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Navigating Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness: Insights from Middle Managers in Norway

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Abstract: Middle managers play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between senior leadership and employees, often navigating competing demands and pressures. This study investigates experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness among middle managers serving as department heads in the University and University College (UUC) sector in Norway. The study adopts a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews with six participants. The findings underscore the significance of autonomy, trust, and support in facilitating the effective execution of middle managers' roles as executive and inclusive leaders. Autonomy emerges as crucial, which aligns with the principles of the Nordic work-life model. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of internal motivation and the support provided by the immediate leadership in enhancing middle managers' performance. Personal competence in one's subject areas and relatedness emerge as key factors ensuring employee confidence and fostering a positive work environment. The implications of these findings suggest that nurturing autonomy, competence, and relatedness may mitigate the perceived stress associated with being a middle manager in the UUC sector. By addressing these fundamental needs, organisations can potentially enhance the well-being and effectiveness of middle managers, ultimately contributing to organisational success.

Keywords: middle managers; autonomy; competence; relatedness; self-determination theory



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1. Introduction

Head of department positions within the University and University College (UUC) sector occupy a unique role as intermediaries between management and employees. Positioned between the operational core and senior management, middle managers such as heads of department serve as conduits for information across organisational levels (Mintzberg 1989; Harding et al. 2014). This intermediary role exposes them to the cross-pressures of balancing employees' safety needs with management's demands for performance and efficiency (Anicich and Hirsh 2017; Jacobsen 2019). The prevalence of high work pressure among middle managers in higher education is well-documented (Wisniewski 2019; Corbett 2020; Tietjen-Smith et al. 2020). High work pressure and limited work autonomy can, in turn, lead to stress reactions and sick leave (Cooper and Marshall 1975; Irfaeya 2008; Osterman 2008; Hassard et al. 2009; Buchanan et al. 2013; Prins et al. 2015; Humphrey et al. 2007). Research indicates that fostering positive interpersonal climates can enhance motivation and well-being in the workplace. Furthermore, positive associations have been documented between perceived autonomy support and trust, intrinsic motivation, physical and mental well-being, and job satisfaction (Deci et al. 2001; Baard et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2011). Different forms of support can enhance the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and motivation, leading to positive work outcomes such as increased engagement, improved performance, greater psychological well-being, and reduced fatigue, illness, and turnover (Trépanier et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2014).

Various studies have explored middle-level leadership in higher education. One study conducted at Australian universities revealed that middle managers perceived their roles as overwhelming, characterised by a profound sense of responsibility but limited authority

(Pepper and Giles 2015). Another study from English universities suggests that middle managers need additional support and training to become better senior managers (Floyd 2016). Similarly, Tietjen-Smith et al. (2020) describe that many department heads face role strain and subsequent burnout, contributing to a high turnover rate among administrators at this level. However, studies are lacking that specifically confirm the importance of satisfying one's own basic needs for intrinsic motivation and well-being among department heads in Norway. Given the pivotal role of middle management in the success of higher education institutions (Wisniewski 2019; Tietjen-Smith et al. 2020), this study aims to address this gap by examining how well-defined frameworks can contribute to creating favourable working conditions for middle managers within the higher education sector. The theoretical foundation in the present study is embedded in the self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000), and the primary aim of the study is to investigate how the work experiences of middle managers in the Norwegian higher education context relate to autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

2. Theoretical Background

The self-determination theoretical framework serves as an umbrella term encompassing various propositions that explore how the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence human functioning (Deci and Ryan 2000; Deci et al. 2017; Ng et al. 2012; Van den Broeck et al. 2016; Vasquez et al. 2016; Slemp et al. 2018; Yu et al. 2018). In simple terms, the theory explores the extent to which the causality of individual behaviour is driven by intrinsic autonomous processes or external control. Self-determination theory (SDT) has long been a central concept in organisational theory, particularly as concerns the contextual factors that support employees' self-determination and psychological needs (e.g., Deci et al. 2001; Van den Broeck et al. 2016). Job autonomy, defined as individuals' ability to determine how and when they perform tasks, is often considered a fundamental aspect of self-determination in the workplace. Perceived autonomy can also be influenced by interpersonal characteristics, including managerial motivational style, which can range from highly supportive to highly controlling (Slemp et al. 2018). SDT suggests that individuals have an inherent capacity to grow, overcome challenges, and incorporate new experiences into their self-esteem. However, this process relies on constant social support and nourishment. Social context plays a crucial role in either facilitating or hindering psychological growth and active engagement, thus shaping individual behaviour and development (Ryan and Deci 2017). Consequently, the experience of being a middle manager can vary greatly depending on the degree to which the social environment supports the manager's basic needs.

Within the SDT framework, healthy development and functioning hinge upon the fulfilment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000). Autonomy involves self-determination and the freedom to make choices that align with one's interests and values and promote a sense of integrity. However, individuals may experience frustration when they feel pressured or conflicted, which compromises their autonomy. For middle managers, autonomy involves balancing various considerations of loyalty while navigating the limitations of individual and managerial autonomy (Gunnarsdóttir 2016; Ryan and Deci 2017). Competence pertains to mastering tasks, achieving desired outcomes, and feeling efficient and capable. Engagement in activities that allow for skill utilisation and development satisfies this need, but frustration can arise from inefficiency or failure. Relatedness involves feeling valued and connected to others, which fosters warmth and meaningful relationships. Without such connections, individuals may experience social alienation and loneliness (Ryan and Deci 2017; Slemp et al. 2018). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be notably shaped by the challenges, demands, and expectations imposed upon each manager. It can be argued that support from leadership and employees can help meet these basic needs, and that a particular leadership style is necessary to succeed in a middle management position (Deci et al. 1989, 2017).

According to [Cook and Artino \(2016\)](#), people are likely to become more internally motivated when they can choose activities freely (autonomy), when they master an activity (competence), and when they feel relatedness to and support from the people who are important to them. Satisfaction of these needs can be understood as essential for the internalisation of motivation, as the senses of autonomy, competence, and relatedness tend to provide value and satisfaction to the activity itself ([Slemp et al. 2018](#)). However, the interplay between these fundamental needs is complex. For instance, creating an inclusive environment that promotes respect, care, and safety can enhance the sense of relatedness. Conversely, relatedness can be undermined by environments with strong competition, criticism, professional and group loyalty, and traditions. One's sense of competence may grow with favourable challenges and positive feedback, but may be undermined by difficult challenges and negative feedback. As for autonomy, this is seen in the positive context of an ability to make one's own choices, the availability of good explanations, and emotions being confirmed. On the other hand, threats, deadlines, imposed goals, and control discourage autonomy ([Cook and Artino 2016](#)).

SDT suggests that managers who prioritise employee autonomy are more likely to foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness among their employees ([Ryan and Deci 2017](#)). Research indicates that positive experiences with competence and autonomy are crucial for intrinsic motivation, as specific positive feedback enhances interest and pleasure in tasks. Conversely, external rewards can diminish intrinsic motivation by shifting the focus from internal to external sources of motivation ([Ryan and Deci 2017](#)). When employees have the autonomy to work in their own way within a supportive context, they tend to experience greater engagement, job satisfaction, and proactive involvement with their colleagues ([Slemp et al. 2018](#)). In essence, SDT illuminates how middle managers' autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence their well-being and performance. Recognising and nurturing these basic psychological needs can enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and overall effectiveness in the middle management role.

2.1. Middle Managers in a Nordic Context

Norwegian and Nordic working life is typically characterised by a close and trusting relationship between management and employees, often described as the Nordic model ([Levin et al. 2012](#)). Compared with other countries, there is little distinction and little difference between wages at the bottom and the top. Employees often participate in decision-making, and a culture of collaboration between management and employees has emerged. Unions have a legitimate position and function ([Levin et al. 2012](#)). In the higher education sector, however, the organisational structure seems to have a somewhat more hierarchical distinction than within the Nordic model as traditionally understood. There is a considerable distance between the top level of organisational management and the final level before the employee. Because democracy provides the basis for governance in society, there is still a high level of trust between employees and management ([Levin et al. 2012](#)).

Within a leadership context, the Nordic model can be associated with the idea that employees should be active through their direct influence and involvement in decision-making processes. Here, labour law can also be referenced regarding the manager's right to manage and duty of care, as well as their obligation to allow employees to participate ([Arbeidsmiljøloven 2005](#), §4–2). Participation is claimed to be a premise for all engagement in the workplace, and it is not a matter of either/or but of extent ([Levin et al. 2012](#)). In the Nordic countries, it is generally not necessary to supervise employees but rather to facilitate efficiency with the opportunity to take responsibility and show independent initiative. It is argued that the most effective approach is to spend time providing information and encouraging involvement. Thus, the role largely revolves around decision quality and implementation ability ([Velten et al. 2016](#)).

According to a recent survey conducted by [Jacobsen \(2019\)](#), the role of the middle manager as an information intermediary is more crucial than that of the manager at other levels, confirming previous assumptions. Surprisingly, middle managers report

experiencing lower levels of role conflict, emotional pressure, and time constraints than other leaders. However, perceived pressure correlates strongly with the size of the unit managed by the leader, with larger units being associated with greater pressure in terms of both time and emotion (Jacobsen 2019). This suggests that middle managers who are responsible for a greater number of employees may be subject to more pressure than those responsible for fewer employees.

2.2. Middle Managers in the UUC Sector

In the context of higher education in Norway, universities commonly have a university board as their highest organisational authority. This is followed by senior management, with the university director, rector, and vice-rectors. In addition, the organisation is often divided into several faculties, each with their own faculty management. The next level, head of department, has managerial and personnel responsibilities for the employees of their institute. The participants (and middle managers) in this study are heads of department at a university, and the number of employees for which they are responsible varies. The head of department, dean, and faculty director together form the faculty's management team. The delegation of tasks by the faculty director should occur in consultation with the dean. For all employees in teaching and research positions in the department, it is the head of department who serves as the immediate academic leader. A department head's responsibilities and tasks primarily relate to general management, education management, and research leadership. Within general management, the department head is responsible for overseeing all scientific activities at the institute, ensuring there is a strong connection between education and research, and also driving efforts to ensure high-quality education and research (Nokut n.d.).

There is much complexity in the role of head of department as a middle manager in the higher education sector. Firstly, government organisations suffer from sometimes confusing demands and incomplete information due to the huge number of external and internal actors participating in political processes (Chen et al. 2017). Middle managers are constantly receiving information that must be critically examined, filtered, interpreted, and disclosed (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Because senior executives also experience increased demands on their work, middle managers may have to exercise leadership in assessment situations to a greater extent. In the higher education sector, the strategic management is far away from where the research and teaching are conducted. In other words, it is a centralised decision-making authority, where many of the major and most important decisions are made by senior management (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2013). This may create several challenges in the exchange of information. Middle managers in the public sector are expected to be the balancing wheel in terms of being participatory but also proactive in decision-making. Furthermore, it is interesting that middle managers in the public sector more often engage in synthesising information than in fighting for alternatives (Chen et al. 2017). The functional or psychological significance of the input influencing the initiation and regulation of intentional behaviour can be classified as either informational or controlling. Informational input can support autonomy and enhance competence, while controlling input involves pressuring the individual to think, feel, or behave in specific ways. If input is perceived as informational, this will provide individual autonomy, whereas the opposite is true of controlling input, which will reduce autonomy. Leadership styles that allow for significant participation in decision-making and greater flexibility in carrying out one's work have been positively associated with satisfaction, work-life quality, and organisational effectiveness (Deci et al. 1989).

3. Method

3.1. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

This study aimed to explore middle managers' perceptions and experiences through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The participants comprised six middle managers—three men and three women aged between 47 and 62—in the position of department

head at a university in Norway, with each overseeing between 30 and 44 employees. They had between 3 and 19 years of experience in their current position and there was significant diversity in their educational background in terms of academic discipline. They all possessed a doctoral degree or equivalent within the field of study of the department they led. None of the participants had formal leadership education, but all participated to a varying extent in the university's own leadership training seminars. Their employees primarily consisted of academic staff, and they reported to the faculty director and the dean. Two of the participants had experience in other types of leadership positions.

The interview guide was developed based on a theoretical understanding of the topic and a review of the previous research. It was also important that the questions were formulated to allow the participants to describe their experiences within the given theme (Thagaard 2018). Several questions related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness were derived from Ryan and Deci's model, the Self-Determination Continuum (2000), and tailored to the context of this study. The interview guide consists of 42 questions, including sub-questions and introductory and concluding questions. To stimulate reflection, introductory questions were asked at the beginning, and towards the end, participants had the opportunity to add or comment on anything through the concluding questions.

Data collection was conducted during March 2022, and the interviews were held at the participants' offices. To maintain full focus on the participants, a maximum of two interviews were held per day. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 min. All participants were asked the same questions. However, additional questions were also asked based on what emerged in each individual interview.

3.2. Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

A pilot study was conducted by interviewing a randomly selected participant, a department head, to assess the reliability and effectiveness of the interview protocol and ensure the clarity and coherence of the questions. The insights gained from the pilot study informed refinements to the interview guide and helped identify any potential issues or ambiguities in the questions. This iterative approach to refining the research instruments contributed to the overall reliability and validity of the study. Validations, following Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), were also conducted throughout the main interview process, and there was confidence in the accuracy of the participants' responses. The intention was to enhance the validity by focusing on the respondents' understanding and by incorporating examples shared by the participants (Jacobsen 2015). Discussions on the empirical data from the interviews, considering theory and other research, also contributed to the validity and reliability (Thagaard 2018).

Ethical research guidelines were upheld by ensuring voluntary participation and anonymising the data. Respondents could withdraw from the study at any time. The study was registered with the Norwegian Social Science Data Services and approved on 27 January 2022 (reference number: 826632), with stringent measures in place for handling and storing personal data.

3.3. Analysis

The data were analysed based on the principles of the hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutics were employed for understanding or interpreting actions, thoughts, or the general meaning of various aspects of human interaction. Such an approach is like a dialogue between the reader and the text, where the reader expands their horizon of understanding through repeated readings of the same text. This refers to the connections between what is to be interpreted, the preunderstanding, and the interpretation. It involves a continuous exchange between the whole and a part, preunderstanding, understanding, and explanation, as well as an exchange between the text and context (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). All the data material was transcribed verbatim and then read in its entirety. Furthermore, I followed the traditional five steps in the analysis process, which involve creating units of meaning, creating condensed units of meaning, coding, categorisation, and thematisa-

tion (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015; Johannessen et al. 2021). The analysis concentrated on identifying empirical evidence that sheds light on the three basic needs. Consequently, the coding process, while straightforward, required a continuous interchange between specific elements and overarching themes. Categories were derived from participants' concerns related to the research question and their pre-understanding.

4. Findings

4.1. The Experience of Autonomy

The complex dynamics between senior management and employees posed challenges in the experience of autonomy for as many as five out of the six department heads. Balancing these expectations and fulfilling the department head role was not always straightforward. Prioritisation emerged as a recurring theme, yet conflicting priorities were evident. One participant attributed implicit job demands to the position, which required balancing the conflict between the expectations of management and those of their closest colleagues. Another participant highlighted the impossibility of meeting all demands, opting to prioritise immediate tasks based on their perceived importance. Two participants attributed the pressure of meeting expectations to their self-imposed high standards. However, one participant felt pressure from above, while another found it challenging to manage demands from both sides. Loyalty to their team was particularly demanding for many, occasionally leading to acts of disobedience followed by subsequent explanations to immediate superiors:

In a middle management position, there are things coming from above that one must accept and handle, even if not always in agreement. Similarly, demands arise from below...that's the squeeze you find yourself in.

The relationship with faculty leadership posed the most significant challenge, and was likened to being 'caught between two chairs'. Conversely, managing interactions with employees in their own department was considered less daunting. Top management's focus on strategic planning and vision created a disconnect from everyday life at the institute, making it challenging to bridge this gap, as noted by one participant. This individual emphasised the importance of establishing a connection between these levels, metaphorically described as 'standing on the bridge' between upper-level strategic work and the institute's daily operations. Internal processes, such as hiring and exam work, were highlighted as particular challenges due to their lack of smoothness or quickness.

It's precisely about establishing a connection between the strategic work that happens at the upper level and the everyday life at an institute, standing on the bridge there.

Despite these challenges, the six participants found their work manageable and expressed optimism about continuing in their roles. Enjoyment of tasks and workplace satisfaction were key motivators, with some finding inspiration in the enjoyable aspects of their jobs. Support for projects, research time, and meaningful work were valued over top-down directives. Collectively, they emphasised the critical importance of their roles and occasionally reminded the university board of their significance.

The daily responsibilities of department heads are extensive and diverse, as described by all participants. These encompass addressing employee enquiries and needs, participating in meetings and committees, engaging in strategic planning, managing emails, and conducting unannounced office visits. This constant stream of tasks necessitates efficient systems to benefit employees. The need to personally engage with individuals is underscored as both time-consuming and essential. One participant emphasised the department head's role as a facilitator for employees, while another acknowledged occasional redundancy due to the effectiveness of programme leaders and coordinators, although recognising their crucial role in other processes. Improved faculty services could alleviate workload burdens, particularly as the role of department head often entails heavier responsibilities than the role of dean or rector, especially in terms of personnel management.

In sum, all the participants emphasised a sense of autonomy as crucial for their role as a department head. Trust, freedom to choose, and the ability to make decisions

were important. They emphasised the significance of having autonomy and the trust of the faculty leadership, while also acknowledging certain boundaries within which their autonomy operates. As one participant stated:

I do have significant autonomy and trust from the faculty director and dean regarding how I conduct leadership and lead the department.

As another states:

It is critical to have trust, and it would not be possible to function as a department head if you did not have the opportunity to do things in a way you believe in and make certain selections.

Strategic initiatives occasionally encroached on their autonomy, with decisions made without their input. Not all assigned tasks elicited equal enthusiasm. For instance, one department head felt obligated to promote a staff discussion coffee cup. Another participant expressed a desire for more control in certain situations, seeking assistance in navigating what they perceived as a controlling system. However, all department heads emphasised granting significant autonomy to their employees on the basis of mutual trust. They trusted their staff to perform well and believed in granting them autonomy, and they viewed their own autonomy as a valuable tool in their leadership interactions with staff.

4.2. The Experience of Competence

The participants all underscored the critical importance of possessing expertise in the field they led and expressed concerns about leaders lacking such knowledge. This fear stemmed from the potential for decisions to be made without adequate insight, which highlighted the essential role of domain expertise in effective leadership.

Competence and understanding of academia, including everyday teaching, supervision, research, and dissemination, are crucial in such a leadership role. Otherwise it's incredibly difficult to earn respect from colleagues and lead in academia. So, competence and experience are essential.

Understanding human behaviour was also emphasised as pivotal for navigating the complexities of academic environments. One participant admitted to stepping into a leadership role without formal training, relying instead on personal principles and instincts:

And I haven't read a single book on leadership, don't tell anyone, but obviously that's evident (laughter). But I've sort of thought that there are two principles that I find important. . . One is recognition, that I'm constantly on the lookout for treasures. . . seizing people doing something good. Recognition and herding the team, and by that, I mean (laughter), these are completely new leadership concepts.

While the participants had significant experience, formal leadership education was relatively limited. However, they identified several key competencies essential for effective leadership, including decisiveness, a holistic understanding of academic activities, financial acumen, and skills in recruitment and conflict resolution. Adaptability and a willingness to seek knowledge when necessary were also highlighted as crucial attributes. Several participants also emphasised the importance of harnessing potential, fostering development, adaptation, and change. For a couple of participants, it was also crucial that they could speak up if they did not understand everything, while also being aware of how to acquire necessary knowledge. Involvement in leadership matters was deemed invaluable, with practical experiences contributing significantly to motivation and a deeper understanding of complex issues.

I often say that people need to come here and use me, so my task is largely to be a vent. . .

One participant mentioned attending useful leadership development sessions with other department heads and acknowledged personal limitations, particularly in personnel management. Moreover, while external support in areas such as financial management was

appreciated, there was a recognised need for the further development of legal knowledge and conflict resolution skills.

Overall, participants stressed the crucial role of expertise and competence in academic leadership, emphasising the necessity of a thorough understanding of academia to earn respect and effectively lead. They also recognised the importance of understanding human behaviour in academic settings and acknowledged personal limitations and the need for ongoing development, particularly in areas such as personnel management, legal knowledge, and conflict resolution.

4.3. The Experience of Relatedness

The sense of relatedness to the workplace was vividly described as a deep identification with, feeling of being at home in, and active participation in the development of the department. All six department heads articulated a strong sense of connection in this regard, attributing this to their expertise and their familiarity with colleagues. Notably, only one participant had not previously worked as an academic staff member in the same department. Both the professional and social dimensions of relatedness were underscored as essential. One participant expressed profound loyalty to the university, while another highlighted a sense of relatedness stemming from her expertise, which extended across all levels of the organisation. This deep-rooted sense of relatedness served as a significant motivating factor. As articulated by one participant:

It greatly affects motivation, absolutely. Because I feel it makes sense to be involved in leading and developing something that I have a passion for.

This participant was supported by another who emphasised the link between relatedness and motivation:

The connection between belonging and motivation is quite clear. You know who you're working for, and that provides motivation.

Immediate leaders played a pivotal role in motivation through recognition and acknowledgment. While two participants admitted they were not adept at receiving praise, they acknowledged its positive impact on their work. Furthermore, it was emphasised that basic needs were met through a sense of belonging and motivation. One participant underscored the importance of fostering a sense of relatedness among employees to enhance their motivation. Additionally, the significance of performance appraisals was highlighted in this context.

If you think a bit like Maslow, that there are sort of basic needs that must be met, then you have more energy and capacity to develop further in advanced, professional tasks. But it must be at the foundation, otherwise we will constantly sink into feeling lonely or excluded or undervalued. . . .

Naturally, five participants' transition from academic staff member to department head altered relationships, particularly regarding power dynamics and colleagues' work tasks. Despite these changes, the participants felt included both professionally and socially. They also expressed satisfaction with the support received from the faculty leadership, describing it as 'very solid', 'good', and 'reliable'. Strong support was also reported from employees, who valued initiatives and leadership. Positive feedback from employee surveys further validated their efforts. However, instances were occasionally noted of a perceived lack of support or willingness to resolve issues, particularly from the top leadership. Overall, however, there was a consensus that there was a supportive working environment, characterised by a robust collaboration between department heads and their employees.

The findings reveal a strong sense among department heads of relatedness to their workplace, characterised by deep identification, a feeling of belonging, and active involvement in departmental development. This connection is attributed to expertise and familiarity with colleagues, with a clear link between relatedness and motivation. While oc-

casional challenges were noted, there was a consensus that there was a supportive working environment, fostering collaboration between employees and leaders.

5. Discussion

The findings in this study present a nuanced picture of how the participants perceived their leadership situation with regard to autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their everyday work. As a starting point, it is worth noting that the participants experience autonomy and the ability to make decisions as crucial for performing well as department heads. They also described autonomy as being linked to enthusiasm and motivation. Autonomy is about having the freedom to act in accordance with one's personal values and express one's values truthfully and having the ability to consider others' feelings. The literature on this subject underscores that a middle manager should balance various loyalties and navigate limitations to individual autonomy and managerial autonomy (Gunnarsdóttir 2016) and, furthermore, that autonomy in the job is linked to inner motivation and well-being (Humphrey et al. 2007; Deci et al. 2017). Indeed, it was clear that the participants in the present study experienced autonomy regarding their position within their own faculty leadership, and it was noted that, without this, it would be impossible to function as a department head. This indicates that the motivational style of their immediate leaders was supportive rather than highly controlling (Slemp et al. 2018). While cognitive evaluation theory posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes when individuals engage in work for its inherent value (Ryan and Deci 2017), the autonomy experienced by department heads is not without constraints. Mandated tasks, devoid of participatory opportunities, represent a form of control within the organisational framework (Cook and Artino 2016). However, the participants' compliance with such directives, albeit without a deep internal motivation, suggests a pragmatic adherence to role expectations rather than overt resistance (Ryan and Deci 2017). Thus, while mandated tasks may not significantly impede autonomy, they could evoke a sense of irritation or inconvenience.

The participants advocated for the reciprocal nature of the trust between management and employees. Furthermore, their own autonomy was a valuable tool for leadership actions. Individual-focused actions combined with effective communication were deemed significant in this regard. Autonomy, obtained through the delegation of responsibilities, cultivates ownership and commitment among employees, thus enhancing performance outcomes. Conversely, insufficient autonomy can precipitate burnout, stress, and absenteeism, underscoring the delicate balance that is required (Humphrey et al. 2007; Irfaeya 2008).

Being responsible for a considerable number of employees, ranging from 30 to 44 individuals, contributes to a substantial workload. Participants' daily tasks were perceived as extensive and content-rich, with employees' enquiries and needs being particularly pronounced. The magnitude of managers' responsibility for personnel raises questions regarding workload management, especially in view of research linking perceived work pressure to the size of the unit being led (Jacobsen 2019). In the Nordic model, individual recognition is valued, which necessitates direct contact between managers and employees to ensure workplace participation (Levin et al. 2012). Not only does this align with the needs of SDT, it also builds upon the basic premises of the theory. Furthermore, autonomy in terms of being the source of actions is embedded in the Nordic model through influence and involvement. This also implies that, in other contexts, discrepancies may arise. Efforts to facilitate employee initiatives and responsibilities are crucial for fostering a collaborative work environment. While middle managers may not experience as much time pressure as other leaders, as observed by Jacobsen (2019), the optimal threshold for responsibility for personnel remains debatable. Although participants did not explicitly raise concerns about coping with workload demands, they did express desires for more time that could be dedicated to staff engagement. Stress in the workplace is multifaceted and can affect individuals differently, irrespective of their work capacity (Cooper and Marshall 1975). While personnel management is an integral aspect of a department head's role, the delegation of certain tasks to alleviate workload pressures should be explored. This could entail

reconsidering the number of employees for whom a department head bears responsibility and identifying tasks suitable for delegation.

Five of the six participants felt caught between top management and their employees, a common challenge in middle management (Mintzberg 1989). Managers are required to balance leadership and following directives while dealing with conflicting interests in several ways (Prins et al. 2015; Buchanan et al. 2013). Firstly, middle managers control others, but they are also controlled themselves. Secondly, they may resist upper management, but they also must deal with resistance from their employees (Harding et al. 2014). Thirdly, middle managers, when interacting with their employees, often need to provide clear guidelines and have a clear opinion. When dealing with immediate leaders, an understanding and listening demeanour may be expected (Anicich and Hirsh 2017; Jacobsen 2019). Perhaps it is the differences between employees' need for security and management's demands for results and efficiency that lead to this pressure (Jacobsen 2019), and as is known, a work situation with this type of pressure can lead to undesirable conditions (Prins et al. 2015; Buchanan et al. 2013; Hassard et al. 2009; Osterman 2008). One participant stood out by not experiencing the same sense of being squeezed, and not experiencing conflict between the demands of management and those of his closest employees. This highlights the subjective nature of the challenges in middle management roles: what is perceived as challenging by some may not be viewed the same way by others. The personality traits of leaders could potentially play a role in shaping these perceptions, with some individuals naturally being better equipped to navigate conflicting demands. However, regardless of individual differences, the overarching framework conditions are critical.

5.1. The Balancing Act

There was no indication that the participants in this study experienced the middle management squeeze as threatening to their health; instead, they expressed their intention to continue their career as department head. This suggests that while they may have felt dissatisfaction, this is likely related to frustration regarding the lack of alignment between top management's decisions and the academic environment. Participants mentioned the need to accept and balance directives from above, indicating a disconnect between the visions of top management and departmental realities. As one participant described it, achieving an alignment between these levels was akin to 'being a bridge'. Middle managers face challenges related to loyalty and managing the limitations of their autonomy, particularly in public sector contexts, which can be demanding (Huy 2002; Gunnarsdottir 2014). The middle manager must navigate interactions with individuals at varying authority levels and ensure the implementation of the top management's strategies while recognising and including their employees (Velten et al. 2016). Given these complexities, it is understandable that middle managers describe their experiences as being caught in a squeeze or acting as a bridge.

The perceived disconnect from decisions made by a university's top management might fuel negative perceptions. These perceptions could be particularly amplified among the employees of middle managers, given their position within the organisational hierarchy. Top management's role is crucial in ensuring that middle managers are provided with the necessary autonomy and support to navigate their responsibilities effectively without feeling overwhelmed. Velten et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of mutual commitment, shared goals, and a fair distribution of burdens and benefits in the relationship between top management and middle managers. According to Construal Level Theory (CLT), individuals' responses to events are influenced by their perception of their distance from those events (Trope and Liberman 2003). When changes are to be implemented, gaining support from academic staff can be challenging for department heads, especially if there is resistance due to their perceived distance from the decision-making processes. Trope and Liberman (2010) suggest that changes can evoke emotions that are not driven solely by rationality and may also be influenced by psychological factors. Thus, while reactions to change may initially appear negative, they can be seen as constructive criticism aimed at

improving future decisions. Anchoring plays a crucial role in initiating missions or changes, as it helps establish a connection between different worlds or levels within the organisation. The notion of being caught between two different worlds reflects the challenges middle managers face in bridging the gap between top management directives and the operational reality at the departmental level. Similarly, the acceptance and handling of decisions by both top management and employees highlight the distances inherent in CLT (Trope and Liberman 2010), underscoring the complexities middle managers encounter in their roles.

It is noteworthy that all the department heads expressed a high level of satisfaction with their leadership teams at the faculty level. These provided them with a supportive environment where they could freely discuss leadership challenges and seek advice when facing difficulties. Such open communication channels within the faculty leadership group are invaluable, especially when dealing with emotional or relational issues. Functional leadership groups not only offer support but also play a crucial role in implementing strategic decisions made at higher levels. Discussions within these groups facilitate the smooth execution of changes and the management of new tasks. However, despite the support from faculty leadership, all participants highlighted challenges with the internal processes, which often did not occur as smoothly or quickly as desired. This inefficiency could lead to frustration, particularly in departments where there is a pressing need for timely action, such as in exam administration or when addressing staffing challenges. Openly addressing such frustrations within the leadership group proved to be essential for maintaining morale and productivity amidst these challenges.

The availability of support from immediate leadership and employees provided a sense of security, enabling an open discussion about both opportunities and challenges as needed. This support, described as robust and reliable, fostered a strong “we-community” dynamic. The perceived support from leaders and colleagues significantly contributes to the sense of relatedness, as highlighted by the participants. Relatedness involves feeling valued and experiencing care and warmth from others (Ryan and Deci 2017). For the participants, relatedness meant feeling at home in, identifying with, and participating in the development of the institute. This concept easily aligns with the aspects mentioned above. Feeling at home can involve feelings of warmth and care, while feeling significant can relate to identifying with an institute and participating in its development. However, there were occasional instances of a lack of support and a lack of willingness from faculty leadership to address issues, but these were rare. Conversely, top management was perceived as more distant, with little involvement in the day-to-day affairs of department heads, reflecting the hierarchical distance (Trope and Liberman 2010). Despite occasional experiences of lacking support, the participants generally perceived a work environment that adequately supported the basic psychological needs that are crucial for well-being and optimal functioning. The presence of support from immediate leadership and employees suggests the presence of the necessary foundation for meeting fundamental needs, although ongoing efforts are essential. Efforts to facilitate employee initiatives and responsibilities are crucial for fostering a collaborative work environment, as described in the Nordic model (Kuvaas and Dysvik 2020).

Within the framework of SDT, competence entails feelings of efficiency and mastery, along with opportunities to utilise and enhance one’s skills and expertise (Deci and Ryan 2000). For the participants, possessing competence in the field they led was paramount, given their role in guiding academic staff. Consequently, there was an emphasis on comprehensively understanding the UUC sector. Additionally, having an academic background related to the institute they lead was crucial for feeling that they were in the right place. The sense of relatedness can be enhanced by an inclusive environment, respect, and security, all of which the participants experienced within their institutes. Conversely, a strongly competitive atmosphere, criticism, strong traditions, and relatedness to specific academic fields or groups might potentially undermine the sense of relatedness (Cook and Artino 2016) and result in feelings of exclusion, loneliness, and social alienation (Ryan and Deci 2017).

The group's relatedness to their field helped reinforce the feeling of being at home. It can be argued that a strong organisational culture underpins this sense of community and relatedness (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2013). Previous studies have shown that such subcultures within a specific field or area can lead to groupthink. On the one hand, this can create various negative tensions, and it might be tempting to label this culture as dysfunctional. On the other hand, such a subculture can support the organisation's attitudes and values (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2013). It is the latter that appears to be predominant in the expressions of the participants.

The participants emphasised a strong link between relatedness and motivation, asserting that leading and nurturing something they are passionate about is meaningful. Relational motivation theory underscores the significance of interpersonal interactions for adaptation and well-being. Studies indicate that quality relationships not only fulfil attachment needs but also partially satisfy autonomy and competence requirements (Ryan and Deci 2017). The transition from a scientific employee to a department head leads to changes in relationships. For instance, the need to assume authority over former peers was noted. While acquiring more personal insights into colleagues' lives, participants still felt a sense of relatedness, both socially and professionally.

While the participants valued experiential knowledge, it is notable that formal leadership competence received less attention. However, relying solely on experience may not always suffice for effective decision-making in diverse contexts. Perceptions of competence can be compromised by overly challenging tasks or negative feedback, leading to feelings of ineffectiveness and helplessness (Ryan and Deci 2017). Fortunately, the participants in this study did not report such challenges significantly affecting their self-perceived competence. Nonetheless, instances arose when they felt their expertise fell short. Integrating both experiential and formal leadership competences could potentially enhance their ability to navigate the various challenges encountered in their roles. Positive feedback and engaging challenges have been shown to bolster feelings of competence (Ryan and Deci 2017), underscoring the former's role in motivating department heads' work.

For all participants, mastering the role of department head was a significant motivation. However, opinions diverged regarding what was most crucial in achieving good results, which reflects the different orientations individuals adopt in their work environments. Determining the driving force behind an individual's actions, whether external or internal, provides the basis for establishing causality (Schunk et al. 2010). Orientations often align with three types of causality orientations (Ryan and Deci 2017). Notably, there were no signs of amotivated orientation among the participants, who instead generally acted based on their interests and values, actively seeking situations that resonated with them. This suggests a causality orientation towards the individual themselves, who are driven by internal motives. In certain cases, where there is a desire for financial stability or a higher salary, choices may lean in a more control-oriented direction. This involves potential rewards or approvals for the participant, who regulate their behaviour based on anticipated outcomes (Ryan and Deci 2017). Overall, it appears that the participants in this study were predominantly motivated by an internal drive. Hence, there is little indication that deficiencies in competence contributed to increased pressure during their workdays.

As anticipated, the findings demonstrate that all three basic needs were integral components of the participants' well-being while functioning as middle managers. More surprising, perhaps, is that the participants in this study did not feel overwhelmed by their work as middle managers, in contrast with other contexts (Anicich and Hirsh 2017; Jacobsen 2019). With the Nordic model in mind, it is worth reflecting on what happens when a need is not satisfied. Mutual dependence within the SDT model warrants further exploration to understand its implications, including the potential for a middle manager to avoid burnout even when one of the basic needs is not fulfilled. It is conceivable that two fulfilled needs may compensate for one that is not, allowing the middle manager to continue to perceive the job positively. Although not explicitly highlighted by my data, one might speculate that competence becomes especially vital in favourable circumstances, when it ensures effective

performance and the capacity to seize opportunities. Conversely, in turbulent times, relatedness assumes heightened importance, fostering a sense of support and cohesion among team members. Meanwhile, autonomy may have consistent significance, providing a stable source of empowerment and freedom in decision-making. This aligns well with the Nordic model, which prioritises a high level of trust and close collaboration between management and employees. Generally, there is less emphasis on supervision and more on facilitating efficiency, responsibility, and initiative in this context (Levin et al. 2012).

5.2. Limitations and Implications

The present study has some limitations that should be addressed. First, caution must be exercised in drawing strong conclusions, given the relatively small sample size and qualitative methodology. Future studies should aim to increase participant numbers, and the use of some form of mixed methods is also recommended. Second, the dataset may have been affected by the diverse expertise of the organisation's employees. Third, participants lacked formal leadership education, despite having high levels of education in other areas. Fourth, the interview questions may not have captured all aspects of being a department head and, finally, the included theory is limited. Previous research has explored various aspects of middle managers' experiences of motivation and negative pressure in the position. I have chosen a somewhat less explored path, focusing on the positive aspect of being a bridge between the top and bottom levels of management. While SDT was utilised, some sub-elements may have been omitted. Future research could incorporate other elements of SDT to further explore middle managers' experiences.

The limitations described above do not diminish the strengths and contributions of this study. The study contributes to a relatively unexplored area of research on middle managers in the Norwegian academic context, offering a new perspective within the framework of SDT. Despite its limitations, the study opens avenues for further exploration of middle managers' experiences in various organisational contexts, both domestically and internationally. The findings are likely relevant not only within the higher education sector but also within organisations of a similar size. The practical implications include the importance of recognising the values of autonomy, relatedness, and competence among leaders and employees, as well as understanding the cross-pressures faced by middle managers in both the public and private sectors. Future research should consider approaches to assess the trends and factors affecting middle managers' work experiences and explore interactions, role expectations, self-determined behaviour, and the impact of formal education on their roles.

6. Conclusions

In contrast with previous international research conducted in various contexts (Pepper and Giles 2015; Floyd 2016; Wisniewski 2019; Corbett 2020; Tietjen-Smith et al. 2020), the findings of this study suggest that the experience of being a middle manager in the UUC sector in Norway is not as daunting as previously thought, if the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Jacobsen (2019) has drawn similar conclusions about middle managers. The findings are particularly noteworthy within the Nordic education sector, where the role of middle manager seems to be less stressful or overwhelming than in other organisational settings. While many of the participants occasionally felt caught between top management and employees, in keeping with previous research and theories on middle management (Mintzberg 1989; Prins et al. 2015; Buchanan et al. 2013; Harding et al. 2014; Anicich and Hirsh 2017); this tension is not perceived as detrimental to their well-being but rather as frustrating due to the disconnect between directives and the department's reality.

The study illustrates how department heads maintain a delicate balance of responsibility, trust, and support to facilitate their roles as both executive and an inclusive middle manager. They navigate a dynamic environment where they both influence and are influenced by others. This reflects an organisational culture that emphasises engagement,

openness, community, and accountability, in line with the Nordic model (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2013; Velten et al. 2016). Autonomy emerges as crucial for middle managers' work, although some control-oriented tasks may hinder this. Additionally, middle managers feel strongly supported by their immediate leadership at the faculty level, which enables them to navigate challenges effectively. Thus, it can be speculated that, given a good work environment and a high degree of satisfaction, they tolerate somewhat more pressure than expected in such a position. Overall, the participants feel that their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which must be satisfied for the sake of their well-being and intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2017), are largely met at work.

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