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Living the Janus Face: The Promise and Perils of Role-Distancing for Middle Managers

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ABSTRACT Middle managers often find themselves in a challenging position: They have to impress different audiences in somewhat incompatible ways and represent and enact managerial ideals and expectations that may be detrimental to their work identities. This study explores role distancing as an alluring coping strategy. Role distancing – acts that express separateness between the individual and the enacted role – may enable the professional to *do* management and give an impressive managerial performance, without *becoming* a manager. This may seem like the perfect strategy to impress others while escaping identity struggles. Or maybe not. In this study we take a closer look at role distancing among a group of middle managers in higher education and focus on one manager, Manny, in particular over a period of time. We find that what first seemed to be a promising strategy applauded by a backstage audience, turns into a problem in need of its own solution, as backstage also becomes a frontstage. The paper contributes to theory about middle managers, role distancing in professional work and front−/backstage acting.

Keywords: double frontstage-backstage, meta-role distancing, escape, identity work, middle management and leadership

INTRODUCTION

> Manny was brilliant! … he was really good at the managerial role, and I could see why they made him head again (Eddy, Manny's subordinate).

> It was difficult to justify myself in the managerial role. It's a frog-boiling exercise. At the end of my first term, I kept it all at a distance. The act (role distancing) slowed it down.

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> It gives, or it increases the chances of not getting it, but it's all artefacts. I created an identity, or held it at a certain remove, it was some fabulation, not efficient, but just a construction. And it was exhausting! (Manny, after he has quit his role and reflects back)

Studies that describe middle managers' life in the middle, often suggest there is a 'risk inherent to their position, of identity turbulence and conflict' (Giacomelli, 2020, p. 1634). In this 'sandwiched' middle, managers may feel stuck between opposing ideologies and values (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). They may struggle to keep a subject position which is constantly challenged (Splitter et al., 2023). And they may come to feel alienated from the people they used to identify with, but who now see them as a 'stoker in Hell, no matter what you do, you are wrong!' (Lund, 2020, p. 364). As middle managers attempt to navigate ideologies and values, uphold subject positions or are forced to reconsider what and who they now identify with, they may be tempted to distance themselves from the managerial role in the hope that this will help them escape identity-related struggles.

In this study we explore middle managers' life in the sandwiched middle through the lens of role distancing theory (Goffman, 1959, 1961). *Role distancing* refers to the subtle acts we use in everyday life to signal a distance between how we act and who we are. The objective of such distancing is to imply that although I am behaving in line with social role expectations, 'This is not the real me' (Goffman, 1961, p. 118). Since role distancing acts may 'hinder that one's role performance is interpreted as defining features of who one is' (Goffman, 1961, p. 108), this may seem like a perfect 'escape' strategy from the kind of identity tension and identity work (Cohen and Taylor, 1992) that many middle managers are up against.

Through this empirical study we address what role distancing looks like for managers in the genuine middle – i.e., positioned above low-level managers and below senior managers – and why it may seem like such a promising tactic, in particular in the professions. We examine the role distancing behaviours exhibited by a group of middle managers in the higher education sector, and subsequently, we follow the experiences of one particular middle manager, Manny, who serves as the head of a university business school, over a period of almost two years. Our analysis reveals that role distancing serves as a crucial strategy for Manny to avoid the burdensome task of identity work, which entails repairing, maintaining and upholding a coherent academic self (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), while he performs a managerial role that conflicts with his professional identity. Through these distancing acts, Manny communicates to his backstage audience (academic peers) that despite fulfilling his managerial role effectively, he remains one of them and shares their identity.

However, as we follow Manny over a period of time, we stumble upon what Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) would call an 'empirical mystery': a breakdown in our understanding, that calls for novel theorizing. This mystery is signalled by the two initial quotes. We find that the strategy that first was a solution to Manny's problem since it helps him impress different audiences while escaping identity troubles, evolves into a new problem with time. Paradoxically, this emerging problem requires him to do what he previously attempted to escape: repair, strengthen and revise his sense of self.

To solve this empirical mystery of how the solution could become the problem, we suggest two new empirically derived concepts: *double-front/back-stage* and *meta-role distancing*. We employ these to explain our mystery and reveal how some middle

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managers attempt to cope with the challenge of facing multiple audiences and reference points, a challenge which is only marginally addressed by the otherwise huge middle management literature. Through the theorizing of our study, we address three research questions: (1) What is the meaning of role distancing for middle managers in the professions, i.e., why do they do it? (2) How does role distancing play out from a place in the middle, with different audiences? (3) Why can role distancing backfire for middle managers in the long run?

By answering these three questions, the paper contributes to the middle management literature which is lacking in rich empirical studies that take the double/multiple relationality that middle managers engage with seriously (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Jaser, 2021). By utilizing Goffman's (1959, 1961) original theory of role distancing to shed light on the underlying mechanisms that come into play when multiple audiences are involved for the middle manager, we also add to our knowledge of the 'understudied aspect of role distancing in professional roles' (Lupu et al., 2022, p. 8).

The paper proceeds as follows: We start with an overview of the literature on middle management in general and on middle management in the professions in particular. We then present research on identity work and role distancing which may help us better understand life in this sandwiched middle. We go on to introduce our methodology, data analysis and findings of what role distancing looks like among a group of middle managers, before we explore our empirical mystery, its paradoxes and their implications. Finally, we offer our two empirically derived concepts of double-front/back-stage and meta-role distancing to help us unpack our mystery.

A key finding of our study, is the problem of multiple audiences that middle managers in the professions in particular are faced with. We discuss the related difficulties that come from dealing with front- and backstage through acts of role distancing and how this may escalate into meta-role distancing over time.

THEORY

We will now present the three main streams of literature that form the basis of our study, but before we proceed a short note on two phenomena that run across all three: role and identity. Although these are two distinct phenomena, they are sometimes conflated. Thus, for the sake of clarity we will start by defining the two. Identity is understood as 'internal self-meanings that one attributes to oneself, and that help answer: "who one is' in a social situation", while role is "the external component that provides cues and clues as to what is appropriate and/or expected behaviour in the situation and helps answer how one should act"' (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020, p. 38). Simply put identity refers to one's internal self-view, whereas role is external in nature and implies acting with reference to others.

Identity and role can be in alignment or exist in a more frictional or contradictory relationship. When aligned, the role can serve as a source of identity. For example, Lok (2020) defines role identity as 'a cognitive scheme whose meaning lies in expectations for behaviour reflecting the role on which the basis of the identity is formed' (p. 735). Nevertheless, to enact a role does not automatically lead to the development of a role identity (Ashforth, 2001). Sometimes role and identity are loosely coupled (Sveningsson

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et al., 2021), or, like we find among a group of middle managers in our study, they may be coupled and in direct tension with one another.

Middle Managers' Experience of the Middle

The literature on middle managers is huge (Tarakci et al., 2023). However, in most cases the middle managers are studied as one demarked social category and the themes tend to be fairly general such as for example: strategy, teambuilding, change or participation (Down and Reveley, 2009; Musson and Duberley, 2007; Splitter et al., 2023; Thomas and Linstead, 2002) or organizational roles, coordination processes, and agentic behaviours (Tarakci et al., 2023). Some studies address career issues and layoffs of the middle level (McCann, 2016), while others attend to time pressure and the need for muddling through (Styhre, 2012). Some explore the increasing or diminishing significance of middle managers or whether the tasks of middle managers have changed over time (Hales, 2005; Hassard and Morris, 2022; Huy et al., 2014; McCann et al., 2008). Others look at the middle managers' role in e.g., radical innovation (Wilden et al., 2023), digital transformation (Van Doorn et al., 2023) and strategic practice (Stjerne et al., 2022).

While these are all important themes, they do not really address the middle managers' experience of being *genuinely middle*, i.e., what it is like to be 'sandwiched' in between layers of subordinates and superiors in the organizational hierarchy, while simultaneously adhering to both categories. What is missing is a deeper understanding of how middle managers relate specifically to their 'double relationality' as superiors *and* subordinates (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) and in a professional context which adds to the complexity.

Within the limited research that specifically addresses the experiences of *middle* managers, Sims (2003) highlights the challenges inherent to this role. He describes a life 'between millstones' where middle managers have to 'put together a convincing story' that satisfies both their seniors and their juniors, while simultaneously facing the risk of being challenged and undermined by both (Sims, 2003, p. 1201). Each story, and by extension each performance, must be tailored to its specific audience in order to maintain credibility and coherence. But as Goffman once suggested: when 'audience segregation fails and an outsider happens upon a performance that was not meant for him, difficult problems in impression management arise' (Goffman, 1959, p. 139). Middle managers may encounter a particular challenge in managing their impressions when it comes to audience segregation since both their subordinates and superiors may very well be present in the same room, interact or become privy to the messages that are conveyed to the other group. This renders the task more daunting, as discrepancies or inconsistencies in their messages may easily be identified and potentially undermine their authority and credibility.

Another study that explores the middle-experience is Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) who liken this middle managerial role to playing Janus the two-faced Roman god due to the way these managers often have to face two directions at once while engaging with and even representing what are often opposing worldviews, values and priorities. The middle position requires the manager to move between contradictory subject

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positions as 'controlled and controllers, resisted and resisters' and 'conform with and resist normative managerial identities' (Harding et al., 2014, p. 1213). As a consequence, the middle manager may have to go up and down hierarchical levels much like a yo-yo and often change role identity from superior to subordinate in a heartbeat (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2021). Sometimes they are even pulled in two different directions at once (Jaser, 2021).

Despite a growing interest in how middle managers attempt to handle relations and communication between ranks and across professional logics, Azambuja et al. (2023, p. 30) note that 'we do not yet have a satisfactory understanding of how complex boundary strategies disrupt the experiential and identification processes both of managers and those around them'.

Middle Managers in the Professions

Identity related struggles may be experienced by many a middle manager, but in a professional organizational context like higher education, it may be particularly challenging for a number of reasons: In professional sectors such as healthcare, professional service firms like law, accounting, architecture, and the cultural sector such as theatre, orchestras, and museums, the tension between professional and managerial logics is pervasive, and some argue it may be difficult to embody these different logics within the same person (Gibeau et al., 2020). Academic managers, for example, are embedded in the 'two worlds' of collegiality *and* hierarchy (Frenkel, 2023). Therefore, studies on middle managers in the professions often find that they attempt to balance opposing logics while engaging in identity struggles (Giacomelli, 2020).

To embark on a managerial career may for certain professions such as e.g., nursing, be seen as a status-improving route (Croft et al., 2015). However, to others such as doctors (Bresnen et al., 2019, p. 1351) or academics, the managerial role may be perceived as a less desirable career choice. Within higher education, the professional will sometimes see the managerial role more as 'an episode and not a career move' (Parker, 2004, p. 56). They may perhaps 'fear the frowning judgment of others' when they take on a managerial position (ibid, p. 48). Sometimes, the managerial role can even be perceived as 'shady' as in the case of deans (Brown et al., 2021; Seery, 2017). Consequently, it can be particularly challenging for a core group of individuals to willingly identify with a managerial role in a professional context.

Those who develop a combined professional and managerial identity are often referred to as *hybrids*. 'Hybrids' are 'professionals engaged in managing professional work, professional colleagues, and other staff' and hybrid roles are 'framed by both professionalism and managerial logics' (McGivern et al., 2015, p. 412). Some individuals are 'willing hybrids', i.e., professionals who have enjoyed managing early in their careers and/or now see the managerial role as a mid-career opportunity. Others are 'incidental hybrids' who passively or reactively take on the managerial role through obligation and/or as a reaction to problems affecting professionals that they wish to address (McGivern et al., 2015).

Due to the big variety in contexts and individual experiences among middle managers, it is hardly surprising that researchers vary in their assessment of the experiences facing these willing and incidental hybrid middle managers. Some studies accentuate the

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compromising of professional ideals and increased uncertainty and anxiety associated with a complicated situation and often strict performance management for the hybrid manager (Brown et al., 2021; Knights and Clarke, 2014). While others point at options for a better professional and organizational practice, based on a combination of logics and considerations leading to a more positive hybrid position (Currie and Logan, 2020). Others again highlight difficulties but emphasize that individuals by 'deploying diverse boundary work practices to manipulate boundary visibility and permeability, middle managers exert and gain agency' (Azambuja et al., 2023, p. 25).

However, no matter the organizational context and individual experience enacting this managerial role, there seems to be a widespread belief in the middle management literature that *identity work* 'is required to manage tensions between professional and hybrid identities' (Currie and Logan, 2020, p. 542).

Identity Work and Roles

Identity work. Identity work describes 'on-going struggles' that people engage in to create a sense of self and 'provide temporary answers to the questions of 'who am a' (or 'who are we') and what do I (we) stand for' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164). People desire to see themselves in positive ways and are motivated to construct identities that hold positive meaning (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Brown et al., 2021; Dutton et al., 2009; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Nevertheless, threats and challenges to their identities will come in a variety of forms: from events to interactions and personal actions (Petriglieri, 2011). So, attempting to maintain cherished working identities may be a continuous process that requires effort, hence the identity *work* metaphor (Brown, 2015; Oswick and Oswick, 2020).

Identity work among middle managers. During identity work organizational members try to find an optimal balance between authenticity and meeting role expectations (Ibarra, 1999; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Zikic and Richardson, 2016). They can apply cognitive, affective and/or behavioural tactics in the process (Kreiner and Sheep, 2009) with the general aim to close gaps between real, ideal and preferred identities and between identity self-perception and other perception.

Due to the way middle managers in the professions are positioned both hierarchically and in terms of professional/managerial values, logics and regimes, there can be more identity work here than elsewhere (Sveningsson et al., 2021). Some will engage in identity work to *become* and *maintain* desired identities such as *professional* (Brown and Coupland, 2015; Clarke and Knights, 2015) or *manager* (Andersson, 2010; Hill, 2003; Watson, 2008). While others may try to become a professional *and* a manager as part of a hybrid identity (Brown et al., 2021; Currie and Logan, 2020).

For hybrid managers who need to 'reconcile different agendas in their day-to-day work' this identity work is more likely to be intense as they attempt to create a 'coherent self-image' (Bresnen et al., 2019, p. 1346). Since managerial and leader roles are sometimes frowned upon and associated with scepticism in the professions (e.g., Brown et al., 2021; Keenoy, 2005; Parker, 2004; Parker and Jary, 1995; Prichard and Willmott, 1997; Willmott, 1995), taking on

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a managerial role may pose a particular threat to a professional identity (Brown et al., 2021). Therefore, some will struggle to *resist* and *dis-identify* with preconceived organizational (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Sinclair, 2011) and cultural identities (Evans and Sinclair, 2016) and strive to hold on to other identities that may dwindle in the process. Still, if one tries too rigidly to hold on to one's 'true self', be it professional or essential, this may result in tension, struggle and failed role adjustment (Gjerde and Ladegård, 2019; Ibarra, 1999).

When organizational members struggle to be authentic, meet role expectations and fear being identified with the role all at the same time, they engage in processes of role-*identification* and role-*distancing*. Both types of processes may be understood as part of an individual's identity work. However, while role-identification and identity work have been massively studied over the past 20 years in the general management literature (Brown, 2022; Oswick and Oswick, 2020) and in the hybrid professional/management literature (Giacomelli, 2020; Martin et al., 2021), the role distancing process is still an 'understudied' topic in the professions (Lupu et al., 2022, p. 8).

Role distancing. Role distancing is a term coined by Goffman (1961). It refers to acts the individual who performs a social role uses to break from role to signal that they are aware of the make-believe aspects of their role performance. By dropping hints to what Goffman called our *backstage* we can show those behind the scenes that even though we are performing our social role really well, this is 'not the real me' (Goffman, 1961, p. 118). Role distancing acts can take the form of joking and mocking one's own role performance, explaining and apologizing own behaviour, employing irony and sarcasm, or making use of gestures such as twisting and squirming, a bemused look or expressions of withdrawal from role.

The beauty of these role distancing acts lies in how they automatically provide us with an escape-route from role identification while we simultaneously embrace the social role. By making a point that doing is not the same as being, we as role players have more 'freedom and maneuverability' to fully embrace the role and give a good performance while we avoid being identified with the role (Goffman, 1961, p. 133). Such identity avoidance can be particularly helpful if the role comes with a certain stigma (Goffman, 1963) in the form of physical, social or moral 'taint' associated with the role (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). As shown in our literature review, the managerial role can be seen as socially or morally tainted in some professional contexts. Thus, for the middle manager who wants to impress their audience with well-played role performances, without fear of stigma or unwanted identification, role distancing may seem like a helpful strategy. If well carried out, it may increase the likelihood of perceived/attributed authenticity. Still, there is also the risk that role distancing is seen as impression management. This may in turn affect perceptions of authenticity negatively.

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and notions of life as a stage with front- and backstage regions on which people attempt to impress each other while attending to their social selves, has been useful for understanding many aspects of organizational life (Whittle et al., 2021). Studies have e.g., found that role distancing helps explain how people manage feelings and suspend emotional responses that do not fit their role in order to perform their roles in accordance with social expectations of what good performance looks like (Hochcschild, 1983). Role distancing, in the form of cynicism in particular, has been found to push back claustrophobic cultures (Kunda, 1992). Still, these acts of resistance do not always offer any real escape from the power

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relations, they may also end up reproducing them (Costas and Fleming, 2009). In such instances, role distancing is used more as pretence for being autonomous, i.e., an excuse for allowing oneself to be occupied by work and organizational culture and comply with requirements (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Kunda, 1992). Thus, paradoxically, role distancing acts can sometimes contribute to making individuals compliant with social roles.

Although Goffman's theatrical metaphors, such as role performance and management scripts, have gained popularity in the management and leadership literature since the 1980s (Oswick and Oswick, 2020), the concept of role distancing has suffered a general lack of attention, in particular in the professions (Lupu et al., 2022). This is regrettable because role distancing can provide valuable insights by serving as both a literal and a generative metaphor (Oswick et al., 2001). Our study examines how role distancing may be used as a generative metaphor or a *lens* to better understand how middle managers in the professions attempt to navigate the role/identity tensions from their place in the sandwiched middle. In doing so it responds to the need for a 'reintroduction of role into the identity debate' in the management and leadership literature (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020) as well as in the professions.

METHODS

Context

We chose higher education, in the form of four (research intensive) business schools in the UK, as our context in which to explore the middle manager's lived experience. Higher education is a particularly interesting context since it over the past decades has undergone a process of intensified managerialism (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Keenoy, 2005; Parker and Jary, 1995; Prichard and Willmott, 1997). This has left the academic middle manager caught between opposing worldviews and values (Alajoutsijärvi and Kettunen, 2016; Brown et al., 2021; Frenkel, 2023; Gallos, 2002; Kallio et al., 2016): From above they face managerialist expectations of efficiency, hierarchy and control and from below the anticipation of collegiality, negotiation (Clegg and McAuley, 2005) and protection (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Thus, due to the many potential pressures facing middle managers in higher education, this context can serve as a valuable 'extreme case' (Pettigrew, 1990) to help us spot issues of relevance that may be more difficult to recognize in other less extreme professional contexts.

Data Collection

Our study did not set out to explore role distancing as such. This was a theme that emerged from our interviews. The overall aim of our study was to better understand middle managers' (Heads of departments and deans) experience in the sandwiched middle, and we wanted to do so by addressing issues of role and identity in more general terms. We employed a purposive sampling approach, i.e., we aimed to recruit interviewees who

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would be particularly informative (Symon and Cassell, 2012) for understanding managerial life in the middle and shed light on role and identity.

Identity and role are two interrelated phenomena that may easily be conflated and that are sometimes difficult to study unless approached via reflexive interviewees (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020). Thus, to gain key insights of high quality we aimed to recruit reflexive middle managers with 'self-knowledge, motivation to reveal sensitive issues, and ability to communicate' (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020, p. 46). By reflexive we mean able to show 'scepticism toward familiarity' (Tomkins and Ulus, 2015, p. 601) and aware of our natural tendency 'to misinterpret the filter we impose on our version of events' (Tomkins and Ulus, 2015, p. 603). We also wanted them to be able to consider and reconsider interpretations and thus offer well-thought through descriptions and interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). As a result, our selection criteria for entering our study were: open, reflexive and communicative organization and management scholars with middle managerial – current or previous – experience (deans or heads of department/institute managers) from business schools.

We used our academic networks and snowball sampling to identify our middle managers. After we had conducted in-depth interviews with 13 middle managers (previous or current), who were all active management scholars, we experienced 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in themes across our interviews. This meant we had gathered sufficient data to develop a comprehensive understanding of their overall experiences in the middle, and we now wanted to delve deeper by engaging in follow-up interviews with them.

In order to add to the trustworthiness of our data with the middle managers' accounts, we also supplemented their reflections with interviews conducted with their subordinates and/or peers. Our selection criteria for recruiting these subordinates or peers, were almost identical to those of our middle managers: open, reflexive and communicative academics in business schools, only their experience should now be from a subordinate and/or peer position with our selected middle managers.

Our aim was to obtain data from at least two additional data sources for each middle manager. We were able to achieve this goal after we had interviewed only five subordinates, as many of our recruited middle managers could also comment on their peers from other business schools as they had witnessed these in action, and/or they could look back on their experience with a previous manager who was among our 13 selected managers. Thus, since it is common for managers in higher education to return to their previous roles as a researcher/teacher after their managerial term ends, several of our recruited middle managers could also provide us with insights from their position as subordinates and/or peers. By comparing the middle managers' accounts of life in the middle, with how this had been experienced by their subordinates and peers, we were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding from various angles.

Following the initial round of interviews with our middle managers and their subordinates, we conducted follow-up interviews with the managers. During these subsequent conversations, our interviewees revealed more complex and darker aspects of their experiences. The follow-up interviews allowed us to disentangle light identity beliefs from more profound identity and role concerns during our analysis. After we had conducted follow-up interviews with Manny (two), Swirly (two), Eddy (one), and Roland (one), we found that Manny emerged as a particularly interesting case. We therefore chose to focus our further investigation on Manny and stopped collecting

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more follow-up interviews with the other middle managers, while focusing our remaining talks only on Manny. Three of our interviewees were Manny's subordinates (interviewed on two occasions each), while three were his peers (two of which were interviewed on two occasions). This left us with in total, 26 interviews, all of which were conducted by the first author. Please refer to Table I for an overview of the interviewees and interviews.

Interviews

The first-time interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide and lasted ca. 90 minutes. The middle managers were asked to reflect upon their understanding of and experience in their managerial role, their ambitions, learning, critical incidents and potential performance pressure. The subordinates, including the middle managers who had previously been subordinates, were asked to provide feedback on their experience with these managers, to share surprising observations, and to comment on experienced performance pressure. The subordinate responses provided us with diverse interpretations of the same incidents and added credibility, complexity and richness to the stories surrounding each middle manager.

The follow-up interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and aimed to clarify themes and crosscheck interpretations made in the first round of interviews. The first follow-up interviews were conducted three to six months after the first interview. Manny's first three interviews were spread across two years. Our fourth and final interview with Manny, was conducted four years after the first. He had now quit his managerial role, and this last interview gave him the opportunity to reflect upon his entire managerial experience in hindsight.

Rich in-Depth Case

Manny's experience with role distancing and identity work offers an in-depth study of a rich case (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967) which is supplemented by a larger sample. Such one-case studies based on several interviews and multiple empirical sources allow us to not take interview accounts on face value or to assume that individual statements reflect a given logic, discourse, or an identity. Furthermore, one-case studies have proven to be a useful

Table I. Overview of interviews

Middle Managers	Manny: four interviews (across four years) Swirly: three interviews (across two years) Eddy: two interviews (across a year and a half) Roland: two interviews (across a year) Felix: two interviews (across a year) 8 additional middle managers: one interview each **Total**: 13 Middle Managers: 21 interviews
Subordinates	5 subordinates: one interview with each **Total**: 5 subordinates: 5 interviews
TOTAL	**Total: 26 interviews**

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way to spark novel theorizing (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Hallett, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008).

However, although individual cases can offer valuable information and a comprehensive analysis, they can also lead our thinking into an idiosyncratic direction. Therefore, we first situate our in-depth case within a broader context of how role distancing and identity work was experienced among a group of middle managers. This enables us to compare various role distancing strategies. We do not claim to generalize our findings, as differences in national, organizational, and individual contexts are evident (Frenkel, 2023). Our objective is to contribute to the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the topic using empirical insights and theorizing which in turn may have broader conceptual and theoretical implications.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis spans three stages: We begin with a thematic analysis. This is followed by a hermeneutical analysis. Finally, we conduct an analysis of *abduction*, which implies that we interpret 'an (often surprising) single case' 'from a hypothetic overarching pattern, which, if it were true, explains the case in question' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, p. 4). This final process involves moving between empirical input and on-going considerations of a preliminary theoretical framework. This allows empirical data and theorizing to influence each other throughout the research process. There is thus no strict separation between 'pure' data and distinct theory during the research process. We will now present these three stages in more detail.

Stage one: Thematic analysis. After each interview, we analysed the data thematically. We identified *role distancing* as a significant theme after five interviews. Still, we did not probe for it in our first round of interviews. We found that several aspects of the middle managerial role posed challenges across three of the business schools, prompting some middle managers to attempt to distance themselves from the role. After we had discussed thoroughly several emerging themes, we decided to focus our follow-up data collection and analysis on role distancing. The findings from this first stage of analysis allowed us to address our first research question which explored the meaning, purpose and methods of role distancing for middle managers (in the professions).

Stage two: Hermeneutical analysis. During the second part of our analysis, we used theatrical metaphors inspired by Goffman (1959, 1961) as sensitizing constructs to help us make sense of our material. This part of the analysis allowed us to answer our second research question: How does role distancing play out from a place in the middle with different audiences? During this stage we compared explicit and implicit examples of role distancing acts in our data material to the original work of Goffman (1959, 1961), Cohen and Taylor (1992). We were mindful of doing justice to our material, and to never force any preconceived theoretical ideas on to it.

According to Goffman's (1961) theory on role distancing, we will not only abide by social rules of comport that make up our social roles when we interact with others, we

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will also try to break free from these. We do so in the form of hints to what Goffman called our *backstage audience*. Such hints can e.g., be to joke about or mock our own role performance, to explain or attempt to apologize for our own behaviour. We can use irony or sarcasm or use gestures such as twisting or share a bemused look. All these hints aim to express that we withdraw from the role even though we may come across as someone who believes in our role performance.

We addressed our data material with such hints in mind and looked for examples of when and how our middle managers made subtle gestures and/or explained to ensure that others did not fully buy into it. We found that such hints revolved around three parts of their managerial role that we chose to categorize in the form of theatre metaphors such as: costume, acting and script. Examples of statements that exemplify these are: *Costume*: 'Manny who had stuffed himself into a suit, clearly being very uncomfortable' *Acting*: 'So, you have to pretend upwards'. *Script*: 'Manny was excellent in management lingo… he was very slick, like it was all very smooth'.

During this stage of the analysis, we did not code our data with a 'factor-analytic approach' (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 377), but employed hermeneutical principles. This meant that we explored our data material through a part-whole thinking and addressed our interview material in a context-sensitive way (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). When one does an interpretivist analysis, it is particularly important that the reader is persuaded by the credibility of the reasoning process. Thus, we have aimed to show rigour through our transparent and detailed explanations for our many interpretations and methodological choices. We have also strived to balance explanations that are both *lovely* 'in that they explain a phenomenon in patently rich detail' and *likely* meaning they are probable explanations explained in a simple way (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022, p. 255).

The statements that we during our thematic analysis had interpreted as examples of role distancing acts were now compared to other people's interpretations of the very same acts. We let the consideration of the entire empirical material guide the interpretation of its parts. Thus, for *acting* to be considered as an example of role distancing, the middle managers would simultaneously have to let the audience '*backstage*' know it merely was an act. For example, a former head who was now one of Manny's subordinates said: 'Well, it helps to detach from role and say, well, I know I'm Head of School and I'm having to do this, but really, if it was left to me and my own devices I wouldn't. Manny does that quite well'. Another way we learned that the people 'backstage' were informed of Manny's role distancing was when they described how he talked to superiors using expressions such as 'management lingo' and 'management speak' and explained that he was very knowledgeable in what we decided to refer to as *scripts*.

Stage three: Mystery solving through abduction. The third stage of our data analysis addresses our final research question: Why can role distancing backfire for middle managers in the long run? This part of our analysis started as we stumbled upon our *empirical mystery* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). We had followed Manny over almost two years when we in our third interview with him found that the role distancing tactics we had discovered during analysis stages one and two no longer seemed to be working. The

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subordinates' and peers' descriptions of Manny's performance had given us a success story of someone who pulled off role distancing with ease, while giving an excellent managerial performance in a job he was negatively disposed to. However, our interviews with Manny over time, slowly but surely gave us a different story as we learn that Manny comes to struggle with the consequences of his role distancing acts.

In order to solve this mystery, we made use of abductive analysis (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Abduction has some characteristics of induction, where our point of departure is empirical data – we start with Manny and his fellow middle managers as our case – and *deduction* when previous theory is used as a source of inspiration to discover patterns that help bring new understanding to the fore. We went back to our data material for new clues. We asked ourselves what was going on, and then: what was *really* going on?

In the final stage of data analysis, we addressed the empirical material both as a source of inspiration and constraint, while we drew upon the three fields of literature that we presented in our literature review: middle management, identity work and role distancing. We used hermeneutic principles and alternated between empirically laden theory and theory sensitive empirical facts. This form of analysis aims to build gradually emerging understandings, and theory and empirics are used in dialogue to offer robust results (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Through this analytical approach, we were able to generate novel concepts and theoretical ideas that provide deeper insights into the phenomenon of role distancing among middle managers in the professions.

It was as we moved back and forth between data and theory, that we came to our understanding that multiple audiences would create *a double-front/back-stage* for our role-distancing middle manager with time. Due to this creation, Manny would spiral into a form of *meta-role-distancing* during which he attempted to distance himself from his distancing. Together these two new concepts generated from our abductive analysis, may help explain our mystery of how role distancing could go from being a solution to an identity-struggle problem, to creating a new identity problem over time.

FINDINGS

The Meaning of Role Distancing for Middle Managers

In this first part of our findings, we address the paper's first research question: What is the meaning of role distancing for middle managers in the professions, i.e., why do they do it? We found that role distancing was a prevalent theme among eight of our 13 middle managers. Some of these would use the term explicitly, while others simply described attempts to keep the role at a distance and *not become* a Manager. During these reflections, our interviewees would display more emotion and non-verbal cues such as laughter and hand-gesturing, than in the other parts of the interviews.

When we compared all our middle managers, we noticed that the eight who held the role at an arm's length, were different from the ones who gave no such examples in two main ways. They showed: (1) a more pronounced scepticism towards leadership

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discourse with statements such as e.g., 'The leader is a besmirched idea and most leaders are horrendous, with psychopathic tendencies'; and towards the status of the manager in general: e.g., 'I'm no manager, but an academic who dabbles in management. I do stuff, mundane stuff. The big stuff such as where we should be going, should always be collective' and (2) they stressed the importance of and difficulty in having to alter their stories in order to 'Tell the same story in many different ways, to energize both those above and below'.

A Coping and Navigation Tactic

The role distancing middle managers pointed at challenges that were related to facing multiple audiences which needed to be impressed in opposing ways. One of our middle managers, Swirly, described this through a fitting metaphor:

> This middle management role feels very much like being in a swivel chair. Shifting between groups, faculty and top management. (Swirly)

Our main case subject, Manny, used the slightly more negative metaphor of being 'Janus-faced'. He explained that to feel better about himself while he shifted from one audience to the next, 'toying with the language to tailor his stories to different audiences', it helped to see it all as a 'game and theatrical performance to play' and to let his colleagues in on this performance. This allowed him to navigate between levels while being liked by both groups. It was nevertheless a challenging balance since being accepted by top management could easily lead to being seen as a 'management poodle' or 'Judas' by colleagues, Manny explained while he compared himself to his predecessors:

> So, I had to play the other game and effectively represent, and it's the worst of both worlds all the time. Eddy had a horrific time with other heads of department and the senior powers at Uni. Peter probably had a hurtful time with colleagues thinking Judas, raincoat what's he doing, he's management's poodle etc. I got lucky. I got to, for a little while at least, inhabit the sweat spot where centre thought I was quite reasonable, and the school thought I was quite reasonable. But it's very, very, very rare in my experience in a University to be both liked by the centre and liked by the department or respected by either. If you've got one you've generally lost the other. So, in a sense you have to, you buy the respect of one with one performance and the respect of the other with another performance and you absorb the difference (Manny).

Roland confirmed Manny's stories and explained how role distancing was an important 'survival strategy' for them both.

> I think distancing is important, but it's a survival strategy, so you've got to recognize it both as, why are you doing it? And you might be doing it because you actually believe that you don't want to do the role, or you might be saying it because it's a way of escaping from the opprobrium, the hostility, which comes from doing the particular role… I try to say the university wants this but I'm not doing it. And then of course

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> sometimes you've got to do what the university says, but in those days, and I, when the place was much smaller, it was possible to say, I've been told we have to do this, but I'm going to struggle my best to say that we're not. Which is honest. And occasionally you're going to have to say, sometimes quite a lot, well I've tried my best, but it's not worked, we're going to have to do it. (Roland)

As Roland indicates, sometimes the struggle is real. The middle manager may be up against a real challenge trying to figure out who one is, what one is expected to do and wants to do, and so it may feel tempting to escape scepticism and hostility from people around by distancing oneself from the role (see also Brown et al., 2021). Roland, who had been head of the same business school some time before Manny, reflected upon how he and Manny coped in their role through acts of distancing which provided a clever escape from identity struggles.

> So, you ask yourself: Why am I doing this, and that worry you wake up in the night and you think: Why have I done this? And it's this … ah, what is the word, yes, it's this *role distancing* which is a form of escape (Roland). An escape from what? (Interviewer) Escape from the process you're in, from the structures you're in, from yourself. The role detachment is to say, well, I know I'm Head of School and I'm having to do this, but really, if it was left to me and my own devices I wouldn't. Manny does that quite well. He does the role detachment thing. He sends messages out: Do not shoot the messenger. Yeah, we all do. (Roland)

Here we see some identity troubles ('escape from yourself'), but these seem to be more a matter of, and partly solved by, external communication to a backstage audience (the other academics). Manny appears to be an effective role distancer as he sends out the messages. However, not everyone managed to uphold a distance between doing and being and underwent quite a lot of soul searching when in role. Eddy, an ex-head from a third business school, described considerable struggles to make sense of and get to terms with the role.

> So, I guess I kept the role at a distance (Eddy). How? (Interviewer) I never really *believed* it. I think. I may have *acted* it. I mean I *did* act it, I went to employment trainings, people lost jobs and so I did it. So, I definitely *did* it. We restructured people out of jobs. We made people redundant. So yeah, I did do those things and did them with academics too, so you know. Not particularly pleasant. … So, I did a lot of soul searching. (Eddy)

Despite *acting* the role which indicates non-being, i.e., the un-involvement of identity, Eddy still feels that some work eats into his identity ('soul searching'). Here Eddy's actions are not clearly marked by the distancing – 'I *did* act it', he says – while he for himself and perhaps the interviewer was doing role distancing.

Different Worldviews and First Hints of Double-Front Backstage

A re-occurring challenge among our middle managers was to engage with very different worldviews and objectives. To become credible in the eyes of groups with very different expectations and demands is not easy. Swirly explained:

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> Next week I have to provide a plan on paper, two pages, that speaks to top management *and* faculty. I have to provide the *same* story. But there is nothing sustainable to an academic scholar about KPIs (key performance indicators) and he (the Vice chancellor) doesn't care about practice. I have to be so conscious about how I speak. (Swirly)

Swirly was very aware of the combination of being consistent *and* making the messages appear quite different to the various audiences. We here see how the middle manager is faced with a *double front-backstage*. This means that the backstage – which Goffman (1961) once suggested is where the performer can relax, 'drop his front' and 'step out of character' 'when no audience is present to be affronted by them' (Goffman, 1961, p. 115) – is not necessarily a place without a frontstage audience. What on one level is backstage, i.e., away from top management, may simultaneously be a frontstage performance for a second audience, i.e., subordinates, where the middle manager signals distance from and perhaps distaste for managerial tasks and priorities as a way to ensure subordinates s/he is still a professional fighting their common cause. The trick to make these double performances fly, was to never let front- and backstage audiences hear the same important message at the same time, as that would ruin the performance.

> And the situations in which one would find oneself in real difficulties were if you ever ended up by accident or by lack of careful design to avoid this in a room with both of them at the same time. Because obviously at that point you can't face in two different directions and tell two different stories. (Manny)

To present oneself and what one stands for in contradictory ways, may feel Janus-like and be perceived by those who witness these double-faced acts as *hypocrisy*. However, in different situations, there is often an expectation and inclination to think in terms of different types of 'us' and 'them' (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), and as a manager among managers and an academic among peers, you talk differently. If there is hard pressure from various angles, it is difficult to adopt a straight line (Brunsson, 2003; Jackall, 1988). Seeing the managerial role as *just* a role meant that the hypocrisy was *not real*, it was only *performed*. It may therefore be less threatening to one's sense of self, and also acceptable to an audience who is tolerant of messages that are part of the managerial role – but not the person.

Front-Stage Performance and Backstage Role Distancing Hints

We will now explore findings which help us delve deeper into understanding our first research question concerning *why* the middle managers attempted to distance themselves from the role before we address our second research question: *How* does role distancing play out from a place in the middle, with different audiences?

In order to perform their roles as middle managers well, but still not feel or be categorized by others as a (dreaded) 'manager', we found that a group of our middle managers would drop hints that helped them distance themselves from their managerial performance. These hints addressed three parts of their social role that we, inspired by the

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Goffman's theatrical metaphor, chose to name costume, acting and script. Attempts at distancing was portrayed as a very conscious tactic among some of the managers who would sometimes even explicitly refer to their behaviour as role distancing. However, others seemed to take on a more unconscious form of coping to help them deal with the challenges of being in the squeezed middle.

Costume. In the theatre great performances are usually helped on by convincing costumes. In the often theatre-like contemporary organization masks and costumes are worn by many a great deal of the time. Managers may also be expected to put on a specific material performance (Ford et al., 2017). Some of our middle managers moved in and out of managerial costumes and with that in and out of managerial roles, without too much trouble, like these:

> So, I've seen Felix when he's stuffed into a suit and he's just been glad handling the Lord Mayor of London, whatever it is, and then he'll take his tie off and we'll go for a beer, and I kind of, I think in order to be effective, that you need to have that sort of flexibility, in a way, yeah? And Felix is very good at doing it, I think. (Ted)

> It's this role transition. I use my high heels to transition into the Manager. I put my lippy on. Perfume on. And I always wear a jacket. I then I go back home, and out of role. And my daughter says I don't ever talk to her before she's in her pyjamas. (Jackie)

For Ted, Felix and Jackie, the role transition is – or seems to be, also from their inside group's view – smooth. The 'micro-role transition' as the managers psychologically and physically switch between simultaneously held roles (Ashforth, 2001, p. 7), is without friction. Identity is not directly involved in these role plays. These individuals are not visibly uncomfortable or disturbed about dressing the part. And although costumes, like the organizational dress, may represent 'issues of organizational versus individual control' and organizational members may feel that dressing as the organization expects is 'to give up one's right to act as an individual' (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997, p. 865), they may also be relieved from the moral duty to act in an authentic way. These three managers seemed to be unbothered with how their costume provided a form of entry into and exit from roles. For other middle managers, like Felix ('stuffed into a suit') it clearly appeared to be a costume they did not feel comfortable with – at least in the eyes of their subordinates who were their fellow academics. We learned that seeing the whole managerial experience through the theatrical lens, helped them create a distance to the role that would help them escape a feared identification with the role.

> 'I never took on the identity although I did wear a suit. I wore a suit largely because I thought that the senior management would like, would expect a business school manager in a suit, rather than my usual daily attire. So, I did that. But I never really took on the role, I mean I never really, I mean I might have had the highest teaching load while I was head of school as I wanted to stay close to the students. … So, I didn't really, I didn't buy into the leadership role and all that stuff, and I never really, I never really have. So, I don't think I *became* a manager'. (Eddy)

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Eddy here strongly emphasizes the role, like in the theatre, where the divide between role-playing and the 'real' person is very marked. To wear a suit, signals that this is a role in a similar way to how one wears a costume in the theatre. Several of the middle managers talked about being squeezed or stuffed into a suit and emphasized their discomfort with costumes and having to fake ideals when interacting with Vice Chancellors. This way they demonstrated that this role was 'not me'. To be an educator who delivers much teaching (a point repeated across interviews) on the other hand, shows that Eddy is an academic, with a strong teacher identity. He shows – to himself and others – that he distances himself from the managerial job. Teaching, typically a frontstage activity, is here a backstage comment to the head of department position. This illustrates the floating nature of front- and backstage.

If one accepts a continuum of front and backstage, to be a manager is to *play* a role frontstage, but to *be* a teacher is not, it is genuine and positive and a backstage behaviour. For Eddy teaching is a genuine and positive behaviour, not a role to play like being a manager. The costume is off. Eddy's statement of 'the highest teaching load' shows his effort to strengthen his academic identity and compensates for the managerial work and its potentially identity-eroding effects.

Acting. Another way to give a convincing frontstage performance we learned was to be clear to yourself and the backstage group that this is pretending.

> So, you have to pretend upwards. Well, pretend I care about particular kinds of things. I remember when I used to go and have to see the Vice Chancellor fairly regularly at University. And we'd sit on her sofa and I would tell her about how much I cared about the levels of surplus contributions that the department was making and the various things I was going to do in order to get more students or whenever it might be, because that's primarily what she was concerned with I think, and then I'd walk out of there just feeling a bit grubby, a bit, yeah, just a bit, as if I'd betrayed something. A little part of me had died. (Laughter) (Ted)

Ted, an ex-middle manager, now (formally) a subordinate to Manny, here indicates the identity challenge of being a manager. The work calls for inauthentic behaviour and moral compromise, an experience of appearing false/betraying identity and not just acting the managerial role. The negative feeling is not easily brushed off through smooth transitions. Post-managerial life is a 'great thing', Ted says and signals his true self and dislike of pretending and front-staging. Through the pain – betrayal and feeling that a 'part of me died' – the anti-managerial self is emphasized and restored. Nevertheless, as always in interviews, we need to consider that he may perhaps tell this story as a form of role acting and that the researcher here represented some form of audience. So, Ted may exaggerate the pain somewhat, something he realizes and reveals with his laughter. The victim/great suffering person position is something he slightly distances himself from. Still we may see the way he reports bad feelings as an indication of the difficulties of doing the work.

Manny was famous for his well performed 'shows' and knowing what to 'care' about several of his colleagues explained.

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> Manny was brilliant! He was always brilliant. So much better than me at detail (smiling), much better than me at communicating, in some meetings he'd be on top of the detail, he had the answers. It was seamless, he was really good at it, and I could see why they made him head again. It was like a warm bath when you'd see him interact with senior management (Eddy)

Ted also commented on Manny's managerial performances and emphasized how demanding he had experienced they could be due to this feeling of (in-)authentic role-playing. He reflected upon how happy he was now that he no longer had to pretend. His admiration for Manny's acting acknowledges a combination of Manny's greatness in the role and his suffering:

> There are some days when he's come in, and he's stuffed himself into a suit, and he's looking very uncomfortable. And you know he's got to go to counsel or has a meeting with the VC or whatever it is. I very rarely have to do that and I like that. I found it difficult, yeah. I could do it. Most reasonably sophisticated human beings are capable of moving between roles after all, aren't we? But yeah, it always used to leave a bitter taste in my mouth. I know that. (Ted)

> Why did it leave that bitter taste? (Interviewer) Hypocrisy. Most of the time I don't have to be a hypocrite. I don't have to pretend stuff. (Ted)

The managerial role enactment is a world of 'not-me' for Manny and Ted: alien, false, and it leaves a bitter aftertaste. This is not a moral failure, a sign of lacking in honesty or authenticity, but a case of sacrifice. The play and pretending demonstrate that Manny is an authentic and trustworthy person for Ted and other colleagues. A distancing from the managerial performance made visible by pointing to the make-believe and acting involved in the role, paradoxically expresses his genuine character. Through these role distancing acts he is able to show that it is alien to his true identity.

For role distancing to have its intended effect, Goffman (1961) suggests the performer has to lead one 'frontstage audience' to believe that his or her performance is real, while the 'backstage audience' is informed through signals that break from role that the actor is not convincing her/himself. To let the backstage audience in on one's make-believe performance like Manny does, may be particularly valuable for the middle manager who due to contradictory role demands from above and below, often behave inconsistently (Sims, 2003) and therefore risk losing both parties' trust. When the backstage audience knows the middle manager is more than and different from their role and frontstage performance, they tolerate role performances that clash with values and objectives they may otherwise advocate.

Manny is seen as 'brilliant' in his role-playing. This can in turn become problematic since the audience of fellow academics – the backstage of managerial performances – may start to wonder. So, by appearing 'very uncomfortable' he may reduce the risk of the management poodle or Judas problem. Manny signals: 'I know I'm Head of School, but really I'm one of you'. The look here assures Ted that Manny truly is the true grit, one of us. And so, it is possible that Manny performs *looking* very uncomfortable and

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is perceived as such by colleagues who believe in Manny's frequently signalled non- or anti-managerial true self. This is clearly different from *being* uncomfortable.

In a sense Manny may perform that he performs, play that he is playing, and put on a demonstration of being stuffed. Ted believes Manny has 'stuffed himself into a suit' and irrespective of Manny's true feelings or objective behaviour (stuffed or not), there is a logic to why Manny should look like this. He, in his own words, *performs hypocrisy*, i.e., he is not hypocritical in relation to faculty (significant others) or his true beliefs, but is a genuine academic forced to pretend. The morally negative sting is taken out of acting in the eyes of faculty, his backstage audience. Nevertheless, performing a performance may still not be that simple as it leads to – perhaps even calls for – a bitter aftertaste and dislike. This dislike links to how we learn that over time Manny starts to perform not only the managerial role, but also *his distancing* from this, e.g., looking uncomfortable in his suit, as time goes by. We see the first hints at how acts of backstage performance are about to turn into frontstage acting – in relation to subordinates who used to be his backstage audience – and role distancing becomes complicated.

Script. A good role performance also requires that one knows the role-script well enough to present it convincingly. Still, knowing one's script well, does not in itself suggest role distancing. One should also share with others backstage the knowledge that there is something funny about the script. Manny was admired for his fluency in what some called 'management speak' and he was known for playing with it.

> Manny was very, like very well briefed, very, could communicate in a kind of management style, very well. I don't know how to say this, so I am just going to say this, and I don't like the word, but he was very *slick*, like it was all very *smooth*. Slick has a kind of a negative connotation to it, and I didn't mean it that way, but I can't think of another word. (Eddy)

Manny knew 'management lingo' so well that he could improvise and always make it come across as real.

> The trick is to work out what goes where. Now that means that there is some interpretative flexibility in any location, but it's not unlimited and it is limited by the situation, and the trick of the game is understanding, OK, what meanings can I manage here before I push it too far that somebody just turns around and says, no, really that's a table, it's not a chair. (Manny)

Manny confided that the trick was to know the language-game in such a way that one could press the right buttons, both frontstage and backstage. However, this excellent handling where costume and script apparently sit perfectly for all observers (who are unaware of backstage signals) is not unproblematic. One obvious risk is that faculty starts to believe that this is not *just* 'slick acting' but actually sincere management talk, which in turn would trigger doubts and suspicion: Can he really be one of us, if he is so good a manager in the eyes of top management? This impressive managerial performance can also lead to nagging

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self-doubt for our manager as the role eats at the person. Here there may be a combination of 'who am I in all this?', 'how are others reading this' and 'who do they really think I am?'. And so, a more complex form of role-distancing is about to develop.

Backstage Performance

It can be challenging to ensure that the backstage audience knows that the acting, costumes and scripts are all pretend. Still, we found that what made this particularly challenging was that multiple audiences would overlap and render simultaneous front- and backstage acts near to impossible. Thus, we learn that role distancing was seldom a straightforward matter.

> When I'm in head role, of course occasionally I'll play the game and be one of the reasonable heads and actually understand that, yes, some things need to change and all the rest of it, and we might be too soft on certain colleagues who aren't doing certain things whatever. But no, in terms of the everyday interaction you smile that way, and you smile the other way, but what you never get caught doing is giving the response you have to give to people in power in front of your colleagues. Nor do you ever get caught giving the response you have to give to colleagues in front of power. That's when you're dead. You can't operate at that point, because you have to give two very different stories to keep the machine running. (Manny)

This means being very sure about the front and avoid that frontstage and backstage talk meet. Of course, frontstage talk to one audience may be accepted by the backstage audience if the latter thinks this is acting and contingent upon external constraints. But it is also important that enough credible role distancing hints are demonstrated and that this second audience buys into what they believe is the right story. So, they have to see the individual they encounter backstage as a person out of role constraints.

Manny ensured that his backstage audience always knew that he was not buying into his managerial role even though they occasionally happened to see him as a 'slick manager' by using self-derogatory descriptions of himself in the leader role. One of Manny's colleagues found this to be a great strategy:

> Manny talks of himself as Leaderene. Ene as in there's something in the Bible in English about the swine. God, is it the Gadarene swine? But it's a biblical adjective, the ene on the end. So, a leaderene is this person, I'm not saying it's got biblical status but a leaderene is an individual who has got the characters of the area, yeah. So, the Gadarene swine, and I think that's it, are pigs that come from this particular area. So, but that's the biblical phrase he uses quite a bit. (Roland)

Through the use of pejorative metaphors Manny shows his distaste for the leader and managerial role. Sometimes he compares himself to a swine and a pig. Other times he uses the term leaderene. This is a term we later learn by talking to Manny is a feminine version of Leader, used pejoratively about Margaret Thatcher. We did not know this connotation of the word, but clearly Manny's subordinates do. This helps him signal a strong disidentification from the managerial role and helps him put what Goffman (1961) would call a wedge between doing and being. This way he may be seen as the 'real' person who

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is doing identity work – to repair or actively reconstruct himself as an academic – but it may also be viewed as role distancing since he also has his eye on audience effects. Thus, he simultaneously displays awareness towards his colleagues who are seemingly backstage, that he knows he may be behaving like a pig (i.e., a leader), but this is simply the performance of his role and not him.

With this powerful role distancing tactic, we learn that he wins the admiration and respect of his colleague. To be a prototypical character of a group is key for being accepted as a leader according to social identity theory (Hogg, 2001). Here Manny signals his *anti-leader* orientation which seems to make him credible as a leader in a context which is sceptical towards management and where first among equals is the ideal of the group. We label this performance with his backstage: *backstage management* and suggest that Manny operates as *a stage manager*. To engage in *stage management* means to manage one's own performance by considering the scripts communicated explicitly and implicitly to multiple audiences and to be attentive to audience responses. It also means that one considers what has been communicated earlier on to the audiences and that one is aware of the risk that messages travel to the wrong audience which allows audiences to compare messages.

With strong language comes a valuable distance from the role as well as extra credibility towards the co-workers. Thus, role distancing still seems to be a valuable tactic. However, we soon learn that the extreme vocabulary not only creates a distance between identity and role, it simultaneously besmirches the job, role and top management and complicates working in the role. Since Manny is so good at the managerial role and enacts it smoothly in such an appreciated way, a tendency of role-identity merger is difficult to avoid. People tend to start identifying with roles they perform well (Ashforth, 2001). This may perhaps be why Manny's attempts at role distancing get amplified with time and Manny shares that it is difficult to strike the right balance. Stronger doses seem needed to uphold a split between doing and being, in order to maintain credibility and to avoid identity being merged with role performance.

Backstage Becomes Frontstage

In this last part of our findings, we enter the empirical mystery-stage and address our research question number three: Why can role distancing backfire for middle managers (particularly in the professions), in the long run? Over the almost two years we follow Manny in real time and then in our final follow-up interview almost four years from the first, we learn how his navigation between levels and use of role distancing becomes more and more demanding, in particular from an identity and existentialist point of view.

> Well, what you're trying to do is make sure that the meanings in play are sufficiently pliable …it was very rare that I was so cynical I actually ended up in what I consider outright lying, but I was certainly careful with how I told stories. (Manny)

Manny emphasizes his eagerness not to be highly political and cynical. Pure manipulations and deceits are avoided. It is more a matter of smooth navigation through vague

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expressions and multiple meanings, or as Manny called it: 'management of *ambiguity*'. He tweaks messages from above and below to camouflage content and make it open for multiple meanings. The term he uses is a play on words of 'management of *meaning*' which is when 'leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the ability of others' (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 258). Ambiguity is not the same as deceit and this becomes Manny's way to reduce tension and pressure from both sides, a form of half-manipulation.

Manny also needs to be increasingly careful about which stories to tell where and how to tell them. As time passes and he has been longer in this managerial role the risk of exposure grows while his escalating risks take their toll. If his expression 'leaderene' for example, travels from the in-group to members of the out-group, it will most likely backfire.

> In a sense I can witness that breaking down. That's what happened to me towards the end of my term, largely as a result of all sorts of contextual factors, but I lost the ability to *play the game*, and as I lost the ability to play the game, I probably made wilder and wilder punts to carry on playing it, which made, it was more and more likely I'd get caught and more and more likely that respect, you're into a downward spiral in the same way that you were into an upward spiral beforehand. (Manny)

> Why did you play wilder and wilder punts? (Interviewer)

> Just increasing desperation. I don't, I think probably the time I saw you it hadn't gotten as bad as it got in the end, but I eventually resigned. I'd agreed to carry on past the end of my term to help with the appointment, the gap before any appointment was made, and in the end, I just lost patience sufficiently that I just walked away and said I'm not doing it anymore. (Manny)

Looking back at Manny's role distancing over time, we see how distancing from the managerial role helped him at first to keep the managerial identity at an arms' length while he enacts the role fully and puts on convincing shows for both top management and subordinates. However, in the long run, we find that it leaves him with a bad taste and feeling of phoniness. Manny goes into higher and higher spirals of role distancing. The awareness of double-playing, i.e., the (obvious) role of the manager and the (less obvious) role of the anti-manager, is exhausting. It also feels risky as the double-playing may be revealed, as people may hear his varied messages, included those intended for other groups. He needs to watch his back – i.e., his backstage. And so, the distancing acts become problematic and double-edged as an identity-upholding manoeuvre. We here start to see the hidden catch that role distancing may hold when used as an identity escape tactic for the middle manager in the genuine middle.

In the final act of our interviews with Manny, we learn how role distancing turns from being mainly a positive resource, to a negative one. It is a mixed blessing. It solves and creates a problem at the same time. Over time it becomes too complicated: it is risky, exhausting and erodes identity. This brings us back to Manny's quote in the beginning of our paper:

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> It was difficult to justify myself in the managerial role. It's a frog-boiling exercise. At the end of my first term, I kept it all at a distance. The act (role distancing) slowed it down. It gives, or it increases the chances of not getting it, but it's all artefacts. I created an identity, or held it at a certain remove, it was some fabulation, not efficient, but just a construction. And it was exhausting! (Manny, after he has quit his role and reflects back)

When Manny signals anti-leaderene he seems to feel that the strong role distancing also becomes an exaggerated, even fake expression of himself. He is no longer just a non-leader, but someone *performing* the role of a non-leader. He attempts to distance himself also from the role distancing, but he is trapped into stronger and stronger role distancing. It seems that the absence of a genuine and safe backstage, or more precisely the lack of off-stage where he can genuinely relax his act, be himself and not consider the effects of performances, becomes exhausting. Since he has to engage in all this role distancing on a double front−/backstage, the backstage no longer works as a genuine identity-support after some time.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of our study was to investigate how middle managers experience organizational life in the genuine middle, and we have done so through the lens of role-distancing theory. Role distancing is a public display manufactured by people to create separateness between what they *do* (role) and who they *are* (identity) (Goffman, 1959, 1961). We have explored what these acts look like in a professional context such as higher education, and how it could offer identity escape (Cohen and Taylor, 1992) to some middle managers in our study. However, we have also discovered that it can be a double-edged sword if taken too far, as exemplified by our extreme case. Manny, who initially succeeded in navigating his complicated middle manager role and identity, eventually found his approach to no longer be effective. This led us to stumble upon the empirical mystery of how a successful middle manager, who is great at role distancing, could end up feeling so troubled.

The Middle managers' Double Front/Back-Stage

As our study shows, not every person in a managerial position wants to identify with the managerial or leader role. The cross-pressure experienced by the sandwiched middle manager can be especially challenging in professions where people above and below in the organizational hierarchy adhere to contradictory values and worldviews (Alajoutsijärvi and Kettunen, 2016; Frenkel, 2023; Gallos, 2002; Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). In such contexts, there are also mixed operating principles such as management /organization vs. faculty /professionalism. This adds to the variety of audiences which may partly overlap with hierarchy, and this may in turn result in identity/role confusion. The uncertainty and contradictions in professional contexts that are suspicious of management and hierarchy and sensitive to deviations from ideals of autonomy and peer control may be reinforced. Thus, middle managers in

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the professions who identify more with the profession and faculty, than with the managerial discourse and superiors (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) may wish to distance themselves from this role in order to protect their professional identity and affiliation with academics.

Our research indicates that a key reason that middle managers in the professions may want to keep their managerial role at arms' length in the eyes of faculty, is that if they are seen as *really* being a manager this can undermine academic in-group membership. This is in line with findings from Croft et al. (2015). However, while Croft and colleagues explain their findings from the lens of identity work, we have addressed the role distancing work. We find that the risk of being seen more as a manager than an academic and even a 'management poodle' or 'Judas', can trigger not only a need for identity work, to repair and actively reconstruct a cherished professional identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), but a continued distancing from role. To be appreciated for being a real academic and a true member of the professional group, while simultaneously taking on an act to indicate that this managerial role-performance is only a performance, can be problematic, as evidenced by Manny and others like him.

One major issue that arises when middle managers try to distance themselves from the managerial and leader role while enacting it, is that a lack of *real* involvement needs to be expressed to and accepted by a backstage audience, in our case faculty. This distancing has to happen while the middle manager simultaneously presents credible stories to senior people and does managerial work. However, to be credible in the role before one audience means risking not being perceived as just playing the role for another audience. This complicates the process. Thus, the better a manager becomes at playing the role of manager and leader, the stronger the means needed to uphold an image that this is not who s/he *really* is with the subordinates. This is mainly an issue when top management and faculty/ subordinates are seen as having diverse interests and offer different sources of identification and loyalty.

Our research indicates that an important challenge in role distancing is of a temporal nature. When a professional (or other non-manager) enters a managerial position, their professional credibility and shared professional social identity quickly become weakened. And as time goes by, if the manager still wants to be seen as part of the professional group, more effective measures may be needed to make this credible. This is an important element of life in the genuine middle, which has not been adequately addressed in the extensive literature on middle managers. The typical dilemmas of the middle manager have been portrayed as having to: tell different stories (Sims, 2003), adapt a hybrid identity (Currie and Logan, 2020), be in a squeezed position (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Harding et al., 2014) or carve out space for acting (Azambuja et al., 2023). Our study adds layers of depth and precision to some of the contradictions and dilemmas of this middle managerial work, especially in the professions and other organizations where we find elements of anti-management.

A major problem, we find, is how to secure one's identity as time passes. This can sometimes be accomplished through 'internal' or 'auto-communicative' identity work. But to 'stage a show that will generate particular impressions with their audience' will also need 'proponents and opponents' (Whittle et al., 2021, p. 637), and so this calls for interaction with and support from others. Thus, to have a backstage and an accompanying backstage

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audience is particularly important since this is where the individual will find it safe to 'express oneself'. For the middle manager in the professions who identifies (more) as a professional, this can be where they get some confirmation and experience of their social identity as true academics. The more time the individual spends in their managerial role, while not doing professional work, the more identity support they may need from their backstage audience, to counterweigh the role contaminating that consumes their professional identity.

Thus, when the backstage erodes, as in Manny's situation, the middle manager no longer has a safe backstage on which to express self and show a relaxed or uncensored version of self. This means that a new frontstage develops where there used to be a safe backstage. The manager is now left with a constant worry that what is shared on one stage, may travel to another and damage credibility and social relations on all stages. And so, for the individual who used to perform frontstage compliance acts in a way that could pass as a mask for backstage resistance (Ybema and Horvers, 2017), this no longer holds true. Efforts to do backstage 'I am one of you/really an academic/not a manager' will now no longer work, but rather be met by uncertainty and doubt and so the identity support is gone. What used to be perceived as a professional taking on a managerial *act*, *script* or a *costume*, is now seen as characteristics of a true manager identity.

Meta-Role-Distancing

Self-conscious acts of mockery, irony, and scepticism put on to declare that one is more than one's role, are part of the role performance that Goffman called role distancing (Goffman, 1961). We have found that when what used to be a simple form of role distancing with one front/backstage audience, turns into a double-front/backstage, this necessitates stronger distancing acts to prevent role from taking over a professional working identity. Thus, for the role distancing middle manager there are two roles: the role of the manager and the (meta) role of the non- or anti-manager who performs hypocrisy (demonstrates pretence). The anti-role is not just an expression of identity, but also a role that needs to be performed with an eye on the audience.

We suggest that this process of escalating distancing may be termed meta-role-distancing and refers to a role distancing from the role distancing. Spontaneous and orchestrated identity support is mixed and monitored by the (meta-)distancer as the backstage becomes a more ambiguous domain. As a consequence, role distancing takes on a 'spiralling, self-defeating character' (Cohen and Taylor, 1992, p. 2), overdone for audience effect, even self-audience (see Broms and Gahmberg, 1983 on auto-communication). In our study, Manny not only performs the non-manager role but the anti-manager with a clear eye for audience response. His use of the Leaderene vocabulary may be seen as frontstage talk to a (former) backstage audience. Meta-distancing can be exhausting, as sophisticated performance, audience-tracking, and performance-monitoring are required to avoid clashing performances.

In our study, the front-stage manager and backstage anti-manager become difficult to uphold, as the backstage is eroded and develops into a new frontstage. Having to distance oneself from the distancing in order to keep an escape route open (Cohen and Taylor, 1992) while dealing with a potential collapse of the backstage, is draining. The three illustrations below picture how the middle manager in the professions with time

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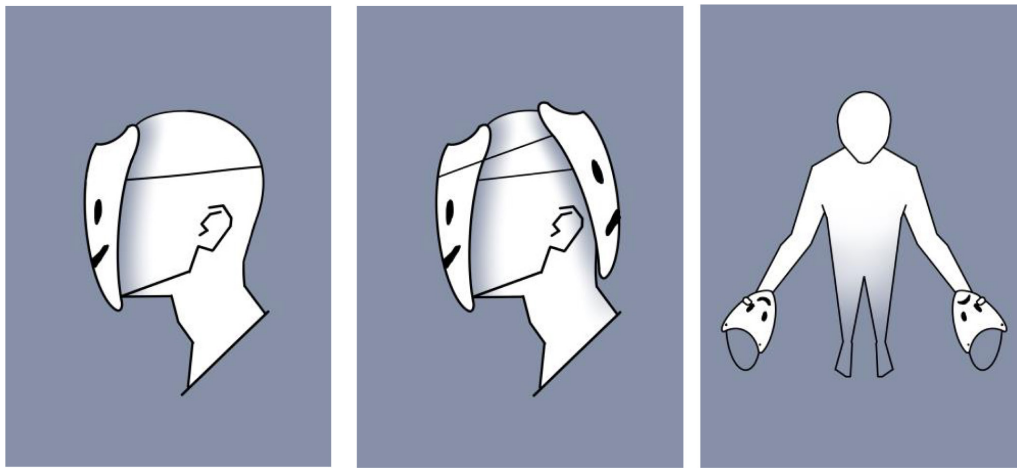
may come to face several frontstages. The double front/backstage leaves the middle manager with a troubling stage-management challenge.



Frontstage Double frontstage Double front/back

Contribution to Theory

This paper presents two concepts, namely double front/backstage and meta-role-distancing, derived from empirical data. These concepts solve the empirical mystery of how a successful middle manager, excellent at role distancing, could end up feeling like a fraud despite using a tactic that everyone thought was clever role handling, identity escape and an authentic performance. The paper contributes to theory and practice in several ways.

Firstly, it contributes to the middle management literature by presenting ideas on role distancing, front- and backstage acting, with a particular focus on the professions, specifically heads of academic business schools. The findings and theorizing sheds light on some of the complexities encountered by these middle managers. This understanding may be particularly valuable for the manager sandwiched in strong professional contexts, such as academics, physicians, lawyers and engineers. The hybrid middle managers who experience the professional role identity as salient, distinct and significant, may be tempted to perform role distancing to keep a new potential identity as manager at arms-length. Arguably, many middle managers will engage in more or less ambitious and complicated stage management work.

Through our in-depth study we address a somewhat overlooked aspect of life in the middle: the double-relationality faced by managers who have to face both upwards and downwards (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Jaser, 2021; Sims, 2003). We find that for the middle manager, frontstage and backstage and their respective audiences may not always be separate, and backstage may be invaded by frontstage considerations. This leads to 'backstage management', which implies careful monitoring of self and audiences front and back, to ensure that everyone is on board and know the rules of the game. The paper highlights the importance of impression management that communicates 'this is the real

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me', but also notes that this may simultaneously become part of an eroded backstage and a weaker identity support.

When backstage risks turning into a second frontstage scene, this adds additional complexity due to front−/backstage complications and problems of backstage erosion. Stage management calls for sophisticated role-distancing. In addition to all other managerial duties, this may be a burden on the manager's shoulders. For the upward oriented managers in a more permanent managerial role, this will most likely be less challenging, and this may perhaps be why this phenomenon of role distancing has received so little attention in the middle management literature.

The paper emphasizes that much social life and identity work may be seen as a combination of frontstage and backstage acting. Frontstage role expectations are central, and the person needs to carefully consider the audience and act so that role expectations are met. Roles provide constraints and transgression may lead to sanctions (Lupu et al., 2022). Backstage is a much freer space where identity can be expressed or repaired (e.g., Whittle et al., 2021). While roles often mean a 'boxed-in' way of behaving, backstage is, in principle, 'box-free', or may be experienced as such. But for the middle manager who faces two frontstages, there is no real backstage where they can truly be box-free.

People are not always monitored, but Gabriel (2005) has suggested the metaphor of the 'glass cage' for contemporary organizations, since workers nevertheless are faced with much transparency and visibility. For middle managers, this metaphor of the glass cage can be very fitting, as they are monitored from all hierarchical and functional sides. Our data indicates that the academic-in-residence as manager may be a difficult position to hold over time, precisely due to this transparency from all angles. To uphold a favoured self-understanding, i.e., identity, in this glass cage – or double front/backstage – this may lead to identity work like previous middle management studies have found (e.g., Giacomelli, 2020; Martin et al., 2021). And as we have seen in this study, to enact social roles in a glass cage and on multiple stages, can also call for intensive and sometimes overwhelming role distancing and stage management work.

Secondly, our research contributes to the emerging literature that draws upon Goffman's (1959, 1961) concept of *role distancing*, as exemplified in recent works such as Mueller (2018), Sørensen and Villadsen (2018), and Ybema and Horvers (2017). Similar to these studies, we maintain that Goffman's theoretical perspectives offer a potent analytical tool for investigating the world of work, both as a generative metaphor that likens social interaction to theatre and as a literal metaphor where interaction is akin to role play in the theatre (Oswick et al., 2001). While there has been some variation in how role distancing has been described by different management scholars through the years, the concept generally refers to a strategy that individuals use to manage the demands of a job, role or social situation by creating a separation between what they *do* – their work or role – from who they *are* – their personal or professional identity.

However, despite what seems to be a rekindled interest in role distancing theory in the management literature, Lupu et al. (2022) argue that there is a general lack of empirical studies on role distancing, particularly in the professions. They suggest that individuals become less likely to question institutional practices, over time, making it difficult to spot role distancing in action. Nevertheless, Lupu and colleagues identified

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individuals who challenged socially established roles through role distancing acts and found that this strategy may come with emotional consequences. Our study contributes to their findings, by showing what these distancing strategies look like among a group of middle managers in the professions, what meaning the tactics hold, and why although role distancing may seem like an alluring coping strategy it can turn out to be a double-edged sword.

Finally, our empirical study adds to role distancing theory in a broader sense of the management literature. When Goffman (1961) first introduced role distancing as a phenomenon, he challenged a belief that it was 'sound mental hygiene' to fully embrace the role that one performs, particularly if one performs it regularly and is committed to a great performance (Goffman, 1961, p. 89). He suggested there might be a bias underlying the assumption that such a role/identity merger would be a good thing, at least in the learned professions, while it may be less appealing for roles of lower prestige. The majority of today's organizational and work literature still sees organizational role embracement as beneficial and motivating, while role distancing is a form of disengagement (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). Identification with the leader role is for example said to be positive (Avolio et al., 2009; Day and Harrison, 2007; Lord and Hall, 2005; Shamir and Eilam, 2005).

There is a widespread ideal in the literature that managers should be 'authentic leaders' (Avolio and Walumbwa, 2014; Caza and Jackson, 2011; Gardner et al., 2021). This appears to be a simple success recipe but is probably often complicated and risky (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). By exploring popular themes such as e.g., authenticity, in the light of Goffman's theories such as role distancing, we may add more nuance to the conversation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations

An obvious limitation is the focus on one key case subject. Although we do think the richness of the case plus a broader, albeit small sample, partly compensates for this, the reader nevertheless, needs to bear the possible idiosyncratic features in mind. There are variations between individuals and various professional and organizational contexts. There may also be variations across different universities and disciplines in the same country. Strict empirical generalizations in this field are hardly possible, but more studies can explore interesting variations further. Our extreme case only points at one possible type of middle-manager situation and role/identity and role distancing dynamics. There are without a doubt many others.

Another limitation concerns difficulties that are inherent to how we study roles and identities. These are subtle phenomena and sensitive to the situation specific acting of interviewees, who may easily engage in frontstage role playing (Alvesson, 2011). The phenomena under study are ambiguous and easily 'ordered' through the framing of the researcher. We have tried to be reflexive and not impose a specific framework, but the paper is still influenced by the interpretive inclinations of the researchers. When

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conducting hermeneutical analysis, we as researchers will rely on our empirical data and our rich knowledge emerging from all in-depth interviews, but our interpretation will also be influenced by our broader pre-understanding of the subject matter.

We agree with researchers who believe such pre-understanding should supplement (over-)reliance of data and data management (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022). After decades in the research area and numerous interactions with people like those targeted in this paper, we believe our pre-understanding should be a valuable asset to our interpretation. Nevertheless, this also means that other researchers with a different pre-understanding, may have come to slightly different interpretation of our empirical findings.

Future Research

Much literature on managers assumes that they are free to act authentically in line with values and beliefs, in particular if they are appreciated and effective (Avolio and Walumbwa, 2014; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), although this issue has been the target of much critique (Alvesson and Einola, 2019) and debate lately (Einola and Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021; Gardner and McCauley, 2022). However, one issue that is seldom addressed is authentic in relation to which audience and according to whom? Different groups may have different expectations of 'authenticity'.

Future research could address if and how e.g., other academics as well as physicians, scientists, and lawyers in managerial jobs engage in role distancing and deal with the double front−/backstage issues. The complexities around identity/roles and the doings of role distancing (and meta-distancing) seem to be important to consider for this type of research (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Gardner et al., 2021). Future research could also investigate if organizational workers in other roles than managerial may feel tempted to engage in role distancing to keep these somewhat threatening identifications in check. Group and organizational requirements are often inconsistent, even contradictory. Thus, our findings may perhaps be relevant for contemporary managerial and professional work and organizations that call for considerable adaption to a wealth of groups and multiple demands that challenge their organizational and professional identifications.

For example, previous studies have shown how workers push back pre-described corporate identities through irony (Trethewey, 1997), humour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), and cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) and 'provide workers with relief from environments that attempt to control their identities' (Costas and Fleming, 2009, p. 356). In these studies, role distancing is assumed to be a clever tactic of *resistance* that enables the workers to hold prescribed identities at an arms' length, in line with what we found in our first round of interviews. However, our study shows the complexities of this strategy and potential downsides of role distancing as it started to escalate.

So, future studies could explore how role distancing tactics aimed at resistance and not only identity escape may seem promising at one point in time but may develop and change over time. Thus, future research could look more specifically into role distancing as a temporal phenomenon among these different groups of workers to see why, when,

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and how role distancing is performed over time, and to what degree role distancing is a success among these different groups of workers.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a fine-grained understanding of life in the genuine middle among middle managers in the professions, which has important lessons for understanding organizational life. We have addressed: (1) What the meaning of role distancing for middle managers in the professions is, i.e., why do they do it? (2) How role distancing plays out from a place in the middle, with different audiences. (3) Why role distancing can backfire for middle managers in the long run.

By answering these questions our study first and foremost, contributes to the literature on middle management in general and specifically in professional contexts by shedding light on the challenges inherent to being truly in the middle. Our analysis introduces concepts such as *double front/backstage* and *meta-role distancing* that help illuminate this sandwiched experience. Much middle managerial work, in particular in professional contexts, is caught between diverse groups with partially opposite interests. To manage in this middle, managers need to embrace and distance themselves from their roles. However, the presence of multiple audiences complicates front-backstage work and may threaten to erode one's backstage over time. In this context, middle managers act as *stage managers* who attempt to maintain smooth relationships with different groups.

Secondly, our study provides new empirical insights into the phenomenon of role distancing (Cohen and Taylor, 1992; Goffman, 1959, 1961), in particular in managerial work in the professions with multiple audiences. We introduce two new concepts that help clarify and explain the underlying mechanisms at play when multiple audiences are involved, and how these may lead to double front/backstage issues. We point out that role distancing can be directed towards the audience or identity, or both, and that the literature is not always clear on this distinction. Individuals may engage in role-distancing to gain acceptance by others, or to distance themselves from their own role. The means of distancing may vary depending on the audience and self, and this can lead to complications.

Thirdly, we point at problems with role distancing. It can be exhausting to do role-distancing in relationship to self and others without running into contradictions and feeling trapped. Stage-managing can become complicated when several audiences are involved. With diverse audiences there is a need to not only do the 'right' distancing at the right time for the right audience, but also keep track of distancing messages and avoid that different audiences and different messages meet so that credibility is lost. Over time role distancing and front/backstage interactions may be muddled and the navigation problems overwhelming.

To finish on a practical note, we believe that if people who face a need to navigate role or attempt to escape identity work, approach role distancing with caution and self-awareness well aware that the tactic may come with alienating side-effects, they may benefit from the peace of mind that moderate role distancing can offer without becoming stuck in or

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over-doing a new performance that needs further role distancing. To be very well liked by all, may create 'excessive' role playing and distancing that in turn may backfire. Managerial work means navigating in complicated terrain, with different audiences that watch both one's front- and backstage. Management development programmes should consider this, and not assume a single audience. Leadership and professional ideals such as 'authenticity' are far from unproblematic and this type of normative control should be approached with caution.

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