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DOI:

[10.1111/1467-8551.12360](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12360)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Harris, L & Ogbonna, E 2020, 'Middle managers' work in recession and austerity: a longitudinal study', *British Journal of Management*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 289-304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12360>

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Middle Managers' Work in Recession and Austerity: A Longitudinal Study

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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 paper 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 ongoing 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.

Introduction

Managerial work has been a key topic that has been studied since management became a recognized profession and research field. Our concern in this paper 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 in which 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 theorized expectations and realities of

managerial work and whether either the content or the context (or in some cases both) has changed and, if so, theorizing on the nature and magnitude of change (e.g. Farrell and Morris, 2013; Tengblad, 2006, 2012).

However, while these debates have remained strong and ongoing, some scholars have suggested that other potentially interesting issues have been overlooked. For example, Hales (1999) has argued that the desire to identify differences in managerial work has discouraged researchers from exploring the commonalities. Other scholars have also pointed to the tendency for analytical categorization and theorizing in studies of managerial work which, they argue, have been achieved at the expense of practice-led empirical understandings (see Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017; Mintzberg, 1994; Tengblad, 2012).

A potentially complicating factor in understanding the dynamics in managerial work is the impact of extreme economic stressors such as recession and austerity. However, although some scholars have identified the generally

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Associate Editor Professor Evanschitzky and the reviewers whose constructive comments helped in revising this manuscript. There is no conflict of interest on this paper, and no external funding was received to complete this work.

destructive forces of economic recessions (see Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012; Worrall and Cooper, 2012, 2014), few have provided extended empirical analyses of managerial reflections regarding these implications. In the context of existing and ongoing transformations, the recent economic recession and the ensuing austerity choices (in many advanced economies, but especially in the UK for the purposes of this paper) have added a new dynamic to studying managerial work. However, although valuable insights have been generated regarding the theorized 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 overlooked. 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 ongoing 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 paper 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 organization lives' of middle managers and differing effects over an extended period using a longitudinal design. This approach to studying managerial work is useful in providing depth and understanding and builds on the insights gained and the approaches advocated by a number of scholars (e.g. Ford and Collinson, 2011; Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017; Worrall and Cooper 2012).

Our concern goes beyond documenting the changes and categorizing these as characteristic of traditional or new ways of managing. Indeed,

we concur with scholars who call for innovative empirical insights into the 'lived experience' of managers that are neither hampered by the imposition of existing categorizations (see Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017; Mintzberg, 1994) nor restricted by theoretical insights that are disconnected from empirical understanding (see Hales, 1999). Thus, building on the recent work of Worrall and Cooper (2012, 2014), and consistent with calls from scholars such as Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2017) and Tengblad (2012), we argue that central to understanding managerial work should be uncovering the reflections of the same managers to events around them and analysing these over time. We document and analyse the reflections of middle managers on their own actions and behaviours in relation 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 investigating these issues is presented 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, p. 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, p. 111).

Work of managers

Following the pioneering work of Fayol (1916 [1949]), 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, while the search for a generalizable definition and understanding of managerial work has continued, some scholars have argued that the multiple and differentiated nature of managerial activities make this search elusive. Although limitations of space preclude a full review of the literature here, it is useful to point to a recent review by Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2017), which provides a valuable conceptual map that distils studies of managerial work into seven broad eras from 1951 to 2015. Importantly, Korica, Nicolini and

Johnson (2017) also discuss the four contrasting approaches that scholars have employed in their conceptualizations. These approaches range from the work of scholars who view managerial work as 'essence of management' or the core functions that managers perform, to those who describe the managerial role as categories of work behaviour, those who focus on power, politics and control aspects of managerial work, and those scholars who study management work as meaningful ordinary activity.

Although early studies of managerial work provided descriptions of the functions that managers were theorized to perform (e.g. Fayol, 1916 [1949]; Urwick, 1952), many subsequent studies refuted these accounts, with later observations failing to support the functionalist and universalistic prescriptions of earlier studies (see Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973). Later efforts concentrated on identifying the skill requirements of managers to succeed in contemporary business environments and highlighted, for example, the ability to promote organizational learning and engage in team leadership (e.g. Hales, 2002) and the capacity to facilitate the development of knowledge workers (e.g. Mintzberg, 1998) as especially important. In response to the perceived inward nature of debates, some scholars have argued that attempts to categorize managerial work without due regard to the contextual particularities portray incomplete understanding (see Akella, 2006; Chapman, 2001; Kanter, 1989). Similarly, Hales (1999) criticized early studies of managerial work for failing to integrate their analyses with empirical evidence. In this regard, recent conceptualizations have urged scholars to move away from replicating earlier descriptions of managerial work to developing new theoretical directions. For example, Tengblad (2012) suggests that practice-based approaches are required to help in unpacking the complexities that are inherent in managerial work, and Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2017) provide interesting elaboration of how such practice-based accounts can be developed. What follows is a brief overview of research on the changing context of managerial work.

Changing context of managerial work

Research interest in managerial work commonly focuses on externally driven forces and on the ways

in which associated changes affect the work of managers. The underlying rationale is that the intense global competition of the 1970s and 1980s, aligned with rapid advances in technology and internationalization of capital, forced many organizations to transform their structural arrangements (see Farrell and Morris, 2013; Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012; Kanter, 1989). Thus, it is not surprising that managerial work intensification has been an ongoing theme in the literature. Recent contributions have explored the impact of structural and competitive pressures on the expectations of organizations, and a common finding is that organizational expectations of their managers have increased significantly, in line with competitive intensity (see Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012).

The overriding argument has been that the emergence of innovative organizational forms signalled a move from bureaucratic forms to an eclectic mix of innovative forms, which are characterized by increased speed and versatility of operations (see Farrell and Morris, 2013). These developments have encouraged many to suggest that new forms of organizing 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) as managers respond to their increasingly dynamic and complex environments (see also Akella, 2006). However, as Hales (2002) has argued, claims of post-bureaucratic organizations are commonly not matched by evidence of corresponding changes in managerial behaviour (see also Sturdy, Wright and Wylie, 2016; Tengblad, 2006).

Interestingly, by overemphasizing external forces, many studies of managerial work can be criticized 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 organizations play a major role in shaping/interpreting the context, conditions and processes of organizational decisions (see Child, 1972; Miles and Snow, 1978). Given that decision-makers are individuals with their own goals and objectives, it seems sensible to suggest that the agenda of the most powerful will dominate organizational decisions (see Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992). Thus, while acknowledging external influences (such as recessionary pressures), the resulting strategies on austerity are

not externally imposed, but are typically the outcome of executive choices. To understand the factors that influence these choices, 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 theorized as occupying a position similar to that of 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.

Overall, the literature on managerial work has developed from the theoretical delineation of managerial functions, roles and responsibilities to discussions of whether (a) managerial work can be universally prescribed and (b) the identified roles and functions have changed or remained relatively static over time. Researchers have argued that many existing approaches to understanding managerial work are generally fragmented and commonly overemphasize theoretical categorization at the expense of new empirically grounded insights (e.g. Hales, 1999; Mintzberg, 1994). Recent conceptualizations (e.g. Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017; Tengblad, 2012) have persuasively argued that practice-based analyses are required to consolidate existing knowledge and advance understanding on managerial work. We concur with the need to provide such accounts, and our approach not just includes the explorations of everyday work and interactions of managers, but also incorporates managerial reflections of their work over time as well as their understanding of the context in which they perform their roles. Our study of managerial work in recession and austerity captures elements and builds on the insightful 'blueprint' of Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2017) for such understanding, in that our aim is to uncover the impact of wider environmental conditions (such as recessionary pressures) on intra-organizational relational processes and to explore the ways in which interpretations and responses to these conditions and the processes for dealing with them are played out in the dynamics of managerial lives.

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 HM 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 organizations are eliminated. In this sense, the post-recession environment will be characterized by the existence of more efficient organizations 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 austerity in the aftermath of many recessions that can have a major impact on even the most efficient organizations 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 organizational 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. One example of the few studies on the impact of the recession is found in the series of surveys on the quality of working life 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. They argue that changes to managerial sense of well-being are exacerbated by the organizational changes and work intensification introduced by the recession and austerity. Our study complements and builds on their work by focusing on the reflections and interpretations of the same managers on the effects of the recession and austerity over time through a longitudinal design.

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 European Union (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 organizational 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 studying managerial work (see also Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017).

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 organizational 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, with four having no first degree, but an MBA) with the average length of management experience of 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 organizations, 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 organizational agreement to participate (both organizations barring the informants from cooperating), and three were not contactable. Of the 40 participants, a number had changed countries, organizations 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 ongoing research project. Participant details are supplied in summary form in Table 1.

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

Table 1. Interviewees and data sources

Gender	Position	Phase 1			Phase 2			Interview transcript Phase 1 (Phase 2)
		Years of experience Phase 1 (Phase 2 +4)	Profit-making firm?	Services firm?	Position	Profit-making firm?	Services firm?	
Male	Area Manager	16	Yes	Yes	Chief Executive	Yes	Yes	11 (8)
Male	Brand Director	15	Yes	No	Brand Director	Yes	No	10 (7)
Male	Head of Finance	31	Yes	Yes	Head of Finance	Yes	Yes	9 (7)
Male	Logistics Manager	27	Yes	Yes	Logistics Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (10)
Female	Group Manager	16	No	Yes	Group Manager	Yes	Yes	11 (9)
Female	Group Manager	7	Yes	No				
Female	IT Manager	8	Yes	No	IT Manager	Yes	No	13 (7)
Male	PR Director	14	Yes	No	Homeworker	n/a	n/a	12 (7)
Male	General Manager	16	Yes	Yes	Group Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (8)
Male	Shop Manager	17	Yes	No	Workshop Ops Manager	Yes	No	12 (7)
Male	Education Manager	18	Yes	Yes				
Male	Shift Manager	22	Yes	Yes	Shift Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (6)
Male	Director of Finance	25	Yes	No				
Male	Operations Manager	10	No	No	Unemployed adventurer	n/a	n/a	11 (9)
Female	Store Manager	10	Yes	Yes	Store Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (8)
Male	Catering Manager	17	Yes	Yes	Catering Manager	Yes	Yes	13 (7)
Female	Brand Manager	31	Yes	No	Brand Manager	Yes	No	9 (8)
Male	Retail Manager	16	Yes	Yes	Retail Manager	Yes	Yes	11 (8)
Female	HR Manager	18	Yes	No	HR Manager	Yes	No	10 (7)
Male	Production Manager	20	Yes	Yes				
Male	Head of Accounting	22	No	No	Accountant	No	No	9 (10)
Male	Personnel Manager	9	Yes	Yes				
Male	Operations Manager	10	Yes	Yes	Operations Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (11)
Male	Store Manager	6	Yes	Yes	Store Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (9)
Male	Hospitality Manager	17	Yes	Yes	Hospitality Manager	Yes	Yes	14 (10)
Male	Brand Manager	19	No	Yes	Brand Manager	No	Yes	10 (8)
Male	Retail Manager	24	Yes	Yes				
Female	Store Manager	13	Yes	Yes	Customer Service Manager	Yes	Yes	11 (8)
Male	Head of Stores	14	Yes	No	Head of Stores	Yes	No	13 (12)
Male	Logistics Manager	15	Yes	No	Logistics Manager	Yes	No	16 (13)
Female	Engineer Leader	16	Yes	Yes	Engineer Leader	Yes	Yes	12 (10)
Female	Head of Sales	28	Yes	Yes	Sales Manager	Yes	Yes	12 (10)
Male	Regional Manager	16	No	Yes				
Male	Regional Sales Manager	16	Yes	Yes	Regional Sales Manager	Yes	Yes	9 (7)
Female	Chief Engineer	16	Yes	Yes	Chief Engineer	Yes	Yes	12 (8)
Male	Marketing Manager	27	Yes	No	Marketing Manager	Yes	No	12 (10)
Male	Group Manager	12	Yes	Yes	Group Manager	Yes	Yes	10 (11)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Gender	Position	Phase 1			Phase 2			Interview transcript Phase 1 (Phase 2)
		Years of experience Phase 1 (Phase 2 +4)	Profit-making firm?	Services firm?	Position	Profit-making firm?	Services firm?	
Male	Output Director	12	Yes	Yes	Shift Manager	Yes	Yes	13 (8)
Female	Growth Manager	10	No	Yes	Area Manager	No	Yes	12 (8)
Female	Process Manager	17	Yes	No	Process Manager	Yes	No	9 (5)
Male	Sales Manager	16	Yes	Yes	Consultant	Yes	Yes	12 (14)
Female	Project Manager	8	Yes	Yes	Project Manager	Yes	Yes	15 (8)
Male	Head of IT	19	Yes	No	Freelance IT Consultant	Yes	No	12 (10)
Female	Consulting Director	7	No	No	Consultant	Yes	No	10 (9)
Male	Manager	16	No	Yes		No	Yes	13 (6)
Male	Head of Operations	17	Yes	Yes				
Female	Operations Manager	18	Yes	No	Operations Manager	Yes	No	10 (8)

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 after 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, Fiske and Kendall, 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 discrete, 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 organized 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.

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, owing to recessionary and competitive pressures, subordinate employees should increasingly be expected to make additional efforts, undertake additional roles or work extra hard. For example:

Table 2. Summary of key findings

	2012	2016
Key management actions	<p>Strong focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Demanding more from workers</i> An intensification of their own and other managers' demands and expectations of subordinates • <i>Shaving margins</i> A focus on cost-saving and margin-shaving tactics and strategies • <i>Strategic recruitment</i> Recruitment practices aimed at generating maximum value for minimal costs • <i>Managers' roles and dynamics</i> Changes to dynamics between managers and the undertaking of unwanted roles/tasks by managers 	<p>Continued but weaker emphasis on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Demanding more from workers</i> • <i>Shaving margins</i> • <i>Strategic recruitment</i> • <i>Managers' role and dynamics</i>
Reflections on managers' actions	<p>Management actions universally considered necessary, prudent and proportionate</p>	<p>Management actions considered NOT necessary, prudent or proportionate leading to feelings of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Regret/shame</i> Regret regarding past and current actions/feeling of personal shame regarding past/current actions • <i>Exhaustion</i> Cognitive, emotional or physical exhaustion as a result of ongoing management actions • <i>Angry instrumentalism</i> Instrumental orientation towards personal protection of income, job security and psychological well-being • <i>Unfairness</i> Reflections interpreting past/current management actions as unfair towards managers in particular • <i>Liberation</i> Reflections that past actions had liberated particular managers from the stress of middle management activities/roles

Essentially, I think that it is fair to say that we expect much more from frontline staff than 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, they all believed, paradoxically, 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 recognized 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 overqualified! 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 organization, 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, on the other hand, 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 become not only more competitive, but increasingly politicized. The outcomes of such increased internal politics were viewed by many managers as damaging to the performance of the organization. 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 criticized, 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 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 – organizations and managers must respond radically or face collapse.

Managers vociferously argued that their and their organizations' actions and overall approach to management during and after the recession were necessary to maintain organizational competitiveness. Illustratively:

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', they were also perceived as 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 overqualified 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 organizations' actions. Predominately, informants based their justifications on entreaties by executives that centred on the need for immediate actions without which organizational 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 bugging 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 changes 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 organization. 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 ongoing economic instability that resulted from the decision to exit the EU were viewed as, at least, partly unnecessary and, in some cases, gratuitously exploitative.

While managers during Phase 1 were broadly loyal employees, a strong theme emerged during Phase 2 of the same managers feeling angry towards their employing organization. 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 organizational 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 organization'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 recognized 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 organizational 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, while accepting that the process had mentally ground them down.

Discussion

The aim of this paper 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, McCann and Morris, 2009; Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012; Grey and Garsten, 2001), especially in the context of the economic recession and austerity (see Worrall and Cooper, 2012, 2014). On the other hand, 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 conceptualizations 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 realization 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 homogeneous group, and should instead consider carefully the level of management that is studied and provide better understanding of the subtleties of the relationships across different levels.

In moving away from the search to impose existing categorizations and dominant conceptions of managerial work to incorporating practice-based insights that are derived from managers' reflective accounts of their own work, we are able to provide the type of interesting insights that some researchers have argued are currently required (see Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017; Tengblad, 2012; Stewart, 1989). Thus, through an extended investigation of managers and their responses to different contextual particularities, our study provides deep accounts that generate insights into

managers' own reflective accounts of their work, and these accounts highlight a range of intra-organizational dynamics that might have been missed by imposing the dominant categorizations of existing conceptualizations (see also Nicolina, 2012; Schatzki, 2012).

Linked to the above is the importance of incorporating power and strategic choice in conceptualizing managerial work. Recent accounts of changes and intensifications of managerial work have explored the influences of environmental factors such as global competitive intensity (see Farrell and Morris, 2013; Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012) and other factors such as gender and national culture (see Tengblad and Vie, 2015). However, many of the changes have been presented as prescribed and inevitable outcomes of environmental changes, with the strategic choice and power/control imperatives of executives overlooked. Indeed, although many studies of intra-organizational power concentrate on the relations between managers and lower-level subordinates (e.g. Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington, 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; Scarborough and Burrell, 1996). In this regard, our study contributes insights that strongly indicate the need to recognize and incorporate power/control and choice dynamics into conceptions of all super-subordinate relations to avoid an oversimplification 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 organizations (see Child, 1972; Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992). 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; McCann, Morris and Hassard, 2008; Willmott, 1997).

Another important contribution is derived from the insights gained by conceptualizing 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, McCann and Morris, 2009; Hassard, Morris and McCann, 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-organizational pressures intensified and magnified required changes, but that such actions were not necessarily fundamentally different from 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 normalized or potentially

even less intense, more critical and 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 many existing conceptualizations that 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 and contributes a rare example of the practice-based insights to theory development that scholars have suggested are lacking (see Korica *et al.*, 2017; Tengblad, 2012; Tengblad and Vie, 2015).

This study also has implications for practitioners. The findings of the extent to which middle managers retrospectively became disenfranchised by their initial role and the subsequent adherence to austerity measures within their organizations suggest a strong likelihood of future disenchantment with organizational 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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