

**Managing change, or changing managers?:
the role of middle managers in UK public service reform**

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Abstract

Drawing upon interview data from three case study organizations, we examine the role of middle managers in UK public service reform. Using theory fragments from organizational ecology and role theory, we develop three role archetypes that middle managers might be enacting. We find that rather than wholesale enactment of a 'change agent' role, middle managers are balancing three predominant, but often conflicting, changerelated roles: as 'government agent', 'diplomat administrator' and, less convincingly, 'entrepreneurial leader'. Central government targets are becoming the main preoccupation for middle managers across many public services and they represent a dominant constraint on allowing 'managers to manage'.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which middle managers are enacting organizational 'change agent' roles within contemporary public services. An enduring feature of debates about government-led service reform has been the role of the general management cadre in service delivery and change (Ferlie, Lynn, and Pollitt 2007). At the hierarchical intersection, middle managers can – and indeed must – look both upwards and downwards, and thereby reconcile strategic objectives with operational imperatives. The structural contingencies and role demands of middle managers have been debated for several decades and the management literature contains two dominant narratives about the role as a 'linking pin' (Likert 1961).

The first group sees middle layers of management as unsuccessful conduits for senior management strategic formulations. These researchers see middle managers as having sclerotic effects on structures and processes. Individual managers become trapped in complex bureaucratic structures, and by virtue of their intermediate position, inadvertently restrict the flow of knowledge and communication across the organization. Others see middle managers as more purposefully resisting strategic adaptation by exercising their agency to protect vested interests or minimize operational risk (Dopson and Stewart 1990). The image of the 'reluctant middle manager' cautious to take the initiative or to champion change is a lingering one (Scase and Goffee 1989). The second group portrays middle managers more optimistically as strategic assets for the mediation and implementation of strategic imperatives. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) see the intermediate position as a privileged location for change agency, where middle managers can assist senior managers in formulating concrete strategic initiatives and playing an important role in disseminating strategic alternatives. Huy (2001) is even more optimistic and sees middle managers as influential agents of entrepreneurial ideas, leveraging informal networks and coordinating tensions between continuity and change. Balogun (2003) reviews this literature and contributes more empirical data, finding four interrelated roles for middle managers during change implementation – undertaking personal change, helping others through change, implementing necessary changes in their departments, and keeping the business going. This work suggests that there may be scope for middle managers to become agents for change in many organizations, but any such activities are constrained by conflicting role expectations and operational routines.

These narratives provide important clues to the role demands and expectations of middle managers, and they help to illuminate how intermediate structural positions might

connect vertically and horizontally within organizations. However, these streams of work do not adequately account for organizational change agency within complex public sector organizations. In particular, Floyd and Wooldridge's typology does not account for role demands emanating outside of the organization, such as institutional pressures from government agencies and regulators or wider social pressures of public legitimacy. Professional bureaucracies face ambiguity and conflict from multiple political, professional, managerial and administrative constituents, and individual managers need to negotiate considerable institutional pressures from professional constituents looking to increase their power over the allocation of resources (Currie et al. 2012). In addition to such 'institutional work', there are institutional and isomorphic pressures at the sector or population level of organizations, which restrain organizational adaptation and reinforce persistent bureaucratic organizational forms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hannan and Freeman 1989). Professional bureaucracies, such as health care organizations, have complex multiple hierarchies – including medical, nursing and administrative–operational chains – which lead to divisional structures and 'hybrid' forms of managerial work (Fulop 2012). Middle managers in these contexts may have previous professional practitioner experience or may be performing a hybrid practitioner–manager role. The professional bureaucratic form of division of labour is likely to impact on structural contingencies relating to organizational change agency and complicates the discussion of middle manager roles.

Despite their importance for an understanding of public service dynamics and public sector reform, Conway and Monks (2011) suggest there is a lack of empirical evidence addressing how tensions and ambiguities in the middle manager role are played out in contemporary public services, particularly across different organizational types (Currie and Procter 2005). The public management literature has largely highlighted competition between professional and managerial cadres, and the shifting balance of power between the two (Farrell and Morris 2003), or alternatively, the leadership responsibilities of the most senior managers or professional elites (Currie et al. 2012). There has been less examination of the perceptions of middle managers on their ability to enact change agency roles. As Mantere (2008) reflected in a recent discussion of enabling factors in change agency roles, 'While others have articulated middle management roles, there is little evidence about how middle managers are able to fulfil those roles' (p. 26). Equally, Balogun (2003) states: 'there is still little research examining what middle-managers can contribute' (p. 69).

In this paper, we examine the structural position and role experiences of middle managers in public sector organizations. We bring together literature on middle managers' strategic role with broader debates about public sector managerialism and organizational change or inertia. We add to the relatively sparse literature in this area by examining the enactment of change agent roles by middle managers within three public sector organizations in the United Kingdom under the late New Labour government: an NHS Trust, a local authority and a central government department. We review theories attempting to explain structural change and inertia and consider how role theory can offer micro-sociological explanations of strategic change. We distinguish between three emerging conceptualizations of the middle manager role as: 'government agent', 'diplomat administrator' and 'entrepreneurial leader'. We then explain our methodology, and provide background information on the three case study organizations. We explain our findings in relation to the three-fold typology of line manager roles, highlight the contribution as well as the limitations of our work, and suggest some directions for future research.

MANAGING WITH PROFESSIONAL BUREAUCRACY

Despite attempts to make public services more dynamic and adaptable over the last 30 years, evidence suggests that bureaucratic forms of organization persist (Farrell and Morris 2003). Bureaucratic organizations in the Weberian rational–legal tradition rely on hierarchy and rules for coordination and control (Currie et al. 2008; Hales 2002). Although new managerialism was associated with a putative move towards more flexible, delayed and decentralized structures, Hales' (2002) research shows that such a transformation is merely 'illusory' (p. 61), and that hierarchical control and vertical accountability endure, either through re-bureaucratization or the creation of neo-bureaucratic structures (Farrell and Morris 2003). Several strands of organization theory, such as neo-institutional theory and organizational ecology, suggest that organizations are deeply embedded within social, political, economic and normative settings that exert isomorphic and inertial population-level pressures to conform to existing and established modes of operation (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hannan and Freeman 1989; Goldfinch and Wallis 2010), and, consequently, create an existential tension for organizational actors within public services. These issues are intensified at structural positions where professional and administrative identities become entangled through 'hybrid' practitioner–manager roles.

The 'hybridization' of management roles in the public sector is an example of longterm institutional adaptation to environmental pressures. Public professional bureaucracies across most parts of the public sector have responded to sustained policy-led managerialism by incorporating the terminology and techniques of business management (Gronn 2000). This emerging role definition has lacked comprehensive empirical examination, but has perhaps received most attention in health care organizations (Brooks 1999; Llewellyn 2001; Hoque, Davis, and Humphreys 2004). For example, in the United Kingdom, NHS general managers were introduced at various levels of unit operation following the Griffiths report in 1983. Clinical areas of operation are now headed by clinical practitioners, who are also the unit general manager with administrative–operational and strategic responsibilities. Reflecting on this professional form of managerialism, Fulop (2012) suggests:

Hybridity is not claimed to be a new form of leadership per se but a way of re-orienting our thinking, especially in looking at the problems that surround theories and practices of heroic and post-heroic leadership. (Fulop 2012: 580)

Other commentators similarly see the term 'hybrid' as an oversimplification because it implies that we can clearly distinguish between professional and managerial jurisdictions, whereas in reality, professional agents, like doctors, are taking on more managerial tasks while, *at the same time*, maintaining both clinical autonomy and professional identity (Exworthy and Halford 1999). Llewellyn (2001) describes this as attempting to create 'management from the inside' through clinical–managerial competence, in contrast to 'management from the outside', which is characterized by centralized planning and performance management. For the purpose of this study, we include practitioner–managers occupying intermediate structural positions as bona fide middle managers with the potential for change agency roles. We follow recent commentators in seeing the 'hybrid' role as highly contested, in line with broader debates about public sector managerialism and leaderism. Professional managers are likely to experience considerable role conflict and ambiguity as they attempt to enact their roles (Doherty, Gatenby, and Hales 2010; Pegram et al. 2013).

MIDDLE MANAGER THEORY FRAGMENTS

After several decades of research examining the role of middle managers and organizational change processes, no dominant theoretical approach has emerged to account for the observed phenomena. It is generally agreed that the institutional complexity of bureaucratic structures, through which middle managers operate, creates a contested terrain for the enactment of change agency roles (Conway and Monks 2011). Many recent contributions to this debate do not make explicit reference to theoretical frameworks or attempt to build theory from their accounts. Many authors refer to the influential typology of Floyd and Wooldridge (1994, 1997) as a way to orientate the middle manager position at an intermediate level of analysis, but do not make explicit theoretical propositions beyond this. A closer reading of the work of Floyd and Wooldridge reveals an appeal to contingency theories of organizational adaptation (Thompson 1967). This is the view that organizational change takes place through the matching of organizational structures to combinations of technologies and environments. This approach moves the question of change beyond the agency of individual managers to encompass higher levels of analysis. It is also consistent with the institutional strand of organization theory that has been widely adopted in the public administration literature (Currie et al. 2012).

As the available body of literature suggests, there is unlikely to be a single theoretical framework capable of fully explaining the dynamics of organizational change and the role enactment of particular managerial levels within this complex system. Instead, we can follow Merton (1957) in looking for delimited theories of the 'middle range' that explain some focus phenomena, but remain relatively fixed to particular levels of analysis. Hannan, Polos, and Carroll (2007) also follow this approach and propose the metaphor of 'theory fragments' (p. 7) as a means of allowing new insights to develop rapidly within a field without addressing the formidable challenge of theoretical integration; yet being open and mindful to consistencies between theory fragments. 'Theory fragments' are different from fragmented or incoherent theories, because they recognize the pluralistic and overlapping conceptual fabric on which social scientific knowledge is built, and how theory can be coherent yet limited in its explanatory power. Rather than working with a single middle range theory or trying to synthesize all theories into a metanarrative, the notion of 'theory fragments' attempts to place together compatible pieces of conceptual fabric and seam them in a constructive patchwork. In this paper, we briefly draw on two theory fragments consistent with middle manager change agency roles: structural inertia from the theory of organizational ecology and role-set analysis from role theory.

Change, inertia and role enactment

Organizational ecology is an influential tradition in organization theory which adapts the logic and methodology of biotic ecology to consider the diversity and dynamics of organizational forms (Hannan and Freeman 1989). The distinctive approach of organizational ecology is to treat the population level of organizations as the main focus for causal explanation. This is in stark contrast to mainstream approaches in organization studies and public administration that consider change to be the rational adaptation of structures or processes to internal resource dependencies. One of the main theory fragments of organizational ecology is the structural inertia of organizational forms (Hannan and Freeman 1984). This is the view that for 'wide classes of organizations there are very strong inertial pressures on structure arising from both

internal arrangements (for example, internal politics) and from the environment (for example, public legitimating of organizational activity)' (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 957). Organizational rigidity is often considered to be a management problem in the literature on organizational change, but according to organizational ecology, structural inertia is not *prima facie* a pathological trait. Rather, inertia offers many benefits for collective action in organizations through its ability to establish reliability and accountability (Hannan and Freeman 1984). Both of these characteristics are central to the legitimacy and identity of public service organizations. For example, patients of health care services are likely to value reliable treatment outcomes over experimental variability. Reliable performance requires consistency in organizational structure, including the structuring of managerial roles. Any managerial attempts to change routines, procedures or behaviours thus become time-consuming and risky. If managers are to become change agents, they must obtain slack resources and combine these in novel ways, usually with unpredictable results.

Hannan and Freeman (1984) point out that the existence of strong inertial forces does not mean that organizations never change. Instead, it means that organizations respond relatively slowly to various threats and opportunities, such as government regime change or demographic shifts in demands for services. However, Hannan and Freeman (1984) suggest that inertial pressures are much stronger than most theorists of change would acknowledge. The organizational ecology perspective has not been widely considered in the management literature on change agency and receives only a passing reference in the work of Floyd and Wooldridge (1997).

A second relevant theory fragment is role-set analysis as part of attempts to develop a substantive role theory. If organizational ecology starts at the population level and works down, role theory starts with individual role incumbents and works up. Following the earlier work of Linton (1936) on social structure, the role set is defined as 'the complement of role-relationships in which persons are involved by virtue of occupying a particular social status'. (Merton 1957, p. 110). Merton recognized that organizational roles face competing expectations and demands from various other role incumbents which serve to structure individual behaviour. He thought that large-scale bureaucratic structures create relatively enduring role sets, which in turn encourage stable role enactments. As intermediate intersecting structural positions, middle management roles are likely to be saturated with role-set conflict, and 'hybrid' managers even more so.

Role theory, as an attempt to explain the structuring of organizational roles, has been criticized by practice theorists for its apparent inability to account for individual agency. Mantere (2008) suggests that individual managers are capable of 'transforming these structural conditions through their agency' (p. 7). However, Mantere unfortunately does not consider Merton's concept of role-set and his argument that role incumbents are capable of transforming structural conditions does not help to explain why the evidence suggests that this rarely occurs. For example, Mantere (2008) reports, from his empirical research with middle managers, 'the fear that unexpected failures will be punished constrains agency' (p. 18).

The concepts of structural inertia and role-set are 'theory fragments', which cannot easily be unified as an underlying theory of organizational change. To unify them would require detailed linking of variables between the micro-sociological context of individual role-sets and the macro-sociological context of population dynamics. However, they offer complementary theoretical propositions, which help us to explain why change may (or may not) occur in public service organizations. Both theories recognize middle managers as contested role incumbents embedded in highly complex webs of structural relationships that constrain their room for

manoeuvre. The two fragments together provide both an 'upward' micro-explanation and a 'downward' macro-explanation that would be missing when using one of the perspectives alone. Together they can provide a foundation for more specific conceptual development around the role of middle managers as change agents.

Three types of change agent

This section moves the discussion on by providing more explicit theoretical propositions about middle managers' roles by articulating archetypal 'change agency' roles that could be enacted within public services. Role archetypes can be seen as distilled role definitions which reflect theoretically derived role-set formations. The fairly limited available empirical work suggests three predominant, and often conflicting, role performances that middle managers play as 'change agents' within public service reform: the 'entrepreneurial leader', the 'government agent' and the 'diplomat administrator'. We examine each of these in turn.

In policy rhetoric, the most pervasive role demanded of middle managers under new managerialism has been that of 'entrepreneurial leader', the requirement to adopt the techniques and practices of private sector counterparts in order to lead in the delivery of innovative public services and culture change (Currie et al. 2008). This role is founded on a belief in the success of public sector leadership to achieve a genuine decentralization of public services delivery, allowing 'leaders to lead' and 'managers to manage' by implementing local solutions (Goldfinch and Wallis 2010). Under New Labour, 'managerialism' evolved somewhat towards a wider ideology of 'leaderism', which encompassed notions of culture management and entrepreneurialism, radicalizing the nature and focus of organizational change (O'Reilly and Reed 2010). This role archetype is consistent with dimensions of Floyd and Wooldridge's (1994) typology that sets out important roles for middle managers in implementing deliberate strategy, synthesizing information, facilitating adaptability and championing innovative ideas and opportunities.

The second change agent role for middle managers is that of a 'government agent', responsible for aligning and adapting central government policy to local situations (Hood 1991), and accountable for achieving and monitoring performance against centrally driven targets (Power 1997). Tasked with policy implementation, the scope for change agency in this role type is limited, and line managers themselves become subject to close performance monitoring with a focus squarely on the enactment of government policy, rather than local entrepreneurial strategies or leadership transformation (Thursfield 2008). Several studies have shown that the 'government agent' role is an enduring one for public sector line managers (Currie and Procter 2005), particularly since external relationships with central government departments have been shown to be vital for many line managers as part of monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

A third potential role for line managers is that of the 'diplomat administrator', negotiating the boundary between managerial imperatives, on the one hand, and the demands and needs of professional elites, on the other (Harrison and Pollitt 1994). Under new managerialism, the trend has supposedly been towards the empowerment of line managers and the wresting of power away from professional groups. However, in a study of social services, housing and hospitals, Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, and Walker (2007) show that outcomes vary across sectors, and are not necessarily directly linked with the level of investment in reform. The values and working practices of dominant professional groups can become entrenched and a shift towards managerial prerogatives and priorities is difficult to achieve in the face of what is sometimes 'overt antagonism' towards managerialism (Syrett, Jones, and Sercombe 1997, p.

160). It is unclear from available empirical evidence the extent to which these role archetypes are being enacted by middle managers in contemporary public services. Despite a stream of policy rhetoric under New Labour proselytizing a more dynamic and responsive public sector, there is very little evidence to suggest that any significant changes to organizational structures and managerial practice have occurred.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to explore the potential 'change agent' role of middle managers in contemporary public service organizations, we undertook case study research in three parts of the UK public sector: the NHS ('AcuteTrust'), local government ('LocalGov') and central government ('GovDep'). These organizations had volunteered to be part of a research project involving case studies of both public and private sector organizations to investigate organizational change and manager-employee work experiences. They constitute a convenience sample, although their typicality was ascertained in terms of descriptive statistical indicators of service provision, organizational structure, workforce size and performance measures within their respective sectors. This paper presented an opportunity to explore in more detail the specific debates within public management pertaining to organizational change and management role experiences.

Sixty-one interviews were conducted (twenty-one at LocalGov and twenty at both GovDep and AcuteTrust) during 2008. Participants included line managers from various functions, senior managers, HR managers, accountants, clinicians (at AcuteTrust), professional and support staff. Many professional or specialist interviewees also had some line management responsibility in a 'hybrid' form, and for the purpose of this study, we include practitioner-managers occupying intermediate structural positions as bona fide middle managers with the potential for change agency roles. In total, forty-four middle-level line managers at the second or third rung of the hierarchy with general management responsibility were interviewed. Interviewees were selected by their respective HR departments. Similar to other studies looking into the role of middle managers (e.g. Conway and Monks 2011), we focus mainly on the views of middle managers themselves, although reference is also made to the opinions of other informants including senior managers, HR managers, accountants and support staff. This comparative analysis illuminates how the role of the middle manager is played out in practice in relation to other organizational actors. Following other authors, we do not discriminate theoretically between second and third line managers (Mantere 2008; Currie and Procter 2005). Following earlier comments, we also do not distinguish empirically between business managers and hybrid practitioner-managers, as both types of roles have the potential for change agency. Instead, we adopt a more general conception of middle-level 'line managers' as a distinct cadre of employees with potential responsibility for a wide range of tasks, including, but not limited to, operational control and supervision, resource allocation, business planning and strategy formulation, performance management, cross-department communication and knowledge sharing, managing change initiatives and people management. Although there is likely to be some difference in emphasis between operational and strategic matters at the second-lines or third-lines, the roles share many common features at the interface between centre and periphery of the organization and for our study of 'change agent' roles can therefore be feasibly considered together.

In order to explore the enactment of 'change agent' roles by line managers, the interviews were in-depth, semi-structured and focused primarily upon managers' experiences of their role and of recent changes, their views of government reforms and experiences of

implementing these, and the general working environment. Interviews with other organizational actors focused on their personal experiences of change, and the roles played by themselves and middle managers. Secondary documentation, including policies, departmental reports and performance data were also collected. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Analysis of the data took place in three stages. First, middle manager role definitions and role demands/expectations from role senders and role incumbents were coded. Second, the data was coded for broader institutional constraints on the role as change agent, including considerations of government policy, audit inspection and sector pressures. Third, the two sets of codes were consolidated for the three cases in an iterative fashion, moving between the data and theory. The emerging themes were based on comparative reduction of intra- and inter-case analysis (Eisenhardt 1989).

Case studies

Local government – LocalGov

During New Labour's tenure as the UK Government, centre-led local government policies were overtly aimed at the 'radical refocusing of councils' traditional roles' and designed to replace bureaucratic structures and the 'culture of paternalism and inwardness' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions 1998, pp. 5–8). A headline reform in Labour's first term was the Best Value (BV) regime, which encouraged local authorities to regularly review their services and make continuous improvements. In England, BV was replaced by the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) during 2002–2003. This extended BV by providing 'a framework for continuous improvement in the quality of local government services' (DTLR 2001, p. 23). Although these reforms did not prescribe in detail how local authorities should organize themselves, nor specify accountabilities, it might reasonably be conjectured that middle managers' formal responsibility for the coordination and delivery of frontline services would imply a strengthening of their role.

Our case study organization, LocalGov, is a large local authority in England. Services are managed within ten geographic constituencies. In collaboration with the community and local strategic partners, LocalGov has developed a strategic vision for the city. The council has undergone significant change and restructuring in recent years. Following the Single Status Agreement in 1997, all council pay scales were unified. LocalGov had only recently implemented these changes across the council, with varied outcomes for staff groups. In 2006, internal employee surveys indicated that employees felt disempowered and demotivated. In response, LocalGov became keenly interested in employee involvement and decided to initiate a programme of improvement based on a new set of organizational values. The council launched a new leadership development programme for managers and staff geared towards a more participative approach to organizational change. Middle-level line managers were expected to support this programme.

National Health Service – AcuteTrust

The NHS was subject to ambitious organizational reforms during the 2000s, many of which appeared to signal a new role for management. The NHS Plan (DoH 2000) set out New Labour's ideas for improving the health service. This emphasized centralized targets for waiting times, referrals and, later, infection control. Quality became an important aspect of NHS reform,

particularly through the notion of clinical governance, evidence-based medicine and the creation of new external regulators. Decentralization was also a common component of the government's rhetoric on improving health care. Pushing control and responsibility to local organizational units as a continuation of post-Griffiths reforms was said to foster a more competitive and innovative service environment. However, the emphasis on targets retained an important role for central government as arbiters of service performance. Furthermore, the work of national bodies such as the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) means the scope for local decision-making has often been curtailed.

AcuteTrust is an NHS foundation trust based in the north of England. It is a large hospital with 4,500 staff providing acute health care to a population of over 300,000. During the fieldwork, the hospital had 860 inpatient and 105 day care beds. The trust's services are organized into fifteen clinical business units, grouped by three main divisions: medicine and emergency, surgery, and support services. Foundation Trust status means the organization has increased independence from government regulation and can reinvest any surpluses back into improving service delivery. According to measures at the Department of Health, the Trust was performing well, having delivered the 18-week waiting list targets and cancer targets. As part of a costreduction programme, the organization underwent a restructure in 2007 when all general managers were asked to reapply for their jobs. Around 3 per cent of the workforce is classed as management. The largest group is that of the general middle managers, called clinical business managers (CBM), who work alongside clinicians and finance to drive change and manage the operations of each clinical unit.

Civil Service – GovDep

The UK civil service has also experienced its own reforms. Bovaird and Russell (2007) reviewed the Civil Service Reform (CSR) programme during New Labour's first term, and suggested that, in contrast to the local government reforms of BV and CPA, the aim was to achieve 'step change' rather than continuous improvement. There are also themes common to the other public services, such as responsiveness to public need, resource usage and 'quality' issues. Prior research on managers within the civil service has suggested that central government control continued to prevail despite some minor local flexibility (Bovaird and Russell 2007).

GovDep is a large central government department covering several customer-facing business areas. We studied one of the larger agencies within the department. The agency has offices in various locations across England, including the south-east, the midlands and the north. The agency has over 16,000 employees and its services are used by around 15 million UK citizens. It has recently undergone considerable change as a result of a merger between two previously separate business units. This led to a new management structure and around 1,000 job cuts. Like many areas of the civil service, there is an efficiency drive with an overall reduction in financial allocation in the short and medium terms. There is standardization of management grades across the agency, including line manager posts, Executive Officer (EO) and Higher Executive Officer (HEO), the middle manager Senior Executive Officer (SEO) and the more senior management post, Grade 7.

FINDINGS

Entrepreneurial leader

As described earlier, the entrepreneurial leader is the dominant role prescribed in New Labour policy rhetoric across the major public services. The interviews yielded little evidence of middle managers enacting such a role. The closest example was at AcuteTrust, where managers were involved in developing proposals for increasing service capacity and integrating a range of service activities within the auspices of a process of business and financial planning referred to as 'business cases'. One line manager explained:

The main project I'm working on at the present is part of a reformation of the surgical division where the number of beds is [being] reduced by twenty-three. ...So there are a lot of difficult issues that we have to look after ... and that's really my priority at present.

However, even in these instances, the primary focus for middle management was on day-to-day operational issues. These included such matters as managing capacity within AcuteTrust, and managing services within LocalGov and GovDep. In the words of one line manager within GovDep, 'people are just busy churning out the work, and there isn't always time for improvements'.

The second area of focus for middle managers was on implementing an increasing array of 'private sector-style' initiatives developed by senior managers, often in consultation with external consultants, but in the development, they themselves had little or no say. In the majority of cases, middle managers opposed the planned changes as irrelevant, inappropriate or unhelpful, and yet were expected not only to help implement the changes, but also to secure staff buy-in. For example, at AcuteTrust, a large 'lean' project was being rolled out across the hospital in order to improve the flow of clinical ward processes. Middle managers were responsible for implementing 're-engineering solutions' proposed by senior managers, the HR department and management consultants. Several middle-level line managers described these changes as difficult to keep pace with, 'confusing' and 'frustrating' due to the rapidity and complexity of the suggested reforms. At GovDep, pressure from the centre to involve staff and ask them to participate in improvement programmes via suggestion schemes was felt to be too far removed from local concerns and perceived as irrelevant by both managers, who were expected to implement the scheme, and by staff. Here too, efforts to introduce 'lean' processes, led by external consultants, were perceived by some managers as 'not a particularly pleasant experience for anybody', and a means to reduce rather than enhance the authority of middle managers and remove them from the decision-making process.

In LocalGov, where a raft of private sector-style change initiatives was also being implemented, the lead was again taken by senior managers and HR professionals. One example was a large-scale employee engagement programme which intentionally bypassed the middle levels of the hierarchy and appealed to staff directly. Views on the scheme appeared divided, with some welcoming the workshops as very positive, and others being more cautious and cynical. Many talked of the excessive amount of time and effort that had been expended.

In all three organizations, middle managers appeared to feel overwhelmed by change and improvement initiatives; as one HR Manager in GovDep commented, the organization was 'absolutely awash with them'. However, the scope for middle managers to do much more than simply acquiesce and attempt, in some way, to implement these initiatives was virtually non-

existent. It was also evident from interviews with senior managers and HR professionals that their perception was that middle managers often lacked the necessary strategic insight and technical competencies to be entrusted with the role of 'entrepreneurial leader'. Middle managers were aware of this and one clinical business manager within AcuteTrust recalled the Chief Executive stating that many middle-level line managers lacked the financial skills to write an effective business case, skills that this manager agreed she probably did lack. Similarly, within GovDep, the senior managers' perception was that middle managers lacked budgetary management skills, one manager contrasting the enthusiasm of senior managers and staff with the that of the 'middle band', where initiatives became blocked by 'reluctant middle managers' (SEO).

Government agent

It was evident across all three case studies that the impetus to meet centralized service targets had become increasingly pervasive. Almost every manager could link the work of their department to 'very clear targets' set by governmental bodies, including patient waiting time at AcuteTrust, caseload processing time at GovDep and efficiency savings at LocalGov. Most agreed that organizational structures and goals were determined more by government policy and central government departments than by managers within the organization. Having targets often created clear conditions for the way services were delivered, leaving little scope or slack resources for initiative at the local level, as noted by a middle manager at GovDep:

I think when your targets are set at the beginning of the year and you know they're not going to change throughout the year ... where you are talking about making continuous improvements you're tinkering at the edges because so much is set way and above our control, but that's just the nature of the beast. (EO)

Similar views were expressed at LocalGov, where targets were developed at a national or regional level with input from politicians and then 'cascaded' through each level until they reached individual line managers:

My department has an overall strategy that's given to us by the Council and then we have a committee that gives us more specific and sometimes separate targets, but it's something that's all achieving the main Council aim, and then that's brought down to me personally as part of my ... personal development review. (Middle manager)

Government-led targets were recognized by many interviewees, particularly senior managers, as the main form of control and accountability for all management groups. Senior managers at GovDep were particularly forthcoming about the influence of targets on the role of middle-level line managers:

If we weren't achieving targets, people out there would know about it more than they do now, because I have bi-weekly discussions with my managers, and if we weren't achieving our targets, I'd be round them like a robber's dog, if you know what I mean (SEO)

Similarly, at AcuteTrust, one business manager noted how she had to suddenly switch her attention to national cancer targets because of an influx of referrals in this area: 'probably most time is spent firefighting around targets... [that might be] around access targets or a patient is going to breach a target' (CBM). Respondents in all three organizations expressed mixed views about the value of government targets. Although senior managers and some professional groups found them useful for performance monitoring and incentivizing staff, the target setting process was far removed from the local situation, and middle managers frequently felt that most targets were not realistic or attainable and therefore created significant and unnecessary pressure.

Diplomat administrator

The majority of managers in the study described their workplaces as 'highly complex' and this was often linked to 'political battles' about how they conducted themselves. For example, middle managers at AcuteTrust often managed across several clinical units and frequently more than one department would require their attention at any one time. This led to significant pressure and role conflict for individual managers, particularly when powerful professional actors, such as senior doctors, would make demands and expect them to respond quickly:

It's very challenging to try and fit it all in, particularly with all of my areas at the moment expanding. I'm not fitting everything into a day, I'm working longer hours just basically to get things done. (Middle level service manager)

Some managers felt they had some autonomy to manage their own priorities around business needs, but the pace of service delivery often meant they needed to be reactive and had little time for planning and careful negotiation. This proved very difficult for many politically sensitive areas which spanned professional divides. For example, business managers recalled being caught between the competing interests of doctors, nurses and senior managers, where the only way to cope was to be as 'diplomatic' as possible and build good relationships with individual clinicians. The business case process at AcuteTrust, referred to earlier, offered a potential avenue for management influence. However, each case required the involvement of a variety of professionals, including consultants, ward sisters and matrons, alongside accountants and senior managers. The real decision-making for business case proposals took place at a senior level between divisional accountants, board directors and clinical directors, and so middle managers often found this process politically frustrating:

I don't think we fully operate as a clinical business unit. I don't think we operate having autonomy for our businesses. I think some of that is still handled by the finance department, and that's because finance ruled this Trust for many years rather than the clinicians or the business managers. (CBM)

Management consultant-led improvement initiatives, such as lean, were also felt to offer little scope for entrepreneurial leadership. However, one unexpected benefit was the opportunity they afforded to develop inter-departmental working relationships. The role of the middle manager at the intersection between departments and hierarchical levels was also apparent. Within all three organizations, middle-level line managers had little control or influence over financial planning and budgets, with decisions taken at more senior and central levels. In many of the interviews, middle managers appeared to be cast in the role of passive recipients of

important budgetary decisions taken elsewhere in the organization, creating significant limitations upon their discretion. In GovDep, one middle manager spoke of the frustration not only at having to implement centrally driven change programmes, but also at the lack of scope to develop locally relevant solutions and approaches due to budgetary constraints. In LocalGov, one middle manager said: 'I wish my senior managers would at least consult with me before they make any radical changes, because I know the business better than they do'. Thus, line managers appeared as relatively powerless actors in relation to other, more powerful, groups and elites, including professional colleagues and senior managers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings shed light on the lived experience of public service middle managers and their ability to enact 'change agent' roles in contemporary public services. We examined what role middle managers describe themselves as serving, and the activities and behaviours they are adopting.

Two dominant narratives in the literature portray middle managers as either reluctant actors unsuccessfully tasked with managing change or as strategic assets with valuable contributions to make by linking with senior managers and reconciling strategic aspirations with operational requirements (Balogun 2003). Theory fragments from organizational ecology and role theory suggest that organizational change will be constrained by inertia forces and role-set conflict, although there is some scope for managerial agency. Prior work on role typologies has suggested three alternative but overlapping role archetypes for middle managers: the entrepreneurial leader, government agent and diplomat administrator. The case studies have provided an insight into a range of issues that middle managers are facing in public services reform and organizational change. Looking across the three cases, we found some variation between sectors. At AcuteTrust, reactive problem-solving, in response to service pressures or demands from senior management and clinicians, was a primary factor dictating the work of middle managers. Although AcuteTrust was closest to the professional bureaucratic form, instances of professional 'hybridity' in middle management positions did not lead to more convincing change agent roles. At GovDep, there was little scope for managerial budgetary involvement and a general perception of polarization between the top and the bottom of the organization. At LocalGov, middle managers felt overloaded with senior management initiatives and had little scope to contribute their own ideas or implement new ways of working in any meaningful way. These differences show that health care organizations are becoming increasingly politicized arenas for 'institutional work' (Currie et al. 2012), where professionals are congregating at senior levels to influence organizational structures for their own ends, whereas local government and civil service organizations remain rigid political bureaucracies with increasingly instrumental government-facing performance mechanisms.

Divergent forces among the three public service settings were counteracted by more powerful convergent forces at the population level of public sector organizing. These were reflected in the commonalities observed in the roles played by middle managers, and in the tensions and ambiguities experienced during their enactment. In terms of the much-heralded 'entrepreneurial leader' role, this appeared to be largely absent, lending support to the Currie et al. (2008) proposition that the nature and shape of contemporary public services, combined with the realities of managerial work, are such that an entrepreneurial role is practically impossible. Somewhat more support was found for the 'diplomat administrator' orientation, and there was evidence of middle managers undertaking complex negotiations between various

professional groups and hierarchical levels in order to secure department-level resources. However, we also found middle managers frequently cast in a relatively powerless role within these networks, with power vested ultimately in senior managers and professional elites. Finally, it was evident from our interviews that the most pervasive role was that of the 'government agent', tasked with aligning and evaluating the work of their department with the prerogatives of central government, and held accountable for the achievement of government goals and reporting schedules (Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, and Walker 2007).

The findings revealed five main factors that appeared to constrain the autonomy and potential change agent role of middle managers. First, perceptions of middle manager strategic and leadership capability by senior managers appeared deprecating, fostering an unwillingness to allow managers to exercise much by way of a leadership function, and possibly a lack of capability on the part of middle managers themselves. Second, the pressures of day-to-day operational work, much of which were short-term and reactionary, were such that finding time to take on additional tasks and secure slack resources was problematic. Third, the lack of middle managers' control over important resources and processes such as budgeting, coupled with their relative powerlessness in relation to professional elites, served to curtail their scope for discretion (Harrison and Pollitt 1994). Fourth, the welter of initiatives driven by senior managers cast the middle manager as an unwilling reactionary implementer rather than a more empowered leader of change (Balogun 2003). Fifth, the pervasive institutional power of central government in determining the scope, scale, direction and monitoring of change agendas within public services further constrained what middle managers could develop by way of local solutions (Conway and Monks 2011).

These five factors were overlaid with the apparent endurance of professional bureaucratic forms of public service organization with their reliance on hierarchy and standard operating procedures (Farrell and Morris 2003), further serving to curtail and constrain the freedom and autonomy of individual middle managers. These features appear to lend support to the theory of structural inertia, where reliability and consistency is favoured over experimentation (Hannan and Freeman 1984). Although New Labour sought to remodel the monitoring of the public sector away from centralized rules and towards regulation through agencies, the ultimate source of power and control remained in the central government, who privilege reliable performance against measureable standards.

The case studies also highlight the role conflict experienced by line managers as suggested by role-set theory (Merton 1957): role incumbents experiencing pressure to keep day-to-day operations working smoothly, coping with intensifying levels of work, acquiescing to an array of disparate and sometimes competing change initiatives, patiently negotiating between professional and managerial groups, ensuring the implementation of government policy and monitoring performance against target – whilst also frequently lacking the necessary resources, budgets or access to decision-making processes needed to function effectively. Little wonder perhaps that the role of the entrepreneurial leader has fallen by the wayside. It should also be recognized that this study was conducted during a relatively resource-rich and optimistic time for the UK public sector. As we move to a new period of macroeconomic austerity with everincreasing demands on resource efficiencies, role demands and conflict are only likely to become more severe for middle managers.

Our combination of theory fragments from organizational ecology and role theory help to provide a foundation for more focussed conceptual development. Our study contributes to theory by showing that the macro-sociological concepts of organizational ecology are consistent with the micro-sociological concepts of role theory. Without attempting to unify the

frameworks, we have used these middle-range theories to build more specific role archetypes for middle managers in public sector organizations. The role archetypes we found most support for were consistent with the propositions of structural inertia. Middle managers can be willing change agents, but they must negotiate complex politicized operating environments typified by tight resources and demanding operational targets. They may be able to make a stronger contribution to organizational change and public sector reform, but this will require the conflicted role expectations to become more relaxed and internally determined, rather than conflict between local professional and administrative concerns on one side and centralized instrumental performance concerns on the other.

Although our study has shed light on the enactment of line manager roles, there are inevitable limitations. First, we had access to a convenience sample of three organizations in the United Kingdom, so although we have gained insight into three different areas of the public sector, further research that explores these issues with larger samples of organizations and in other national settings would be welcome. Second, our data were obtained by interview, and we were limited in the number of interviews we could conduct in each organization. Our findings should therefore be taken as indicative of important trends and complexities, rather than as representative of the three sectors. Despite these limitations, our findings have implications for government policy in the area of public service operation, organizational change and reform. The case studies demonstrate convergent trends for middle managers across the UK public services. The centralized nature of performance standards has given middle managers a prominent role as agents of government rather than as more autonomous business managers. Middle managers are also becoming ever more weary of and sceptical towards 'improvement', 'reform', 'modernization' and 'change', and many distance themselves from new initiatives: the narrative of the 'reluctant middle manager' lives on (Scase and Goffee 1989). The question for future policy-makers is therefore whether they wish to promote public services in which the management cadre exists primarily to implement centralized objectives and maintain consistent standards, or alternatively facilitate a genuinely more 'managerialist', or indeed 'leaderist', role for middle managers. If the latter, careful consideration will need to be given to the balance between demands for local reform, instrumental performance measurement, administration and routine supervision. In particular, policy discourse would need to give more consideration for the enactment of the role of managers in local settings, rather than promoting generic recipes of managerialism.

Our study has contributed to the hitherto sparse literature on the role of the middle manager as a change agent within public services. Line managers in our study were caught in a complex normative and structural web that served to constrain their discretion and autonomy. Far from letting 'managers manage' or 'leaders lead', government reforms appear to have fostered an environment in which middle managers' roles are as constrained by central government as they ever were.

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