly to enquire about the events that were unfolding in their organisations and we were able to conduct sixteen *ad hoc* periodic interviews with those that signalled that they were experiencing significant changes and transformations. However, the second major data-gathering event (Phase 2) occurred in 2016, when 40 of the 47 participants who were interviewed in 2012 agreed to be interviewed for the second time. Two participants declined to participate (one on the grounds that he now considered himself senior management and therefore could not comment, the second on the grounds that she 'did not want to rehash her past life'), two were unable to gain organisational agreement to participate (both organisations barring the informants from cooperating), and three were not contactable. Of the 40 participants, a number had changed countries, organisations or sectors, several had different roles and responsibilities, a number had different job titles and two were not employed full-time (one being a home-maker, the second being involved in a project to circumnavigate the globe). As such, contacting informants was challenging and time-consuming. The research team used email, social media and telephone (mobile) contact details to maintain contact with the informants and to engage them in the on-going research project. Participant details are supplied in summary form in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

For both major phases of data collection, each interview lasted around 60 minutes (the longest interview taking 137 minutes). About two-thirds of the periodic interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the rest being over the telephone or through Skype. The later interviews were typically shorter and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes depending on the nature of the events and availability of time for the participants involved. Acknowledging the possibility that informants might find reflecting and commenting on past issues difficult or uncomfortable, we adopted a different approach in the second phase of data collection. In particular, we encouraged informants to request a break if they felt it would be beneficial, and a number of interviews were temporarily suspended when informants grew emotional or appeared uncomfortable.

Our analysis procedures involved the analysis of data both during and post data collection. We adopted three types of coding to analyse our data, largely following the protocols and procedural recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Following accepted protocol, to enhance the validity of these processes, the authors conducted analyses independently, compared results and resolved points of difference through debate. Following the recommendations of Yin (2003), we employed a systematic approach to data analysis to improve reliability. Data obtained through interviews were transcribed in full and subsequently analysed jointly with interview notes (Merton *et al.*, 1990). We gauged internal veracity via the critical review of our coding procedures and outcomes by two independent researchers, while external voracity checks involved four *ex post* interviews with managers. With the permission of the participants, gender, job titles, length of service and industry type have been included for contextual understanding.

FINDINGS

Reflecting the longitudinal design of the study, data collection and analysis were undertaken in two major phases interspaced by the periodic/ad hoc interviews. Thus, Phase 1 of data collection and analysis is discreet while the data gathered and the insights gained in Phase 2 include reflections and opinions shaped by earlier events and by the insights gathered from the periodic/ad hoc interviews. The insights garnered during these phases of research are presented chronologically. Reflecting data analysis and in order to permit broad contrasts and comparisons, data from both phases of the study are organised into two levels: managerial actions and managers' reflections on these actions. To guide these findings, a summary of the key findings is supplied in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Phase 1: Managerial Actions

The most common way in which managers believed the recession to have affected their work was in the form of an intensification of their own and other managers' demands and expectations of subordinates. Many managers argued that due to recessionary and competitive pressures, subordinate employees should increasingly be expected to make additional efforts, undertake additional roles or work extra hard. For example:

> Essentially, I think that it is fair to say that we expect much more from frontline staff then we used to. In that sense, I guess we expect more for less … I tell them all the time 'the more you give, the safer your jobs'. Things that used to be added extras just aren't any more. They know that we expect them to volunteer, to do those extra-role activities and to put in much, much more. Ultimately, it's their jobs that are on the line and I don't see any point hiding this from them – they all know! [Operations Manager, 10 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Thus, while managers accepted that pre-recession demands on workers were high, they typically contended that recession necessitated workers undertaking not inconsiderable additional, unrecompensed work duties in return for the 'enhanced' benefit of job security. Although all of the managers interviewed had witnessed worker redundancies or cuts in staffing levels, paradoxically, they all believed that workers who were currently employed should be grateful that they were employed and thus work harder for their 'improved' job security.

Managers also argued that recession had led to an increased pressure to focus on cost reduction and margin shaving. One experienced manager explained:

> It is much worse than the 90s or even the 80s … every single penny is so precious. Whether it is saving costs of staffing levels, saving costs on pay (paid overtime went years ago) or

whether it is saving costs on the benefits the workers used to get – it's all gone. It's all just cut costs – costs, costs, costs. [Logistics Manager, 27 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Almost universally, managers attributed such cost saving and margin shaving imperatives to the strategies and resultant pressures put on them by executives. While middle managers noted that a significant part of their role had always included a focus on margins, they argued that recession had exponentially magnified the focus on cost reduction via cutting worker costs and margins. Staff margins were generally enhanced by reducing the number of staff employed and expecting the remaining workers to cope with the same, if not more, work. For example:

> Staff costs have definitely fallen. We're paying people just about what we were paying six years ago if not longer! And the people we got now work harder and longer for less. The people we hire expect less pay and are prepared to work, and I mean, really work! [Group Manager, 16 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Managers often justified such actions on the grounds that all employees (including managers) faced such changes. Employee cost reduction schemes ranged from reduced rates of pay, zero-hour contracts and cuts to additional staff recruitment and promotion. Such changes were measured against past practices, many of which were viewed as '*currently* economically unviable'.

The third way in which managers had responded to recession was what could variously be called 'strategic', 'judicious', 'astute', 'manipulative' or 'exploitative' recruitment practices. At a basic level, managers argued that the oversupply of labour facilitated their recruitment of workers who were prepared to accept, lower rates of pay and conditions. For instance,

> Gone are the days where new members of staff would come in at the top of the payment rates. Today, everyone, and I mean everyone comes in at the very bottom – and they are damned grateful for it! [Store Manager, 13 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

However, managers also recognised that the large numbers of unemployed workers was an opportunity in which the oversupply of labour enabled them to recruit very experienced or skilled workers into subordinate positions for reduced levels of pay. A manager explained:

> I can hire people to do jobs for which they are hugely over-qualified! I have people working on the floor who have experience and skills to do my job! It just means that the people we get are so much better than we used to get. So much more productive and that's only good for us

in the company. [Brand Manager, 19 years, Male, Non-profit organisation, Service Industry]

The fourth way in which managers believed their working lives had altered centred on changes to their own work roles and internal management dynamics. In particular, managers argued that, under the pressure of the recession, they were obliged (i) to undertake tasks or roles in their job that previously they would not have undertaken, or (ii) to remain in their current job or role when they would prefer alternative jobs or roles. In this regard, managers argued that elements of their roles had (i) altered on the one hand and (ii) yet remained constant in other areas (albeit involuntarily). Illustratively:

> For me it means that I've volunteered for roles and jobs that I would have run a mile from before! You want to make yourself as indispensable as possible. If you don’t toe the line, doff your forelock and say ‘of course, sir, yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir!’, the bastard standing next to you will! [Project Manager, 8 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Characteristically, managers felt that such restrictions on their working lives were a poor reward for their efforts or loyalty.

Managers also argued that driven by fears of potential redundancy or cuts to income, their interactions had to become not only more competitive and politicised:

> Managers compete against each other and we know that’s always been the case. But it just got worse and worse and worse in recent years.
> [later]
> To survive here you need to be deeply aware of internal politics – who is in and who is being edged out, who knows about your successes and who should know. [Brand Manager, 31 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Non-Service Industry]

The outcomes of such increased internal politics were viewed by many managers to damaging to the performance of the organisation. Nevertheless, such was the prevalence of fear amongst managers that such political activities were argued to be unavoidable:

> This has always been a company that had an element of political manoeuvring but it’s got much worse over the last five or six years … our competitors are nothing to be scared of but my ‘fellow’ managers are horrific. Every mistake is used, every decision criticised, every weapon employed. If our managers put one tenth of the energy they use to serving customers rather than watching their backs, we would turn this company around in a week! [Project Manager, 8 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

In general, younger and less experienced managers viewed political manoeuvring as a valuable technique to enhance their career. In contrast, older, more experienced managers were more sceptical as to the benefits of such actions.

Phase 1: Reflections on Managers' Actions

While this study examined what actions managers had taken (see above), arguably a more important focus was on managers' reflections on these actions. Interestingly, *all* of the managers interviewed in Phase 1 explicitly voiced the opinion that changes to management practices were necessary, ethically justified and proportionate. For example:

> At times like these you don't have a choice – change or die was the mantra. The message from on-high didn't vary, didn't change – they had their plan and our job was to do it – and damned quickly too! [PR Director, 14 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Non-service Industry]

Such was the prevailing view of managers that most assumed this to be the case universally across their industries and sectors. In this regard, the views managers were consistent – organisations and managers must respond radically or face collapse.

Managers vociferously argued that their and their organisations' actions and overall approach to management during and after the recession were necessary to maintain organisational competitiveness.

> The Regional Director spoke to us [Store Managers] all in turn and scared the hell out of us. If we wanted to have a store in six months we had to change – I messaged some mates [Store Managers] and they got the same line – 'this is a competition between firms but also between our own stores' – only the fittest, leanest, meanest store were going to make the cut. Not nice I suppose but honest … clear … [Store Manager, 13 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

However, not only were such actions viewed as 'necessary' but also ethically justified in that such actions preserved existing jobs, contributed to firm survival and could even be viewed as societally philanthropic. For example, many managers employing over-qualified workers at lower rates of pay presented such actions as acts of 'charity' in helping unemployed, highly-qualified individuals.

Managers' reflections on the proportionality of their actions were inextricably tied to the justification of their own and their organisations' actions. Predominately, informants based their justifications on entreaties by executives that centred on the need for immediate actions without which organisational survival would be unlikely. For example:

> You hear a lot about Executives and Fat Cats but they made the tough call and, for once, made it loud and clear. If we didn't step up, if we didn't run the hard miles – we were going down – no prevarication, no quibbling, no buggering about – time to step up as managers – time to earn our pay! [Project Manager, 8 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Thus, informants typically argued that their only rational response to orders and demands from executives was to implement intensified change to the uttermost of their abilities.

Phase 2: Managerial Actions

Phase 2 of the data collection rapidly revealed that the four key ways in which managers believed that their management practices had been altered by recession in Phase 1 of data collection had not radically altered in the intervening years of austerity. In general, most informants continued to argue that such practices had remained key issues in their role and for their organisation. For instance:

> Are any of those things ever *not* stressed by executives? I'd love to hear some of the fat cats telling us to relax things – 'that's enough – crisis over – spend more on staff!' or 'pay people a fairer wage' or 'give them a contract and stability – no zero-hour crap for us!' Yeah. Not going to happen! [Retail Manager, 20 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Nevertheless, managers contended that the emphasis placed on such activities had subtly altered in terms of pace, intensity and speed, and scale.

Managers noted that while actions such as shaving margins remained a key activity, the pace of such required changes had reduced. For example:

> In the early days it was 'twenty percent down on this', 'forty on that'. Heady days, but you can't do that every year or even three years. After a while you're cutting back on the cut and after a while longer you're cutting bone not fat – the pace has to slow. [Head of Stores, 18 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Non-service Industry]

Indeed, many managers commented that the original pace of recession and austerity-oriented actions could not be sustained over extended periods. Moreover, managers claimed that the intensity and speed of such actions had changed in the intervening years. That is, while in Phase 1 multiple simultaneous initiatives were required, in Phase 2 limited resources and reduced flexibility meant that often smaller, individual changes were more common. Thus:

> Our emphasis now is on focused change. Taking an area and slimming down over a longer time scale – six months not two months, eight per cent not twenty-five per cent. Smaller, steadier, slower. [Hospitality Manager, 22 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Finally, data analysis revealed that although managers continued to take actions to shave margins, demand more, recruit strategically and alter their roles, the scale of activities had contracted. One manager commented:

> Back then it was 'take on this, take on that' and 'while you're there cut this and can you just hack that back?' Today, I'm doing the same but not on the same scale – single jobs, single initiatives – not every damn thing at the same time. [Group Manager, 20 years, Female, Not For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Phase 2: Reflections on Managers' Actions

During Phase 1, managers universally felt that such practices were necessary (albeit sometimes a necessary evil). However, the periodic interviews and the substantive interviews in Phase 2 suggested that by Phase 2, only two participants maintained this view. The remaining 38 managers had formed a very different view.

During Phase 1 of the data collection, managers consistently argued that changes to management practices were necessary. However, this contrasted markedly with their prevailing view as events unfolded, and especially during the Phase 2 interviews. The current opinions of managers had changed, not only regarding the necessity of changes to practice at Phase 1 but also regarding the continuation of such changes today. Barring two managers, 38 out of the 40 interviewed expressed professional regret regarding their roles in past changes and the continuation of such changes. Although a number of participants expressed doubts about the approaches to change during the periodic interviews, this became widespread and was strengthened over time, being strongly expressed during the Phase 2 interviews. For example:

> Looking back and at what we have now, I don't think that any of us is even close to being pleased or proud of [Company Name]. What we did and what we continue to do can only be viewed as something to regret. The changes that were brought in messed with people's lives – they screwed them then and they're screwing them now. [Head of Stores, 18 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Non-Service Industry]

Moreover, two-thirds of those expressing regret went further to describe feelings of personal shame, embarrassment and even dishonour regarding their own personal actions during the past (Phase 1) and present (Phase 2). In these regards, the periodic interviews and the Phase 2 interviews suggest that changes to management practices, both in response to recession-induced austerity and the on-going economic instability that resulted from the decision to exit the European Union were viewed as, at least, partly unnecessary and, in some cases, gratuitously exploitative.

While managers during Phase 1 were broadly loyal employees, during Phase 2, a strong theme emerged of the same managers feeling angry towards their employing organisation. Some managers felt trapped by their circumstances while others directed their anger at senior management teams coercing middle managers to exploit subordinates:

> I'm angry that I was so naïve, so bloody taken in by the crap from above [the Senior Management team]. It isn't an excuse to say that we were caught up in the rhetoric. Under a façade – and bleedin' obvious, what was wrong with us façade – they got us to screw every single drop of blood out of real, live people – just to feed their profit line and their ambition. [Logistics Manager, 18 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

An extension of feelings of anger/resentment was a marked emphasis on instrumentality. Although many managers were (at least partly) instrumental in their views during Phase 1, their focus was on their professional status and prestige. This contrasts with opinions during Phase 2 that were more prevalent and more instrumental towards *personal* protection of income, job security and psychological well-being.

A third key difference in the views of managers regarding management practice changes centred on opinions regarding the fairness of such practices for managers. During Phase 1 of the data collection, managers viewed such changes as hard but necessary and thus broadly fair in achieving what they believed was organisational survival. However, a strong theme emerged during Phase 2 of the data collection wherein managers very commonly viewed the continuation of such practices as impacting adversely on their working lives:

> We're the forgotten victims here – our careers that are frozen, our prospects blighted, our

> lives on hold. The whole organisation's response to this has fallen on us – we're the ones that had to sort this out and we're the ones hit the hardest. [Operations Manager, 14 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Although participants recognised that management practices strongly affected frontline employees, their first instinct was to describe the effects of such changes on the working lives of managers. Very few managers considered the impact of such changes on executives. In very general terms, participants commonly considered their own broad strata of managers as a generation of management whose careers, lifestyles and well-being had been sacrificed for the welfare of others (most commonly board-level executives and shareholders as well as politicians and bankers). One stated:

> We're the sacrificial goats. 'Need more work done? They'll [middle management] do it', 'Got some more stress? They can take it!' 'Squeeze more profits? They can do it!' 'Need more cuts? They can do it!' We're just squeezed and squeezed for more and more – just so the Chairman can make more money and get his knighthood. [Store Manager, 10 years, Male, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Indeed, terms such as 'frozen', 'forgotten' and 'sacrificed' were common adjectives used by participants to describe their current career position.

During the analysis of the data from Phase 2, a strong theme emerged that many managers were tired of continued austerity-related management practices. For example:

> It is a fatigue. You cannot keep doing this for years without running low on motivation and enthusiasm and drive. We are all simply knackered. Not physically tired but mentally drained. There is nothing left in the tank of me. [Group Manager, 20 years, Female, For-Profit Firm, Service Industry]

Contacts with the same participant in the period between phase 1 and 2 interviews indicated that she had been involved in three major organisational transformations which had led to 80 redundancies, several job redesigns and a major streamlining of customer service systems.

In the Phase 2 interviews, many participants appeared to reminisce wistfully about the initial actions to reduce the impact of austerity pressures that contrasted with their current opinion regarding such measures. Thus, for many participants, the sustained pressure of many years had resulted in cognitive numbness regarding their role. Resisting such practices was equated with career suicide, with many participants referring to examples of fellow managers who were 'moved on' for questioning the *status quo* and for advocating alternative approaches. As a result of such instances, the remaining managers numbly obeyed whilst accepting that the process had mentally ground them down.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this article was to explore and analyse middle managers' reflections on how, if at all, their work is fundamentally changed by economic pressures such as recession and/or by choices that executives make to impose such pressures during and post-recession. Our study suggests that the economic recession and ensuing austerity led to important changes in the nature of managerial work in ways not previously documented. On the one hand, our findings concur with earlier research that suggests that managerial work has undergone significant changes (see Hassard *et al*., 2009; 2012; Grey and Garsten, 2001), especially in the context of the economic recession and austerity (see Worrall and Cooper, 2012; 2014). However, our research differs from past studies regarding the nature of managerial work, in that managers were initially positive and even willing advocates of initial changes and were *not* negatively disposed or psychologically damaged at that stage (cf. Worrall and Cooper, 2012; 2014). Nonetheless, our findings are concordant with past studies in that, during Phase 2 of data gathering, the previously optimistic managers had become disillusioned as executives took advantage of the narrative of recession and austerity to extend and tighten their control over their work. The differentiated views of middle managers suggests the importance of extending conceptualisations of managerial work to incorporate the role and actions of senior managers and executives and to consider the roles they play in managerial work intensification. The positive mood of the managers in our study on their roles and actions in austerity-driven changes became negative with the realisation that they had limited scope to influence the limit of their actions. These insights signal the importance of reflective management research on the responses of managers to recession and austerity which scholars have identified as lacking (see Latham and Braun, 2011). They also suggest broader implications for research on managerial work in that the differences in managerial roles at different levels are more profound than the commonly reported responsibilities that these levels represent; for example, differentiating managers on their responsibilities in relation to administrative roles (see Hales, 2005; Tengblad, 2006; Vie, 2010). The understanding of the importance of these hierarchical differences should be extended to reflect the active involvement of higher-level managers in shaping the work of other managers. This suggests that studies of managerial work should move away from the descriptor 'managerial work' that views managers as a homogenous group, and should instead consider carefully the level of management that is studied, as well as attaching the appropriate referent (junior manager, middle manager or senior manager/executive). This is important to ensure that the full dynamics of the relationships with superiors and subordinate managers become an integral part of any analysis and theorising.

Linked to the above is the importance of incorporating power and strategic choice in conceptualising managerial work. Whereas recent studies have explored the influences of environmental factors such as global competitive intensity (see Ferrell and Morris, 2013; Hassard *et al.,* 2012) and other factors such as gender and national culture (see Tengblad and Vie, 2015), the power and control dynamics of executives is an important but overlooked aspect to understanding managerial work. Indeed, although many studies of intra-organisational power concentrate on the relations between managers and lower level subordinates (e.g. Ezzamel *et al.,* 2002), our study presents an example that highlights that the exercise of power by executives can have a profound impact not only on frontline workers but also on the work of middle managers (see also Braverman, 1974). In this regard, our study contributes insights that strongly indicate the need to recognise and incorporate power/control dynamics into conceptions of all super-subordinate relations to avoid an over-simplification of conceptions of categories of employees (including 'managers'). Further, our study highlights that responses to recession and austerity are not universally prescribed but, just as governments choose their policies to combat economic pressures, executives make strategic choices in organisations (see Child, 1972). We extend this position in the current study by contributing insights that support the view that changes to managerial work can be better understood in terms of power and strategic choices (see also Anthony, 1977; Willmott, 1997).

Another important contribution is derived from the insights gained by conceptualising and studying not only the activities of managers but *also* their reflections on and interpretations of their actions. If our focus had exclusively concentrated on managers' activities in both Phase 1 and Phase 2, our findings would, misleadingly, suggest that manager roles changed during recession and merely became less intense over time. However, through incorporating managerial reflections and interpretations, we find significant and profound differences in managers' conception of their work and its value. Reflecting on the differences in the data between Phase 1 and Phase 2, it is evident that the 'macho' optimism and self-worth of middle managers in Phase 1 (portraying themselves as 'saviours' of their firms) was relatively quickly and reflexively replaced by a cynical resigned acceptance that either they were misguided or they were duped by the strictures of manipulating executives. Thus, through encouraging managers to reflect on their activities, changes which may have been interpreted by previous studies as inevitable outcomes of contextual turbulence (e.g. Farrell and Morris, 2013), were, on reflection, reinterpreted as unnecessary and potentially exploitative.

We also contribute important insights that are derived from the design of the study. In collecting data from the same informants at two points in time, we find that managers' opinions and interpretations of their work change. At Phase 1, managers suggest that their work has fundamentally changed (broadly consistent with Hassard *et al.*, 2009; 2012; Worrall and Cooper, 2012; 2014). However, by Phase 2, managers reflecting on their work during *both* Phase 1 and Phase 2 of data collection, claim that economic and intra-organisational pressures intensified and magnified required changes *but* that such actions were not necessarily fundamentally different to the pre- or post-recession focuses. Thus, the adoption of a longitudinal design enabled a fuller understanding of how the content of managerial work could be affected by contextual pressures that magnify or intensify managerial roles but without necessarily radically transforming managers' work. While this broadly confirms the suggestion that more critical reflections may conclude that there are more similarities than differences in managerial work (see Hales, 1999; Tengblad, 2012; Tengblad and Vie, 2015), the insights we generate may also form a partial explanation for such differing interpretations of managerial work in the literature. Our study demonstrates that during highly pressured periods of time, managers may feel that their role has transformed radically. However, over time, where pressures become normalised or potentially even less intense, more critical, considered reflections might lead to very different interpretations. However, the finding that the same managers offered widely differing accounts of their work over a four-year period suggests that much existing conceptualisations which rely on data collected at single points may reflect incomplete accounts of the work of managers. This approach also helps to uncover some aspects of the 'lived lives' of managers which many schoalrs have argued as an area requiring further insight (see Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hassard *et al*., 2012). In this regard, we contribute a rare example of the practice-based insights to theory development that scholars have suggested are lacking (see Tengblad, 2012; Tengblad and Vie, 2015).

This study also has implications for practitioners. The finding of the extent to which middle managers retrospectively became disenfranchised by their initial role and the subsequent adherence to austerity measures within their organisations suggest a strong likelihood of future disenchantment with organisational change. Executives cannot take the trust and commitment of managers for granted in future change initiatives; they need to consider ways of overcoming inertia and eliciting their enthusiasm and support in future change initiatives. At the very least, executives wishing to manage change successfully will need to justify their actions in previous change efforts and persuade managers that past actions were appropriate, measured and achieved the desired aims. Finally, executives need to persuade managers of the merits of their current strategic choices to gain genuine buy-in.

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Table 1: Interviewees and Data Sources

	PHASE 1					PHASE 2			
Gender	**Position**	**Years of Experience Phase 1 (Phase 2 +4)**	**Profit-making firm?**	**Services firm?**		**Position**	**Profit-making firm**	**Services firm?**	**Interview transcript Phase 1 (Phase 2)**
Male	Area Manager	16 years	Yes	Yes		Chief Executive	Yes	Yes	11 (8)
Male	Brand Director	15 years	Yes	No		Brand Director	Yes	No	10 (7)
Male	Head of Finance	31 years	Yes	Yes		Head of Finance	Yes	Yes	9 (7)
Male	Logistics Manager	27 years	Yes	Yes		Logistics Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (10)
Female	Group Manager	16 years	No	Yes		Group Manager	Yes	Yes	11 (9)
Female	Group Manager	7 years	Yes	No					
Female	IT Manager	8 years	Yes	No		IT Manager	Yes	No	13 (7)
Male	PR Director	14 years	Yes	No		Homeworker	n/a	n/a	12 (7)
Male	General Manager	16 years	Yes	Yes		Group Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (8)
Male	Shop Manager	17 years	Yes	No		Workshop Ops Manager	Yes	No	12 (7)
Male	Education Manager	18 years	Yes	Yes					
Male	Shift Manager	22 years	Yes	Yes		Shift Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (6)
Male	Director of Finance	25 years	Yes	No					
Male	Operations Manager	10 years	No	No		Unemployed adventurer	n/a	n/a	11 (9)
Female	Store Manager	10 years	Yes	Yes		Store Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (8)
Male	Catering Manager	17 years	Yes	Yes		Catering Manager	Yes	Yes	13 (7)
Female	Brand Manager	31 years	Yes	No		Brand Manager	Yes	No	9 (8)
Male	Retail Manager	16 years	Yes	Yes		Retail Manager	Yes	Yes	11 (8)
Female	HR Manager	18 years	Yes	No		HR Manager	Yes	No	10 (7)
Male	Production Manager	20 years	Yes	Yes					
Male	Head of Accounting	22 years	No	No		Accountant	No	No	9 (10)
Male	Personnel Manager	9 years	Yes	Yes					
Male	Operations Manager	10 years	Yes	Yes		Operations Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (11)
Male	Store Manager	6 years	Yes	Yes		Store Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (9)
Male	Hospitality Manager	17 years	Yes	Yes		Hospitality Manager	Yes	Yes	14 (10)

Male	Brand Manager	19 years	No	Yes		Brand Manager	No	Yes	10 (8)
Male	Retail Manager	24 years	Yes	Yes					
Female	Store Manager	13 years	Yes	Yes		Customer Service Manager	Yes	Yes	11 (8)
Male	Head of Stores	14 years	Yes	No		Head of Stores	Yes	No	13 (12)
Male	Logistics Manager	15 years	Yes	No		Logistics Manager	Yes	No	16 (13)
Female	Engineer Leader	16 years	Yes	Yes		Engineer Leader	Yes	Yes	12 (10)
Female	Head of Sales	28 years	Yes	Yes		Sales Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (10)
Male	Regional Manager	16 years	No	Yes					
Male	Regional Sales Manager	16 years	Yes	Yes		Regional Sales Manager	Yes	Yes	9 (7)
Female	Chief Engineer	16 years	Yes	Yes		Chief Engineer	Yes	Yes	12 (8)
Male	Marketing Manager	27 years	Yes	No		Marketing Manager	Yes	No	12 (10)
Male	Group Manager	12 years	Yes	Yes		Group Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (11)
Male	Output Director	12 years	Yes	Yes		Shift Manager	Yes	Yes	13 (8)
Female	Growth Manager	10 years	No	Yes		Area Manager	No	Yes	12 (8)
Female	Process Manager	17 years	Yes	No		Process Manager	Yes	No	9 (5)
Male	Sales Manager	16 years	Yes	Yes		Consultant	Yes	Yes	12 (14)
Female	Project Manager	8 years	Yes	Yes		Project Manager	Yes	Yes	15 (8)
Male	Head of IT	19 years	Yes	No		Freelance IT Consultant	Yes	No	12 (10)
Female	Consulting Director	7 years	No	No		Consultant	Yes	No	10 (9)
Male	Manager	16 years	No	Yes			No	Yes	13 (6)
Male	Head of Operations	17 years	Yes	Yes					
Female	Operations Manager	18 years	Yes	No		Operations Manager	Yes	No	10 (8)

Table 2:Summary of Key Findings

	2012	**2016**
Key Management Actions:	Strong focus on: • *Demanding More from Workers* An intensification of their own and other managers' demands and expectations of subordinates • *Shaving Margins* A focus on cost saving and margin shaving tactics and strategies • *Strategic Recruitment* Recruitment practices aimed at generating maximum value for minimal costs • *Managers' Roles and Dynamics* Changes to dynamics between managers and the undertaking of unwanted roles/tasks by managers.	Continued but weaker emphasis on: • *Demanding More from Workers* • *Shaving Margins* • *Strategic Recruitment* • *Managers' Role and Dynamics*
Reflections on Managers' Actions:	Management actions universally considered necessary, prudent and proportionate.	Management actions considered NOT necessary, prudent or proportionate leading to feelings of: • *Regret/Shame* Regret regarding past and current actions/feeling of personal shame regarding past/current actions • *Exhaustion* Cognitive, emotional or physical exhaustion as a result of on-going management actions • *Angry instrumentalism* Instrumental orientation towards personal protection of income, job security and psychological well-being. • *Unfairness* Reflections interpreting past/current management actions as unfair towards managers in particular. • *Liberation* Reflections that past actions had liberated particular managers from the stress of middle management activities/roles.