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Dealing with the downsides of new work: The reactions of middle managers to the decline in middle management

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ABSTRACT

When an organization implements practices within the context of new work, individual actors must translate and adapt them to their local context. These change agents thereby often encounter the paradox of being both translators and targets of change. However, how they react to such a situation, which strategies they use, and whether their reactions legitimize the implementation of new work attempts in their organization have hardly been considered so far. We filled this gap by studying middle managers translating organizational change toward more self-managing structures and other procedures that empower employees. At the same time, however, these changes make the institution of middle management redundant. Findings of a qualitative 32-month single-case study at a medium-sized firm showed that middle managers reacted with five distinct reactions. Informed by translation and institutional theory, we showed that middle managers' intraorganizational social positions determined their reactions over time, making them either victims or phoenixes of the change process toward new forms of work. Our findings contribute to contemporary research on the implementation of self-managing organizations and help to better understand how such concepts are translated within an organization.

1. Introduction

New forms of work (Aroles et al., 2019; Bouncken et al., 2022; Pesch et al., 2021; Spreitzer et al., 2017) have recently gained popularity under a variety of labels, such as agile or self-managing organizations (Lee & Edmondson, 2017) and post-bureaucratic organizations (Hodgson, 2004; Vie, 2010), and have spread throughout organizational fields (Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). However, management concepts do not institutionalize in the same way, at the same time, or at the same rate in different fields or even within organizations in the same field (Morris & Lancaster, 2006). Thus, translation theory addresses the questions of how, by whom, and under what contextual conditions relatively abstract concepts are translated and transferred from the environment into the individual organization (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Lillrank, 1995). Previous research regarding these questions has addressed, for example, the implementation of empowerment (Outila et al., 2021), smart city approaches (Khodachek et al., 2022), diversity management (Boxenbaum, 2006), lean management (Morris & Lancaster, 2006), balanced scorecard (Jakobsen & Lueg, 2014; Qu & Cooper, 2011), downsizing (Bergström & Diedrich, 2011), best practice (Nicolini et al., 2019), and total quality management (Özen & Berkman, 2007).

Most prior research in this context, however, has focused on translation processes in which the translators were not or only marginally affected by the change resulting from their translation. Therefore, these studies have generally focused on the unilateral microlevel tactics of change agents vis-à-vis others (Waldorff & Madsen, 2022). This separation becomes problematic in all those situations where change affects the translators themselves because a feedback loop exists between the translator and the translation (Lawrence, 2017). For example, a change agent's identity may change over time during the translation and vice versa (van Grinsven et al., 2020; Schell & Bischof, 2022). Such recursive or even paradoxical situations especially occur in scenarios that make previous jobs, responsibilities, or tasks of the translators obsolete (Conway & Monks, 2011; Outila et al., 2021)—for example, the introduction of artificial intelligence technologies (Cao et al., 2021) and a self-managing organization (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

In addition to the neglected paradoxical dual role of translators, the interplay between the actors' characteristics, microlevel tactics, and the translation outcome has also been neglected (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). While actors in the actor–network theory

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strand, a subfield of translation theory (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016), are said to have self-interest and different resource endowments (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Nicolini, 2010; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), this has received only scant attention in empirical studies using translation theory. In this regard, the social position has been highlighted as a presumable important factor (Waldorff & Madsen, 2022). The social position has been defined as slots into which actors could fit, including their rights and responsibilities (Biddle, 1979), as well as their access to socially valued resources (Bourdieu, 1984; Lockett et al., 2014). Depending on the social position, actors can affect institutions and conduct organizational change differently (Battilana, 2006, 2011; Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). However, previous translation theory studies have typically focused on homogenous group-level explanations rather than individual ones.

Our study addressed the two aforementioned research gaps by studying the reactions of middle managers tasked with eliminating their own jobs when implementing a self-managing organizational model. These models propose only minimum levels of hierarchy or even no hierarchy at all, as well as autonomous action or participative coordination among organizational members (Oberg & Walgenbach, 2008; Pesch et al., 2021; Reed, 2011; Sturdy et al., 2016; Vie, 2010). Informed by translation theory and an institutional theory perspective, we addressed the understudied paradoxical situation of being responsible for implementing structures and procedures that make the institution of middle management redundant (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Empirically, our research was based on a 32-month process study of a matured medium-sized firm in Germany in the logistics services industry. In 2016, the CEO decided that the firm should adopt a self-managing organizational model and that the future organizational design should not include a middle management level. The middle managers, who were de facto made redundant, were guaranteed their job contracts but were asked to find themselves new positions and roles in the organization. We followed the change process starting with data collection right before the plans were made public. The data of our study were based on 95 interviews with top management, all middle managers (first-level direct reports), and employees. Overall, we asked how ideas from the environment were concretely translated in the organization—that is, how actors reacted in this dual role, which strategies they used, and how they legitimized the implementation in the organization. Therefore, we contribute to the translation and institutional theory in two ways:

First, we questioned *how middle managers translated the idea of organizational change that concerns the institution of middle management*. Answering this question, we explicitly add a translation theory perspective about the changing role and work of middle managers in organizations (Foster et al., 2019; Iida & Morris, 2008) that is currently lacking (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). Such analyses are highly important as middle managers are responsible for conducting the change process to a great extent (Oreg & Berson, 2019), and their reactions can promote or hinder organizational change (Heyden et al., 2017). A better understanding of middle managers' reactions to change consequently helps to manage change processes more successfully. Therefore, we classified middle managers' reactions to change and whether they maintained the status quo or legitimized the ideas of the self-managing organizational model. In more abstract terms, we explained how actors shared and shaped something that they themselves questioned. Second, we asked *how and why middle managers' social positions affected their translations*. Focusing on the role of social position within the organization with respect to middle managers' reactions, we offered an explanation regarding why middle managers responded in particular ways and how organizational change was conducted at the microlevel (Burgelman et al., 2018; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). In this regard, we followed Wæraas and Nielsen's (2016) call to reconcile the Scandinavian institutionalist perspective with the actor–network theory. In contrast to previous research (Hunoldt et al., 2020; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Neumann et al., 2019), we explicitly treated middle managers as a heterogeneous group and examined how and why the processes and outcomes of translation differ or evolve individually (Waldorff & Madsen, 2022; Lawrence, 2017). This focus allowed us to move from insights on a "specific cadre of actors" (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016, p. 312) to explain intragroup differences—for example, why individual translators from the same group translated a field-level concept in their local organization differently.

Findings showed that middle managers' reactions varied in their impacts on the implementation of self-managing organizational models, that they largely differed among middle managers, and that differences could be explained by middle managers' social positions. In analyzing our data, we also observed that middle managers' reactions changed over time and were strategically used to improve middle managers' social position. By questioning why particular reactions of middle managers changed over time and why some reactions resulted in changes in social position over time, we contribute to a better understanding of the recursive relation between the translators and their translations (Lawrence, 2017), legitimization processes of new practices in organizations (Junker et al., 2022), and models of organizations more broadly (Suddaby et al., 2017).

2. Theoretical background

Translation theory is explicitly interested in explaining translators as actors and their actions in organizational change. Typically, translators seek to relate to an already institutionalized logic, engage in various microlevel practices, or use the resources, attributes, and skills available to them to institutionalize a new idea and influence change (Waldorff & Madsen, 2022). Because contemporary management literature acknowledges middle managers' important role in implementing organizational change (Guo et al., 2017; Heyden et al., 2017; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018; Outila et al., 2021; Toegel et al., 2021; Wooldridge et al., 2008), Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) pointed out the crucial but neglected role of middle managers in translation theory that only recently has been addressed in empirical studies (e.g., Waldorff & Madsen, 2022).

Middle management is part of the institutionalized structure in most organizations but is also challenged by new organizational models (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Farrell & Morris, 2013; Foster et al., 2019; Hassard & Morris, 2022; Hodgson, 2004; Junker et al., 2022; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Such new forms of organizing hardly use hierarchy and predominantly rely on autonomous action or participative coordination among organizational members (Oberg & Walgenbach, 2008; Sturdy et al., 2016). Dialogue, trust, and flexibility substitute for control, compliance, and rules in the traditional hierarchical structure, thus enabling decentralized decision-making in self-organized units or agile project teams (Junker et al., 2022; Reed, 2011; Vie, 2010). Consequently, on the one hand, given their function in hierarchy, middle managers are responsible for implementing the change and managing the implementation process. On the other hand, when implementing a self-managing organizational model, the function of middle management is made redundant. Hence, the implementation of a self-managing organizational model leads to the paradoxical situation wherein middle managers become the "knowing architects of their own demise" (Foster et al., 2019, p. 482).

In institutional terms, middle managers find themselves in a situation of organizational change that abandons institutionalized templates and diverges from or at least conflicts with the dominant blueprints common in the institutional field (Battilana, 2006, 2011; Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). In this situation, middle managers become relevant translators (Waldorff & Madsen, 2022; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016; Collien et al., 2016; Ren & Jackson, 2020) as they either preserve the institution of middle management or enable and legitimize a self-managing organizational model. Consequently, middle managers serve as negotiators in the clash between institutionalized forms and new forms of organization within their own organization.

Even with the increasing popularity of new models of organizations (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2004), as well as the new work movement toward more self-determined work processes and procedures (Aroles et al., 2019; Bouncken et al., 2022; Pesch et al., 2021; Spreitzer et al., 2017), this paradox becomes more relevant for middle managers, their role as translators, and their microlevel practices, which have received only scant attention (for a review, see Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). As one recent exception, Waldorff and Madsen (2022) identified three microlevel tactics of middle managers to maintain previous practices despite implementing a new management concept: disregard, modification, and displacement. First, middle managers acknowledged the idea but framed the overarching goal as too unrealistic and worked to discard it (disregard). Second, middle managers recognized parts of the new management concept as meaningful but adapted and translated it to fit the dominant logic in the organization (modification). Third, middle managers did not accept the new idea and delegitimized it by their actions in the organization to retain the previous management concept (displacement). Accordingly, the translation outcome is closely linked to the microlevel legitimation practices of middle managers in the organization. In addition to these more abstract practices, in their study of the implementation process of holacracy (Robertson, 2015) as a self-managing organization model, Schell and Bischof (2022) found that middle managers responded concretely with ignorance, acceptance, self-correction, and active resistance. With their reactions, middle managers as the translators of the holacracy idea thus influenced both the change process and the change outcome.

Among the set of factors possibly influencing translators' reactions and translation, previous studies have highlighted the social position as enabling, constraining, and orienting translators' reactions to organizational change (Cardinale, 2018; Battilana, 2006, 2011; Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2020; Ernst & Jensen Schleiter, 2021; Lockett et al., 2014). In our definition of social position, we followed Battilana (2006, 2011) and argued that social position described slots into which actors could fit, including their rights and responsibilities (Biddle, 1979) as well as their access to socially valued resources (Bourdieu, 1984). Consequently, the social position not only captures elements of middle managers' formal hierarchical position but also informal constituents at both the organizational level (e.g., social status and centrality in the organization's social network) and the individual level (e.g., tenure; Battilana, 2006; Battilana et al., 2009; Nigam et al., 2022).

In line with Cardinale's (2018) theory of action, we transferred the original field-level concept of social position to the intraorganizational context as "it provides insights on individual action that can be useful no matter the level of analysis" (Cardinale, 2019, p. 469) and emphasized the perspective of practice-driven institutionalism in translation theory (Currie and Spyridonidis, 2015; Smets et al., 2017; Smets et al., 2015). In this view, the organization is a field comprised of members, each retaining diverse control of economic, cultural, and social capital while relating to and competing with each other. Following Bourdieu's notion of habitus or field, individuals' access to organizational resources, and thereby their ability to take and influence relevant decisions, is affected by their social position. Although Bourdieu's argument referred to individuals' positions in the field, Battilana (2006) highlighted that an individual's position within the organization and its hierarchy might allow organizational change to be conducted more easily and successfully. Therefore, social position influences resource access and the possibilities to influence the associated organizational change (Bourdieau, 1977; Battilana, 2006, 2011; Battilana et al., 2009; Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2020; Ernst & Jensen Schleiter, 2021; Lockett et al., 2014; Nigam et al., 2022). Thus, depending on the social position, a middle manager can develop visions for change, gain the support and acceptance of other organizational members, and institutionalize new management concepts (Battilana et al., 2009).

Different social positions not only implicate different resource endowments but also different views of the field and, therefore, the possibilities, orientations, or limitations to act (Lockett et al., 2014). Thus, the social position of middle managers influences whether and to what extent new management concepts and their implementation are conceived as possible, desirable, or legitimate. Lockett et al. (2014) showed, for example, that social positions shaped actors' sensemaking and that, depending on the current respective social position, some actors tried to actively change their social positions (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016).

We followed the literature arguing that social positions not only enabled actions but also oriented actions; that is, the agency is embedded in structures that make some actions and reactions more likely than others (Cardinale, 2018). An individual's social position matters because it not only affects the legitimacy of their decisions but also determines their access to relevant resources and their power to execute them (Battilana, 2006). Consequently, middle managers' social positions enable them to translate management concepts that diverge from institutionalized structures within the organization. Middle managers thereby legitimize new structures and make use of the change process for their own benefits if their social positions allow.

3. Research context

Our research setting is a German medium-sized family firm operating in the logistics services industry, and it was founded at the end of the 19th century. It successfully grew from 100 to more than 300 employees after the current CEO took this position in 2011. As described by Greiner (1972), an organizational structure with specialized staff was established as the company grew. Regarding the organization's structure and leadership style, the operating units were replicated (e.g., with more service technicians, branches, and workshops) or enlarged (e.g., by four full-time jobs in HR) during the growth process. Furthermore, the CEO also decided to build centers of competence at the headquarters and to increase management capacity, which led to additional levels of hierarchy. At the expense of increased efficiency, independent decision-making and action became increasingly regulated, reducing employees' motivation. Despite increased management capacity and outstanding financial figures, the CEO decided to solve this autonomy crisis (Greiner, 1972), first, through a campaign to improve working conditions, including the following measures: additional holidays, special leave for various reasons, flexible work hours, the option to work from home, and training, both on and off the job. Second, he chose to radically decentralize (Greiner, 1972) the organizational model to enhance its flexibility, thus preparing the firm for future challenges (Bouncken et al., 2016). Middle managers were ordered to step down from their offices, and shop-floor staff were asked to design a team-based structure without formal team leadership. Although, according to the initial plan, none of the former middle management positions remained, all of the incumbent middle managers were motivated and encouraged to find themselves other job roles within the firm. Throughout the observed growth process, the firm presented itself as a member of the German Mittelstand even though it grew beyond the size of a small and medium-sized enterprise.

4. Data and data collection

Our study used a synchronic and diachronic (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) embedded single-case study design (Yin, 2018) in which we longitudinally (diachronic) analyzed the middle managers as embedded subunits of one organization. Although all middle managers shared the same organizational context, we considered each distinct individual and relational characteristic at each observation window (synchronic). Our data collection started in October 2016, shortly before the CEO announced that a self-managing organization would be introduced. Although we had no previous relationship with the company or its employees, in the following 32 months, we were invited to track the change process in detail, thus enabling extensive qualitative and

quantitative data collection.

We interviewed the CEO and his middle managers in three interview waves on-site, each of which was conducted at the beginning of each distinct phase of the change process. All interviews were audio recorded and pseudonymously transcribed. For the informal interviews in which recording was not possible, the interviewers made memory transcripts on the same day in each case. We emphasized that the recording and evaluation were anonymous and were not transferred in any identifiable form.

The first interview wave took place just before plans were made public. Middle managers knew about the intention to change the organization but were neither familiar with the concept of a self-managing organization nor aware that their jobs as middle managers were in danger. To gather a comprehensive picture of the initial situation, we purposefully selected all managers from the first two hierarchy levels. This enabled us to document the status quo and determine the timing for the second interview wave. From then on, one author conducted further formal and informal semi-structured interviews approximately once a month with a few informants whose jobs allowed them by design to have insights into various organizational domains, such as the IT team leader, the HR manager, and an executive assistant. Through this regular contact, one of the authors developed a strong relationship with at least one interviewee over time, which promoted trust and helped in gathering sensitive information while also allowing for specific follow-up questions. However, the other authors maintained neutrality with employees and took the outsider role in both the data collection and analysis.

Half a year later (April 2017), the second interview wave took place once the new self-organized teams were conceived to replace the previous functional departments (e.g., the introduction of customer-centered sales teams). In contrast with the first wave, we interviewed only those middle managers whose department was directly targeted and whose daily duties were indirectly affected. In addition, we conducted interviews with four members of a headquarters team, which was to be completely self-organized without a manager as a pilot project. Similarly, we conducted the third interview wave two years later (May 2019). We interviewed the same middle managers from the second wave as well as employees from the new customer-focused teams organized similarly to the 2017 pilot project.

Overall, we conducted 95 semi-structured interviews (33, 29, and 33). The interviews lasted 52 min, on average, and followed the same interview guidelines. If we had not interviewed the middle managers before (e.g., during our first set of interviews or in later periods when new employees were hired), they were asked to first describe their previous work experiences and positions. This was followed by questions about (1) changes in their areas of responsibility and whether and how these changes had already occurred, (2) changes across the organization in general, (3) the roles and positions of certain people in the firm (e.g., proponents and opponents of the change, the CEO's role, and, from their points of view, influential middle managers), and (4) opportunities and risks arising from recent and future growth. We also encouraged the interviewees to address issues they felt were not mentioned before but were particularly important. The consistency of the main topics allowed us to compare the interviews over time.

In addition, various firm documents (e.g., presentations and chronicles) gave us a comprehensive insight into the firm's development from the outset. The firm also provided us with extensive additional data to triangulate our research results. These data included excerpts from the internal firm blog; personnel files, including absences, applications, salaries, and training; and sociodemographic data. Moreover, we were granted access to e-mail server log files of all internal e-mail communication (header only) and similar log files for internal phone calls. Table 1 provides a summary of the data structure.

Table 1
Data sources.

Data type	1st wave	2nd wave	3rd wave	Total
Key data sources				
Formal interviews	33	29	33	95
E-mails (30-day sample)	20 784	19 124	38 186	78 094
Firm documents	13	2	1	16
Contextual data sources				
Job descriptions	–	51	–	51
Intern telephone connections	16 424	–	25 539	41 963

5. Data analysis

5.1. Determining middle managers' reactions

The main data sources for our study were the interviews we conducted over the observation period. In analyzing the interviews, we utilized "abduction," which is "the process by which a researcher moves between induction and deduction while practicing the constant comparative method" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 639; for a similar approach, see Kok et al., 2019). The data analysis could thereby be classified into three main steps.

First, we independently read all the interview transcripts several times, giving us a more comprehensive understanding of what happened at the firm. During this process, we started first-order open coding (Gioia et al., 2013): each author of the study coded interviews until theoretical saturation, which was reached after coding approximately one-third of the interviews. In additional interviews, only variations of already existing codes emerged, but no fundamentally new codes appeared (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Guest et al., 2006). Although these first codes addressed multiple topics, the middle managers' reactions to the organizational change had already become obvious. Moreover, we recognized that these reactions differed between middle managers and over time.

Second, we crosschecked the coding and discussed our differences to standardize the codes. We grouped and condensed our codes by comparing them iteratively with the literature on middle managers so that we could determine to what extent a new theoretical contribution could emerge (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Kok et al., 2019). We gradually identified research gaps in terms of middle managers' reactions to the organizational change as well as the influence of middle managers' social positions. As a retest, we compared the occurrence of constructs, both within the same interview and with other interviews (similar to Kok et al., 2019). We then crosschecked our findings by triangulating them with contextual data provided by the firm.

Third, we grouped and condensed our codes into second-order codes that defined (1) middle managers' understanding of their middle management role and (2) distinct types of reactions among the middle managers. The first group of codes was important in better comprehending our research context—that is, to what extent middle managers understood the implementation of a self-managing organization as organizational change that directly affected their position, as well as how they saw their own position in this change process. Again, we discussed the differences to gain a similar understanding of the codes. As a robustness check, a student research assistant independently coded a subset of six interviews per wave. We compared that coding with our own and did not find significant differences. Our final coding scheme, including coding examples, is presented in Fig. 1.

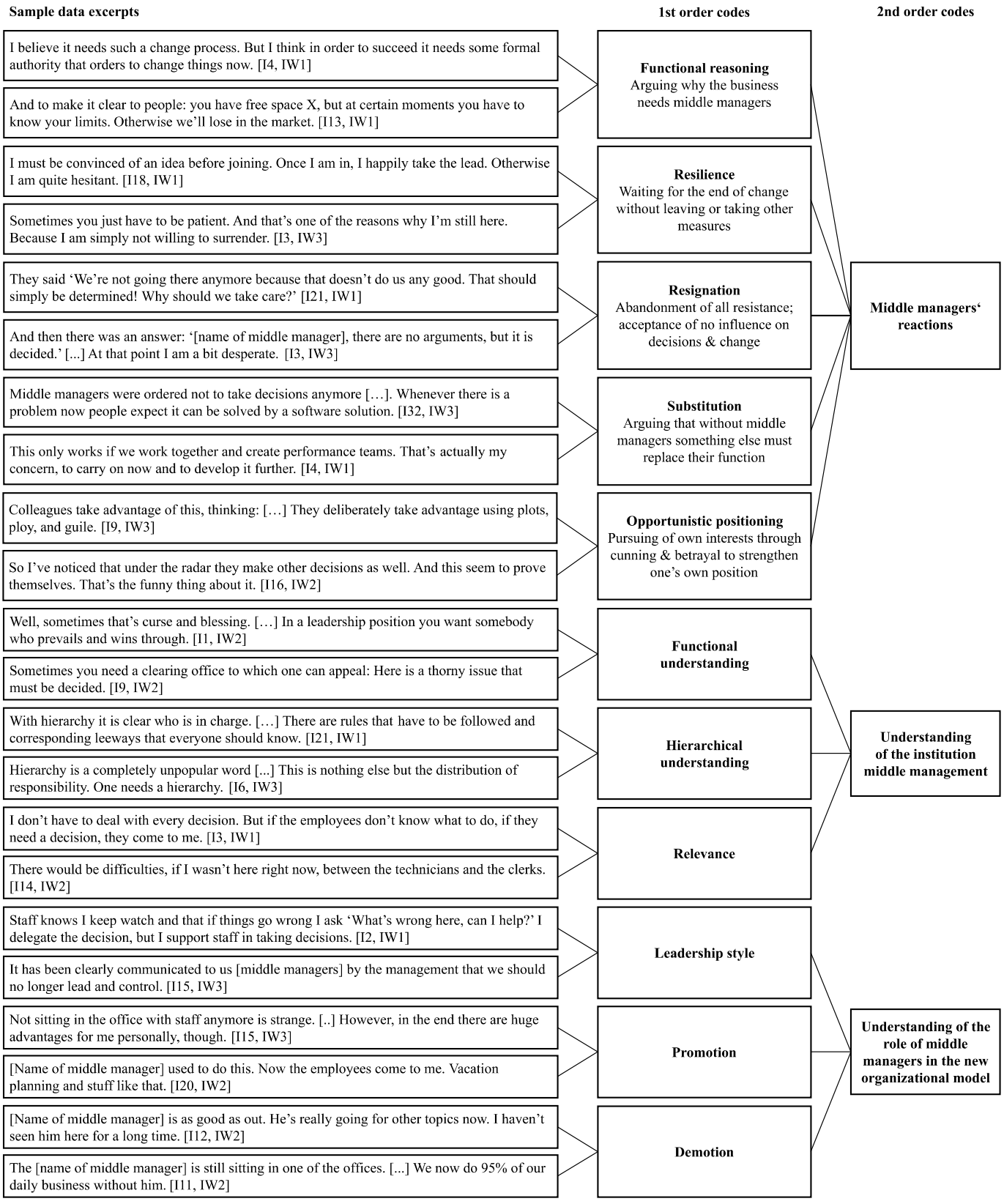

Fig. 1. Coding scheme and coding examples.

5.2. Determining middle managers' social positions

To determine middle managers' social positions, we relied on the work of Battilana (2006, 2011) and chose formal position, informal position, and tenure as evaluation categories. We used e-mail server log files, organization charts, and personnel files, in addition to the interviews, to develop a comprehensive understanding of how social positions differed among middle managers and over time.

Battilana (2011) already empirically showed that the formal position within the firm influenced whether actors initiated organizational change. Fundamentally, formal access to firm resources increased with responsibility for processes and/or products, which we considered in a categorical measure (no [0], some [1], and strong [2] product/process responsibility, as could be seen from the organization charts and personnel files). One's informal position also determines one's social position because it is accompanied by access to information and political advantages. Hence, for each of the middle managers, we assessed both their status and sense of power. Furthermore, the social position strongly relates to the actor's position within the organization's internal communication network because actors can mobilize supporters through this network (Battilana, 2006). Following Oliver and Montgomery (2008), we operationalized this measure as degree centrality, determined by how many people each actor had exchanged at least five e-mails with per wave. In addition, we also calculated the betweenness centrality, which measures not only the communication activity but also the communication role, determined by the proportion of shortest paths between all actors in the network that pass through an actor. To compare the values by actor and over time, we normalized the degree centrality by the maximum observed value and the betweenness centrality, as suggested by Freeman (1978).[1] For this purpose, we evaluated 30 days of internal e-mail traffic per period. In addition to the formal and informal positions, we also included tenure in the criteria for coding middle managers' social position. Different explanations exist about how tenure has an effect (Battilana, 2006), but all findings indicated that it influenced behavior and legitimation issues.

Each of the authors independently assessed the interviewees' overall social position within the organization on the basis of the above criteria during the interview waves. We then discussed the different assessments and aggregated our results (Table 2).

5.3. Determining middle managers' reactions over the course of time

We classified the reactions observed for each interview partner and interview wave. Four independent coders classified text passages into one or more reaction types according to our coding scheme. Thereafter, we compared the coding and discussed the differences. After the first round of discussion, we achieved an overlap of 96 percent because most initial differences resulted from text passages that were not coded by all coders—that is, cases in which at least one of the coders had not coded the passage at all (missing value in code). For the more complicated cases, we returned to the complete interview texts and the contexts in which the statements were made. Based on this procedure, we ended with a classification of a set of reactions per middle manager for each interview wave.

[1] In additional analyses, we also used other variants of the measures (e.g., outdegree, indegree, and reach centrality) and calculated the correlations. As expected, outdegree, indegree, and their reach centrality counterparts are correlated, which is why we used only one aggregated measure (all degree).

6. Findings

6.1. Middle managers' reactions to organizational change that concerns the function of middle management

During the observation period, the individual middle managers reacted differently to the announced change. However, we identified five reactions that we consider typical.[2]

In the first type of reaction, *functional reasoning*, some middle managers started to highlight the hierarchy's relevance for the organization and its success. Although the managers were still very careful about raising their voices against the change process itself, they increasingly tried to offer functional arguments for why their positions and roles were relevant—that is, why the organization needed middle management and hierarchy even when adopting a self-managing structure. For example, managers highlighted that the change process was highly relevant but that people with formal decision-making power were needed to successfully accomplish change.

> *I believe it needs such a change process. But I think, in order to succeed, it needs some formal authority that orders things to be changed now. [I4, IW1]*[3]

> *Despite all of the self-organization, I think it needs somebody who sets the rules, maybe because I think hierarchies are not that bad in the end. There are people who only want to follow. It's always been like that. And there are others who could take the lead. [I5, IW2]*

Other middle managers argued that—because formal decision-making power was absent—the staff's felt insecurity would decrease efficiency. In doing so, they did not criticize the change itself but highlighted the negative impacts on the firm's efficiency and, ultimately, financial goals.

> *Felt insecurity—one has to see—does not exactly increase efficiency. People who do not know their position do not know what they are allowed to decide on their own or who to ask. This leads to stagnation. [I6, IW2]*

In a similar vein, middle managers argued about the relevance of hierarchy in general and claimed that their formal decision-making power was highly relevant for the firm's structure, working processes, and staff; that is, they did not call for formal decision-making power but simultaneously highlighted that processes would no longer work without hierarchy. They also stated that their subordinates were used to following commands, so not having a boss would not work.

> *In the workshop, you cannot tell people: Now everybody decides himself what he wants to do. They start work in the morning with the motto, "Maybe today I would like to do this or that—or work from home." The workshop is like a production line: There are standard procedures, and this is what I have to follow. The most obvious is safety regulations; you have to meet safety regulations. You have to keep all this in mind. Standard processes need to be followed. [I13, IW2]*

[2] Studies of organizational change have often shown three classic reactions of individuals (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2016; Hirschman, 1970): exit, voice, and loyalty. Our data included only one case of exit during the observation period; voice was influenced to some extent by a strong social position; and with one exception, all interviewees showed loyalty. When we asked in the interviews for reasons why managers started to work for the case study firm, all of them revealed a very high identification with either the owner's family or their colleagues. While we regarded this as typical for middle managers in a medium-sized family business, it may have inhibited other reactions observed in less relationship-oriented employment. Since we observed the classic reactions previously studied, we decided to focus our study on the five new reactions.

[3] The abbreviation *I* means "interviewee," and *IW* means "interview wave." For example, [I32, IW1] references interviewee 32 in the first interview wave.

Table 2
Assessment of middle managers' social position.

ID	*Tenure*	*Degree Centrality [%]*[a]	*Informal position*			*Formal position*	*Social position*[c] $t_1/t_2/t_3$
			Betweenness [%][b]	Status	Sense of power	Process/project responsibility	
1	<5	x[d]/5/11.9	x/0/0.2	x/1/1	x/0/0	x/1/1	weak/weak/weak
2	<5	34.6/31.4/31.6	1.7/2.4/1.4	1/2/2	2/2/2	2/2/2	medium/medium/strong
3	<10	20.9/17.6/9.3	0.7/0.8/0.2	2/2/1	2/2/2	2/1/1	strong/medium/medium
4	<10	16.3/10.7/8.3	0.4/0.7/0.1	1/1/2	2/2/2	2/2/2	medium/strong/strong
5	>20	28.1/29.6/26.9	1.3/2/1.3	2/2/2	2/2/2	2/2/2	strong/strong/strong
6	<5	20.3/18.2/19.7	1.3/1.6/1.4	1/1/1	1/1/1	0/0/0	medium/medium/medium
7	<5	16.3/8.2/9.3	0.4/0.4/0.6	0/1/0	2/2/2	1/1/1	medium/medium/weak
8	<15	7.8/16.4/19.2	0.1/0.5/1.8	2/2/2	2/0/0	2/0/0	strong/medium/weak
9	>20	13.1/13.8/9.8	0.1/0.1/0.2	1/1/1	1/1/1	1/1/1	medium/medium/medium
10	<5	26.1/19.5/10.9	0.7/0.3/0.1	2/1/0	2/1/0	2/0/0	strong/medium/weak
11	<10	15/20.1/11.9	1.6/3/0.7	0/1/2	1/2/2	0/1/2	weak/medium/strong
12	<10	16.3/18.9/11.4	0.2/0.5/0.1	0/1/2	1/2/2	0/1/1	weak/medium/strong
13	>20	29.4/18.2/6.2	2/1/0.1	2/2/2	2/2/1	2/1/0	strong/medium/weak
14	<20	45.8/21.4/30.6	5.6/3.3/5.2	1/1/1	1/1/1	1/1/1	medium/medium/medium
15	<10	28.8/13.2/17.1	3.1/0.6/0.5	2/2/2	2/2/1	1/1/1	strong/medium/medium
16	<5	26.1/30.2/17.6	1.6/1.7/0.3	1/2/2	1/2/2	2/2/2	medium/strong/strong
17	<5	19.6/7.5/x	0.5/0.2/x	1/0/x	2/2/x	2/0/x	medium/weak/x
18	>20	13.1/11.3/16.1	0.2/0.2/0.3	2/2/2	1/1/2	1/1/1	strong/strong/strong
19	<10	32.7/30.2/29	2.3/1.5/1	2/2/2	2/2/2	2/2/2	strong/strong/strong
20	<10	7.8/5.7/9.3	0.1/0.1/0.1	1/1/1	1/1/1	1/1/1	medium/medium/medium
21	<20	17.6/22/25.9	0.7/1.2/2.2	1/1/1	0/0/0	1/1/1	weak/weak/weak
22	<10	8.5/13.2/8.8	0.3/0.4/0.1	1/1/1	1/1/1	0/0/0	medium/medium/medium

[a] Share of the number of contact partners with at least five sent or received e-mails in the maximum observed number.
[b] Normalized as suggested by Freeman (1985).
[c] Overall social positions are subjective assessment of the authors according to the other criteria in the table.
[d] x: No data available (e.g., exit or entry between the waves).

After the first measures had been implemented, middle managers sought examples of unintended effects they could use as arguments in their functional reasoning. For example, one manager complained that even shop-floor staff took advantage of the slackened control regimes without middle managers and cheated the firm:

Previously, there had been a middle manager in each department. They kept an eye on things: Thorny issue? Spotted. […] Who keeps watch these days? Either many stir the same pot or nobody cares about anything. This is the problem we have now. [I34, IW3]

A second type of reaction was *resilience*. The organizational structure had changed many times during the firm's growth. Knowing the CEO's interest in new management concepts and his eagerness to work on the firm, some managers simply continued doing their job without attending workshops or sending their staff to workshops on self-organizing teams. Their attitude was that, sooner or later, the institutionalized structure would be revived, including the role of middle management.

Obviously, the organization works a bit against this. Why should we effectively put our positions at risk for something new? [I4, IW1]

I reflect things, weigh risks, think about what could happen, and so on. This is how I am. I am not somebody who jumps on things. That is not me. [I18, IW1]

A third reaction that we observed was *resignation*. Middle managers showing this reaction no longer believed that the CEO and his group of believers would learn and change their course of action. A fair number of interview partners told us about meetings or discussions, after which they no longer believed that they or other potentially powerful middle managers would be in a position to influence the course of action.

The CEO? Nobody is going to stop him. [I36, IW3]

Such things are decided top-down. They decide what comes next and who has to do what. [I4, IW2]

As a fourth reaction, which we called *substitution*, we observed that the middle managers promoted alternatives to formal hierarchy and middle management but at the same time tried to manifest the reality that a certain hierarchical order (that could be informal) was highly relevant. Other coordination measures or tools described in the interviews ranged from IT tools to indoctrination, as middle managers argued that formal hierarchy would become less relevant as soon as employees were "trained" in the right way.

Call it breeding, or if you want to, call it trust. I compare it with my dog: I can walk my dog without a leash, and he neither bites nor goes astray. It is all about training the dog. If you have a well-trained dog, you do not need to shout at him or punish him. Good training—that is hierarchy. I trust my dog, and he trusts me. [I8, IW1]

I think it needs a frame of reference [for the staff]. If I consider the middle managers, the ones who have been degraded, I think they should play a key role because they have knowledge different from that of the ordinary staff member. We now need to find a setting that can clarify that frame of reference. [I18, IW3]

As a fifth reaction, we observed *opportunistic positioning*. Following this strategy, managers used the change process to personally benefit from the changing environment. In this regard, some middle managers highlighted their greater decision-making power and influence. In some cases, tendencies toward opportunistic positioning already existed when the change was first announced.

I take charge without asking. They can like it or not. I just do my own thing. It has worked so far, and nobody has told me, "You are not allowed to do that." Must have not been too bad …. [I12, IW1]

In addition to the active use of their managerial discretion, some interviewees openly expressed ambitions for promotion, whereas status and associated advantages were mainly considered undesirable or nonexistent in other interviews. In pursuing opportunistic positioning, some middle managers also perceived power struggles when there was an overlap in their self-proclaimed decision-making competencies.

I said stop, from the terminology this is X [the other manager's job role title]. This is how I know it—my understanding of X. And now he does Y more and more [interviewees' job role title]. That is my turf. I thought Y

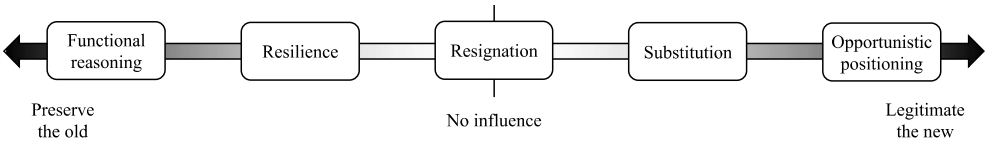

Fig. 2. Reactions to change and their influence on implementation.

was my job. When I confronted him, he left me in the dark: "You cannot draw a clear line …" I am sure he is seeking his own interests. [I16, IW1]

These five typical reactions had very different effects on the implementation of self-managing processes. Whereas some reactions aimed to preserve the institution of middle management, other reactions enabled and legitimized the organizational change (see Fig. 2). On one side of the continuum is *functional reasoning*. Middle managers defended the status quo by arguing that their position in the organization was still necessary. These managers repeatedly expressed their concerns and thus tended to slow down the speed and extent of the organizational change. Those who showed *resilience* tried to hold on to the status quo by staying put and not actively taking part. Undermining measures regarding the ordered change, workshops, and other initiatives were neither taken up nor passed on to employees. A passive reaction like resilience has a rather negative impact on organizational change. Hence, this reaction aims to decrease the likelihood of implementing a self-managing organization. In contrast, *resignation* hardly influenced the change process at all. Middle managers, who realized the change progress could not be stopped, followed the measures desired by the CEO without further protest. Despite some measures demonstrating a positive effect as expected, this did not change their conviction that they as middle managers were targets of change only, having no influence on the outcome. In terms of *substitution*, middle managers accepted that their role would disappear in the self-managing organization and argued that certain functions would still be needed, yet they as middle managers would no longer carry out the respective function. In some cases, this substitution triggered the search for alternative solutions to the required middle manager function, thereby promoting the implementation of the organizational change. Finally, those middle managers who showed *opportunistic positioning* understood organizational change as an opportunity to improve their individual situation. Their reactions accordingly focused on shaping and advancing the change process with many contributions, suggestions, and wishes. Although conflicts of interest also arose, this reaction tended to have a positive effect on the outcome of the organizational change as it legitimized the implementation of a self-managing organization. Reactions to change and their influence on implementation are summarized in Fig. 2.

6.2. The role of social positions on the reactions of middle managers

Based on our observation that middle managers showed different reactions that hindered or promoted the implementation of a self-managing organization to a certain extent, we questioned how and why social position affected their reactions. Although social position has been identified as an important variable in institutional theory (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009 and 2011), this choice of focus did not disqualify other potential explanations of what we observed. However, in qualitative analyses, focusing helps to better understand causal effects. For the same reason, we focused exclusively on middle managers with stable social positions during the organizational change process. This enabled us to rule out that changes in social position biased the findings, because middle managers whose social position improved from weak to strong during the change process may act differently compared to middle managers who had always occupied a strong social position.

Table 3
Observation of reactions of middle managers whose social position remained stable.

Reactions	Weak	Medium	Strong
Functional reasoning	X	X	X
Resilience		X	X
Resignation		X	X
Substitution		X	X
Opportunistic positioning		X	X

Regarding the first approach, Table 3 shows that middle managers with weak social positions only reacted with functional reasoning, refraining from the other reactions that were shown by middle managers with medium or strong social positions.

The reaction *functional reasoning* was shown by middle managers of all types of social position. This might be explained by the fact that middle managers in general—at least in our case study—were highly identified with their job roles and were particularly interested in maintaining their positions and previous functions. Middle managers regarded themselves as victims of a new self-managing organization. Hence, they defended the status quo.

The reasons why middle managers with a weak social position did not use any of the remaining four types of reactions differed per reaction. For example, middle managers with a weak social position could not use *substitution* like managers with a strong social position who used it to be free for a new and more attractive job role.

With respect to *resilience*, the observed effect might be due to tenure. On average, the middle managers with a medium or strong social position worked for the firm for more than 10 years. This means that they most likely had experience with management-driven change processes; only some of the CEO's initiatives lasted, while others petered out.

Contrary to what one could expect, managers with a medium or strong social position reacted with *resignation*. This counterintuitive finding might also be explained by tenure. When middle managers worked for this firm for a longer period, they identified with it more. As a result, they preferred to silently follow the ordered change rather than breaking with their identity.

Finally, the use of *opportunistic positioning* was not open to middle managers with weak social positions. Some middle managers with a strong position pursued this strategy to the extent of setting conditions upon which they would stay to support the organizational change.

Social position was highly relevant for explaining middle managers' reactions when they themselves were the change targets. A strong social position enabled middle managers to act more or less freely, allowing them to take advantage of the change process, whereas a weak social position reduced middle managers' willingness to promote change because they thought they would suffer the most. It is important to note that middle managers showing opportunistic behavior did not necessarily exhibit a belief in the appropriateness of self-managing organizations. Rather, our findings showed that these managers promoted the change process to benefit personally from the change because of a vacuum in the administration of the firm. Benefits could include job empowerment or simply securing their positions in the organization.

6.3. Changes in middle managers' reactions and the effect of these reactions on social positions over time

We observed not only that social position affected middle managers' initial reactions but also that changes in social position affected subsequent reactions. Analyzing our data in this respect, we shifted the focus from middle managers with stable social positions during our

Table 4
Observation of reactions of middle managers whose social position changed over time.

Change in social position		t_1	t_2	t_3
Deterioration	Functional reasoning	X	X	X
	Resilience	X		
	Resignation	X	X	X
	Substitution	X	X	X
	Opportunistic positioning			X
Promotion	Functional reasoning	X	X	X
	Resilience	X	X	
	Resignation	X		
	Substitution			X
	Opportunistic positioning	X	X	X

observation period to middle managers whose social position changed over time. We also distinguished between middle managers whose social position improved versus those whose position deteriorated (see Table 4).

Regardless of changes in social position, middle managers always used *functional reasoning*. Consequently, we observed that four of the five middle managers' reactions observed in this study differed with changes in social position over time.

Regarding *resilience*, middle managers whose social position improved over time in particular showed this behavior in the first and second phases of the change process. However, in the third interview wave, after having improved their social position, they stopped showing this reaction. In contrast, managers whose position deteriorated reacted with resilience only in the first phase of the change. As soon as the targeted departments were named—from the second interview wave onwards—rather than resilience, they showed more active reactions to defend their positions, such as functional reasoning.

Similarly, regarding differences between managers whose social position improved versus those whose position deteriorated, *resignation* was mainly a reaction shown by managers whose position had deteriorated over time. On the contrary, those improving instead showed resignation at the beginning of the change process before the targeted positions were named but stopped showing this reaction once the organizational measures took effect.

Substitution was a common reaction among middle managers whose social position had deteriorated, but those whose social position improved did not show this reaction until the end of our observation period.

Finally, managers differed in their use of *opportunistic positioning* depending on whether their social position improved or deteriorated during the change process. While managers who lost their social position hardly used opportunistic positioning at all, the managers whose social position improved tried to take advantage of the organizational change from the very beginning.

7. Discussion

Studies on new work often emphasize the positive aspects associated with such work practices, such as increasing the adaptability and innovation capacity of organizations (Aroles et al., 2019; Herath & Harrington, 2022). However, research often neglects the downside of new work (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), that is, loss of privileges or status for which individuals have worked hard in the past. In a more general sense, the introduction of new work concepts inevitably questions existing routines, established structures, and, frequently, the responsibilities of individual job positions. As a consequence, new work practices can also cause irritation and frustration among employees. These downsides impact the implementation of new work practices in organizations, especially their translation by middle managers. Studying the reactions of middle managers to the threat of being made redundant and understanding the determinants of middle managers' reactions that either support or prevent the implementation of new work practices in an existing organizational context is highly important.

The dynamics between the actor, the object, and the process of translation are key to translation theory (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Latour, 1987). In line with translation theory, we studied the reactions and interplay of middle managers with respect to the implementation attempts of self-managing structures in their organization (Morris & Lancaster, 2006). Fig. 3 summarizes our results and shows the recursive relationship between the reactions of middle managers and their social positions. The stylized model in Fig. 3 is also the basis for the subsequent discussion of our findings, which contribute to translation theory by the phenomenon being analyzed, the level of analysis chosen, and the mechanism found (Makadok et al., 2018).

We argued that the top-down decision regarding new work practices and the implementation of self-managing organizational structures set the initial conditions to change the structures and processes and provoked middle managers to react to them.

Implementing a self-managing model changes the local context of an organization (e.g., the formal and informal configurations), as well as its members' social positions. Splitter et al. (2021), for example, stated that involving groups, which have previously been consciously or unconsciously excluded in some way and/or in certain areas, usually constrained the participation, roles, power, and responsibilities of others. This is especially true for middle managers' roles in self-managing organizations (Foster et al., 2019; Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Livijn, 2019).

We applied the concept of social position from the field level to the intraorganizational level by analyzing the paradoxical or even dilemmatic situations (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010) of middle managers translating the idea of a self-managing organization in their organization. Contrary to previous studies, we highlighted that implementers and recipients could be the same actor (Morris & Lancaster, 2006), and that middle managers differed in how they reacted (Hunoldt et al., 2020). On the one hand, this enabled us to enrich the institutionalism

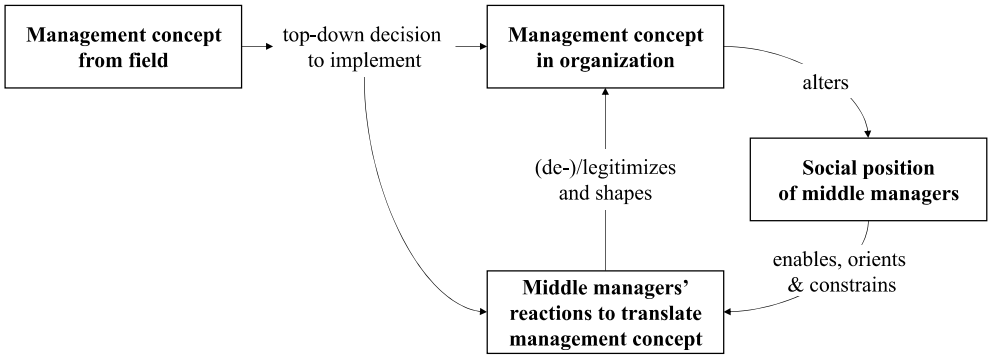

Fig. 3. Research model for translating management concepts and the influence of middle managers' social position.

strand of the research by integrating the action focus of the actor–network theory strand, thereby reconciling the strands in translation theory. On the other hand, we strengthened the previously neglected role of middle managers in the translation of a management concept in the organization. In contrast to the many insightful studies on middle managers, our study is among the few to adopt an explicit translation perspective (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016).

The relevance of social position for institutional change is frequently acknowledged in the organization and management literature (Lawrence, 1999; Suddaby et al., 2016). Furthermore, institutional research has also acknowledged the importance of individuals' social positions within their organizations because they enable or constrain actors to actively change institutional structures and beliefs (Battilana, 2006, 2011; Ren & Jackson, 2020; Suddaby et al., 2016). Our study advanced this area as we presented a typology and contextual factors that allowed for a better understanding of why managers behave differently in situations of organizational change. These differences were not only strategically motivated (Hunoldt et al., 2020; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018) but also based on the enabling or constraining role of the specific social position.

At the intersection of middle managers, their social positions, and the possible responses, Splitter et al. (2021) studied middle managers during the implementation of an open strategy; throughout this process, they were increasingly excluded over time. They found that middle managers continued to exercise either consciously and directly or secretly and indirectly to secure their social positions in the organization, to defend that position against other actors, and to regain it to their disadvantage. Although they did not analyze the interplay of social positions and the process and outcome of the translation, this lens seemed to be instructive. Social position could explain that they only observed facets of opportunistic behavior and resistance because Splitter et al. (2021) noted that middle managers who were likely to be visible, active, and perceptually influential were predominantly included in their study. Against the background of our results, the discrepancy suggests that social position allowed managers to exhibit such extreme reactions in the first place. In addition, our study considered all middle managers in the case study firm with different social positions and revealed a wider range of possible reactions than previous studies. Studying social positions as diverse as observed in our study enabled a better understanding of middle managers' contextual conditions, and it permitted detailed analyses of how and why these conditions affect middle managers' reactions when they translate a new management concept in their organization.

While particular middle manager reactions observed in this study were known—for example, *substitution* is known from other work on the future role of middle managers (Gratton, 2011)—the orchestration of these reactions and the question as to why bundles of reactions differed between middle managers received far less consideration. Informed by the conceptualization of social position in institutional theory, we took middle managers' social position within an organization into account and asked how and why it affected middle managers' reactions to organizational change. Our operationalization of the context in which the manager is embedded enabled us to study in detail how these contextual factors determine middle managers' reactions. Consequently, we contribute to prior research highlighting the role and relevance of contextual factors (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Lockett et al., 2014). However, our findings indicated not only that social position affected middle managers' reactions but also that these reactions and, subsequently, middle managers' social positions might change during the course of organizational change.

One of the main reasons for the success or failure of organizational change is whether employees actively or passively support the change (Heyden et al., 2017) or oppose and hinder it (Erwin & Garman, 2010). In their role as change intermediaries, middle managers in particular strongly influence the speed, course, and outcome of change through their reactions (Balogun, 2003). As noted in this study, middle managers reacted to organizational change with responses that could be ordered along a continuum from hindering to supporting the change process—in the latter case, also supporting the intraorganizational legitimization process of the new organizational model. In line with previous studies, we also found that middle managers tended to show more covert reactions to change—for example, by refraining from supporting change (e.g., resilience)—rather than overtly resisting it (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005). Nevertheless, we also observed more overt reactions, such as functional reasoning and opportunistic positioning, which were used either to defend the importance of middle management or to seek individual benefits.

Initially, middle managers in our study took middle management as a "taken-for-granted" institution, and reactions either challenging this institution or aiming to preserve it differ largely, depending on middle managers' social positions. While middle managers with strong social positions actively used their influence to shape the change process and promote their own careers, those with weak social positions seemed to bear the change process without taking an active interest in affecting its outcome, focusing on preserving the status quo. The literature confirmed that middle managers often found themselves in the role of driving top-down-initiated organizational change (Harding et al., 2014). In our case study, middle managers lost this exact hierarchical authority, making them the presumable victims of the new organizational model. At the same time, however, they were still able to influence and moderate the change process (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018). Having lost their formal authority, the remaining possibilities to actively influence and shape the legitimacy process of the new self-managing organization largely depended on middle managers' social positions (Battilana, 2006, 2011; Battilana & Casciaro, 2012; Cardinale, 2018). As the presumable victims of the new organizational model, middle managers with strong social positions might resurrect like a phoenix from the ashes and shape institutional structures (Battilana, 2006; Collien et al., 2016; Ren & Jackson, 2020). However, middle managers' reactions might even coevolve with the organization as their decisions alter the momentum of change. For example, some interview partners explained that customers and competitors in the industry would feel the consequences of the change and that they exchanged information about self-managing concepts through cooperation with other companies in the future.

However, in our study, middle managers' reactions changed over time, and this was partially because of the fact that middle managers' social positions were also subject to change. Differences in social position over time cause differences in reactions. This insight is important as it relates our study to contemporary discussions on the microfoundations of institutional theory (Cardinale, 2018, 2019). In more detail, our findings revealed how individual actors engaged with structure and how they simultaneously reproduced and transformed it. Even if our data did not allow us to explicitly separate discursive from practical consciousness, their interplay plausibly explained why and how middle managers reacted to change. On the one hand, the institutional environment that generally expected some kind of hierarchy and leadership in organizations (Oberg & Walgenbach, 2008) constrained and oriented middle managers' possible reactions to organizational change (practical consciousness). On the other hand, changes in social position affected middle managers' reactions to organizational change, thereby either enabling or constraining their ability to react. However, our findings suggested that not only changes in social position affect middle managers' reactions but also middle managers can reflect their reactions (discursive consciousness) and act strategically. Some reactions actively sought to improve middle managers' social positions. These findings are highly relevant for work that relies on embedded agency, such as institutional work (Collien et al., 2016; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009, 2011) or institutional complexity (Høiland & Klemsdal, 2022; Greenwood et al., 2011), enabling a better understanding of how processes of organizational change are managed and affected.

Moreover, our findings also indicated that not only did the current social position affect how managers react to organizational change but also the history of middle managers' social positions within the organization seemed to have an effect. Our results showed that middle managers, despite similar strengths in social positions, reacted differently and that these differences largely corresponded with their historical social positions within the organization. This finding added to the conceptual study of Cardinale (2018) by providing empirical evidence for the role of social position history and extended prior studies that generally focused on the current social position (Battilana, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2016).

8. Transferability of findings and limitations

Although the paradoxical situation of simultaneously serving as the implementer and target of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Foster et al., 2019) is especially relevant in the implementation of a self-managing organization in hierarchical organizations, other applications, such as implementing artificial intelligence or any other physical or digital automatization technology that makes the implementer's job redundant, address similar issues and show the relevance of questions in the context of implementation translation in the organization (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Fleming, 2019). In principle, entire jobs as organizational outsiders also exist that by design make their jobs redundant, such as consultants, which further opens up theoretical twists to translation theory for future studies.

Like most empirical research, our study bears some limitations, which are either the result of our empirical approach or restrictions in data availability. These limitations concern four main issues. First, our focus on a single case may have influenced our findings in unknown ways. These findings may be limited by the organizational culture and the CEO's interpretation of what a self-managing organization is. Despite our contextual data and interviews, as well as our observations of the change process, we cannot rule out that there were particular aspects that remain unobserved and that hidden mechanisms might lead to effects and interdependencies of factors that could further advance or alter our argument. At the same time, we understand that our study offers interesting starting points for future research. For example, the CEO deliberately left the change outcome open from the very beginning. This strategic ambiguity might have influenced the implementation not only in scope but also in speed; this question remains open for future research (Weiser et al., 2020).

Second, although we carried out the interviews at important milestones in the change process, we inadvertently created a temporal asymmetry between the observation windows because the change proceeded at different paces. However, this temporal asymmetry in our research design might have been critical for the evolution of reactions; for example, some reactions could be time sensitive.

Third, our study highlighted some important avenues for future research on middle management in modern organizations. New models of organization—as self-managing organizations—challenge the existence of middle management. Our study offers a first empirical approach toward a better understanding of how middle managers react to types of organizational change that make the institution of middle management redundant. However, quantitative analyses are required to test how far the reactions of middle managers found in this study might be generalizable.

Fourth, in our study, social position was identified as highly important to the reactions of middle managers. However, our results indicated that not only the current social position mattered but also the dynamics in social position and social position history. While we focus on a particular time period and a single firm, future research should consider analyzing the role of social position history in a more comprehensive way—for example, by analyzing the complete job history and an individual's private life—providing evidence on how job positions and manager roles change over time in light of new work practices (Currie & Croft, 2015). Such an analysis could provide a valuable additional contribution as one could not only propose that middle managers' social position in prior job positions matters for current reactions but also that the social position in other fields of life affects reactions in the job position.

9. Conclusion

Our study adds to a better understanding regarding the processes and interdependencies when conducting organizational change that disrupts institutionalized and ritualized organizational structures. We adopted a translation theory perspective and showed that the who, the how, and the outcome of the translation of a management concept are recursively interrelated. In addition, we were among the first studies to show that social position—usually a field-level construct—was also highly relevant within the organization. Social position proves to be of central importance to middle managers' reactions to change and, as in our case, allows some managers to become interpreters and influencers of change instead of victims. Studying social position provides important insight into why middle managers react differently to organizational change and whether they can sink or swim during this process.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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