Contextualization as a practice. Middle managers in the public domain

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This contribution focuses on middle managers in the public domain. To be more specific: it focuses on middle managers whose activities are directly related, one way or the other, to these organizations' 'front line' service delivery. As a consequence, these managers do not seem belong to the heroic kind that performs 'in the limelight' (Watson and Harris 1999: 59 and 232). Moreover, the management of 'internal services' such as HRM, quality management, the financial or information departments, the intake office, remains out of sight in this paper, as well, although these managers could be presented as middle managers, also. This paper focuses on those middle managers whose activities are focused on the core business of their organization, even if most of them 'manage' from a position that is a little bit 'higher up', when seen from the operational level.

The aim of this paper is to examine more closely the rather 'undetermined' positioning of these middle managers, both in their self-presentations and in the presentations of those who write about them. Accordingly, I shall first investigate how, in line with Watson and Harris' findings (1999) on the UK, the various public sector middle managers I present, consistently seem to frame their predicament in terms of ambiguities. Accordingly, they could be presented as *non*-people in *non*-places, in the first place. This last term was coined by the French anthropologist, Augé: 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé [1992] 1995, pp. 77-8). Applied to these middle managers it means that they are positioned 'somewhere' in the organization, but that the specification of this 'somewhere' is not very well-defined. Similarly, they can also be framed

as non-people – or as nondescript *personae* - in that their actual performance as 'middle managers' cannot be identified in very specific terms.

Relying on the Watson and Harris (1999) data related to middle managers in the UK, and comparing them with my Dutch data, I shall demonstrate how these public middle managers all appear to present their position as (1) being emergent, both in the subjective and in the objective sense of the word; (2) being located somewhere 'halfway' the organizational ladder between the work floor and the top; (3) being close to the people on work floor but definitely not 'one of them'; and (4), as having to negotiate their territory through the contradictory claims presented from elsewhere.

But, second, I shall also demonstrate that the these managers' actual dealings with these ambiguities seem to rely, at least to an extent, on the specific institutional contexts they are managerially related to. This last issue seems to be largely ignored by Watson and Harris (1999), who do present data on managers from a wide range of organizations but seem to consider their specific institutional settings as a 'given'. Moreover, and instead of treating this relatedness as institutional dependency – or as a contingency – I shall also argue, here, that their actual dealings can definitely be reframed in terms that rely on their local 'situated-ness' as a starting point for their actions. I shall not only argue that these middle managers perform institution work though the locally oriented practices they perform, but also that, in doing so, they essentially rely on their own enactment of this context. I would even like to argue here that these active contextualization practices present them with a unique starting point for the day-to-day learning processes that help them develop their managerial craft (Sennett 2008).

Methodological notes

The data presented in this paper are inspired, first, by a comparison with the ethnographical work presented by Watson and Harris' *Emergent Manager* (1999). This ethnographic study presents data that were collected from a wide range of organizations in the UK. The reasons for choosing this study as a comparative starting point is provided by the wide range of organizations they do seem to cover in the UK, although they do not specifically focus on the public realm. Their presentation does allows for a comparison with a range of Dutch organizations. This choice is also, and second, inspired by interpretive mode of data collection

and analysis that is employed by Watson and Harris (1999), which renders their data compatible with my own.

The data presented in this paper have been collected on public sector middle managers in a range of street level bureaucracies (Lipsky 1983) in the Netherlands. They involve middle managers operating in juridical courts (Burger 2009), in hospitals (Hagen 2007), in a local police organization (Dautzenberg 2009), in organizations providing children's day care (Klaassen 2008), in an organization providing home care to the elderly (Mevius 2008), and in an organization providing mental health care (Wesdorp 2008). In all of these cases the field work was produced as a part of the research performed for a master thesis with which the original fieldworkers finalized their degree in public governance. As a consequence, the actual variety of organizational sectors that is presented here, is quite accidental – for instance no educational institutions were involved, nor are there any data presented here on Dutch social security. Nevertheless, these various locations will be presented here as representatives of the variety of public services that can currently be found in the Dutch social state (Gastelaars 2009).

The interpretive analysis provided here does not only rely on the accounts that were provided by the middle managers who were interviewed by these various master students. My data presentation is also informed by these fieldworkers' original reports and, accordingly, by the ways they represented their respondents. It is for instance taken into account, here, that most of the fieldwork presented here is performed by students who, at the time, were active managers themselves, or were otherwise professionally engaged with the day to day negotiations they report on. One of them (Burger 2009) has interviewed 12 so-called team-chairs (*teamvoorzitters*) coming from various courts of law, who at the time had entered a specialized course on leadership provided by the Utrecht School of Governance, where the fieldworker himself acted as an assistant. Most of the others were managerially related to the sectors they reported on. In one of the cases, the researcher presented a general description of the day to day activities of middle managers who were her direct colleagues, at the time (Wesdorp 2008). In another case (Klaassen 2008) the fieldworker was a member of a centralized staff to a large conglomerate of organizations where the investigated managers were performing. In other cases, the middle managers were selected from departments that were not the fieldworker's own (Mevius 2008, Dauzenberg 2009), or even from more distant organizations (Hagen 2007). But, rather than discussing these fieldworkers' personal

involvement in terms of its potential impact on the reliability of their data, I shall treat it as a part of my data. Accordingly, the data I present here do not only rely on the self-presentations of the managers who were interviewed, but also on the constructions these fieldworkers present.

So, apart from the 12 team chairs from 12 quite different juridical courts (Burger 2009), and 10 cluster managers were interviewed who worked in 3 different hospitals (Hagen 2007) all over the Netherlands, there were 5 local chiefs (and 3 street cops) interviewed in one district belonging to one of the Netherland's regional police organizations in the South, and a number of collective sessions was also reported in this survey, and so was a fair number of casual conversations (Dautzenberg 2009). Klaassen (2008) interviewed 9 location managers, who all belonged to one municipal organization providing children's day care in the East of the country; she also presented 3 interviews with the organization's top. 12 operational care managers, from 12 different location in 3 different regions in the North were interviewed by Mevius (2008). They all belonged to one large organization providing home care to the elderly. Wesdorp (2008) collected her data from a series of 3 collective meetings she held with 5 managers of the middle range in one region in a large mental health care organization in the North, and she was one of them. She also reported on a training course involving all of the 20 middle managers of this organization. In all of these reports the general research question focussed on the various ways in which these middle managers made sense of their day-to-day experiences as a middle manager in this specific context. The specific issues they raised remained close to this general focus: they involved 'issues of proximity and distance' (Dautzenberg 2009), 'passive and active coping' (Mevius 2008), 'dealing with the management participation of managing professionals' (Hagen 2007), the 'effective presentation of a local profile' (Wesdorp 2008) and the 'local balancing of contradictory claims' (Klaassen 2008 and Burger 2009). This means that, although the order of presentation in this paper is directly inspired by the 'first order concepts' that Watson and Harris presented in their analysis, the managers that were interviewed as a part of the fieldwork presented here, and also the fieldworkers themselves, can be presented in these terms as well.

Accordingly, I shall also start with the various ambiguities these middle managers (and fieldworkers) present, from their 'being emergent' throughout the 'having to negotiate their territory through contradictory claims from elsewhere' I mentioned earlier. And, again, while doing this, I shall try to demonstrate how different patterns evolve that each may be related to

their specific institutional contexts. And I shall demonstrate how they seem to rely on some sort of active contextualization, to develop their craft.

The main contextual issues that will be elaborated on, here, rely on the 'proven' organizational impact of (a) a specific 'professionalism' that can dominate the work floor (Cf. Freidson 2001), (b) the local reflexivity that may turn out to be quite indispensable to some front line services, if only because they are related to a very demanding local context (Cf. Punch 1983, Smith 1965), and (c) the local enactment of hierarchy, and of the various accountability issues that, accordingly, seem to emerge from the organization's higher echelons. Among them the 'rationalizing' impact of the New Public Management interventions that most of these organizations have taken part in, in the recent past (Gastelaars 2009).

(1) being emergent

As Watson and Harris (1999) have pointed out, most middle managers are subjectively emergent in the sense that they are novices to their present managerial function. As far as their origins are involved, Watson and Harris produced a differentiation between middle managers who had moved 'upward' from the work floor, and middle managers who can be considered 'career managers' in that they had just finished a graduate training in management science before entering their 'given' organization. Still other managers can be observed to have made a career shift from elsewhere: they are labelled 'movers-in'. (Watson and Harris 1999:31-33) But, as we shall see, these managers are emergent in an objective sense as well. Watson and Harris (1999) relate this 'objective emergence' to the fact that many of these managerial functions have recently been redefined or are even new to the various organizations. As far as the public sector is concerned, they relate this 'objective emergence' to the introduction of New Public Management, now a number of decades ago.

My data confirm this subjectively and objectively emergent state. They also show that, even if this is the case, the actual organizational 'locations' into which these emergent managers have been 'projected' can turn out to be quite different in various sectors. Most Dutch hospitals, for instance, are essentially focused on the maintenance of their professional service cores, even if they are subject to efficiency measures (Gastelaars 2009). Accordingly, it may not prove accidental that, as a rule, they now provide for dual management structures, in

which, on the one hand, there are medical specialists who manage part time. They are 'managing professionals' who are 'moving up', without relinquishing their professional status. They are consistently expected to take care of all issues considered medical. On the other hand there are the full time 'professional managers', the *cluster managers* that were interviewed in field work presented here (Hagen 2007). They are there to take care of all other managerial activities, which can be specifically associated with the rationalization provided by new public management but, as we shall see, with other issues, as well. They in their turn could be career managers or managers moving in but, in this specific report, most of them were semi-professionals (i.e., *not* medical doctors but qualified nurses) moving up.

A similar pattern is provided by the Dutch courts of law, although in this case the interviewing (Burger 2009) was performed with the professional side of the dual management structure their organisations present. The so-called *team chairs* (*teamvoorzitters*) who were interviewed for the project presented here, were part time judges, themselves, and, like the medical managers mentioned in the previous paragraph, they had 'moved up' from amongst their professional peers, without having to relinquish their professional status. According to their job descriptions, they were expressly there to improve their professional teams and also this team's professional cooperation with significant others. The juridical chain, for instance, involves, apart from the judges, police investigators, the public persecution, and the actual carrying out of punishment (Burgers 2009: 61). In their turn, these managing judges are also accompanied by professional managers who take care of the 'specifically managerial' aspect of this dual structure. The team chairs, themselves, claim that they are 'assisted' by these indispensable others and yes, the labels in Dutch that are affixed to them are also quite telling: they are called *Hoofd Juridische Ondersteuning* (The Head of Juridical Support), *adviseur bedrijfsvoering* (consulting expert on technical management) , and simply 'management assistant' (Burgers 2009: 84-5). These technical managers are not to interfere with the team chairs' specific responsibilities towards their professional peers.

In a large conglomerate providing a wide range of mental health care practices there are also part time managing medical professionals (psychiatrists) available, so a dual management structure can be observed here, as well. The managing professionals are expressly held responsible for all decisions concerning 'individual patient treatments' (Wesdorp 2008:50) but otherwise these managing professionals are kept at a distance. Accordingly, the other side of this duality takes on quite a different aspect. Here, there seems to be ample space available

for the many non medical *managers of the middle range* (*middenkader)* that are present, here, of whom some were interviewed for the project that is presented in this paper. They are there to arrange for most of the organization's day to day operations, which – as can be expected in institutional settings like these (Gastelaars 2009) – are mostly involved, not with the individualized decision making performed by the managing professionals but, rather, with the kind of 24/7 care and surveillance that is to be provided by this organization on a day to day basis (Gastelaars 2009). They are specifically concerned with the day to day exigencies presented by this 24/7 type of care. Moreover, all of them were presented as semi-professionals (e.g., psychiatric nurses) moving up and no mention was made, here, of career managers or of middle managers moving in.

Again, a slightly different pattern was presented by the *operational care managers* (*leidinggevenden V & V*) who performed in an organization providing home care to the elderly (Mevius 2008). A dual management structure is not available here; accordingly, there are no managing professionals present , here, with a distinctive role. The same is true with the *location managers* of the organization providing day care to children (Klaassen 2008): they are responsible for all management activities performed on this level. Here, the former professionals who turned manager seemed to blend in with the various other kinds of professional managers that were present here, i.e., those who consider themselves career managers or managers 'moving in' from elsewhere. The last mentioned groups, in particular, seemed to particularly represent some of the top down managerial ambitions that, to these organizations, were relatively new.

And, finally, the Dutch police force has always relied on internal training programs for its lower management. As a consequence, most of the *local chiefs* who were presented in the data I rely on for this paper (Dautzenberg 2009), are of the kind that is moving up.

The so-called dual management seems to specifically re-establish the relative prominence of the organization's professional class; a relative closeness to the operational realm is definitely much more accentuated, for these middle managers, in most of the other cases. And: even if the aspirations associated with the current New Public Management (Cf Noordegraaf 2004) have triggered the organizational presence of these various managers, this does not necessarily mean that it takes a very prominent part in their day to day negotiations. But we shall return later to this point.

2 somewhere halfway the hierarchy

We can gather from Watson and Harris (1999) that middle managers are hierarchically located ‘somewhere halfway the organizational ladder’ and that this seems to particularly imply, *not* at the top. In fact, they are usually presented as performing at some distance from the so-called strategic level of their organizations. One of the consequences of this is that, at least in Watson and Harris’ presentation, their actual assignment seems to be somewhat negatively defined. They do *not* provide for strategy, in that they do *not* determine the general direction of the organization’s development. They do *not* ‘organize’, either, in the sense that, as a rule, they are *not* responsible for the initial development of the organization’s systems and structures; they usually are not even directly involved in the actual redesign of the local work processes they relate to on a day to day basis. Instead, they seem to be there to take responsibility for locally ‘getting things done’ according to a ‘given’ plan, and to locally implement organizational changes that are conceived by these ‘relevant others’. According to Watson and Harrris, this last observation is particularly due to the many systems which, as a rule, are related to New Public Management, and which are experienced by many of the middle managers they interviewed, as ‘torpedoed’ from the top. (Watson and Harris 1999: 91) And, most remarkably, they expressly do not present themselves as ‘on the way up’.

My Dutch data confirms that most of the middle managers who were interviewed discuss their hierarchical positions in similar terms. It also seems to confirm their day to day preoccupation with the numerous systems produced by New Public Management. But, again, they do so with different accents, and, as we shall see, this reinforces the various institutional patterns that were presented in the above.

In the institutional contexts where professionals prevail, the dual system once again reinforces a division of labour. For instance the team chairs in the Dutch courts of law claim, on the one hand, that they share these ‘systems’ responsibilities with the so-called ‘technical’ managers that have been presented earlier (Burger 2009: 61-2) but, on the other hand, they also claim to be particularly responsible, themselves, for the ‘protection’ (Burger 2009: 84) of ‘their’ professional teams against the adverse effects that may be produced by these systems. They for instance feel responsible for the impact on the professionals they serve, of the many quality standards that are now locally applied (Burgers 2009: 63). And, not too surprisingly,

the cluster managers who are said to be responsible for the strictly managerial side of the current dualism in Dutch hospitals, ‘show a distinct preference for these new managerial tasks’ (Hagen 2007: 42). They even claim that they can excel in this specific aspect of their work, for the simple reason that they can spend far more time on it than most of the part time managing professionals they work with. But again, the specifically professional aspects of the local managerial work are set apart.

For the local police chiefs who are presented in my data, however, this contradiction does not seem to be ‘solved’. They particularly present a dilemma between the now very prominent centralized planning and control, on the one hand, and the local flexibility and improvisation that is essentially required on their work floor, on the other (Dautzenberg 2009: 54ff). This seems to be particularly the case because they are responsible for both. We shall return to this point later.

In the various organizations providing care, however, the middle managers seem to particularly deal with the new managerialism as a ‘given’. First of all, these middle managers seem to experience being halfway the hierarchy as a simple fact of life. For instance, the managers of the middle rank in the mental health care organization who are presented here seem to accommodate to this as a ‘given’: ‘a position in the middle is a position in its own right’ (Wesdorp 2008: 48). Not unlike their colleagues who work for a provider of home care for the elderly, they claim to be simply there to take care of the many systems ‘dropped in from outer space’ (Wesdorp 2008: 48). The dependence on the top that is also suggested here is confirmed by these last mentioned managers, in that they claim that they are nothing but a ‘serving hatch’ (Mevius 2008: 46) for the large number of systems – not to mention the associated ‘data, data, data’ (Mevius 2008: 40) - that are parachuted from above. This pattern is also confirmed by the location managers who work for the children’s day care organization, who expressly claim that they are not taken seriously at all by their managerial superiors (Klaassen 2008: 65). They all claim to experience a quite forceful centralization of control.

Most of the managers presented here present being halfway the hierarchy as simply being ‘stuck’ somewhere in between their organisation’s top and its work floor. Moreover, and in all of the cases, the organization’s top seems to be primarily associated with a ‘new’ kind of management – involving formats and targets presented from the top down; in all of these cases it also seems to present them with a profound local impact. But again their local

enactment proves quite different, indeed. In some of these organizations it is presented as a permanent avalanche of ‘instructions’ coming down to the work floor, from the top; in other cases, however, it appears to be locally ‘managed away’ through a local division of labour; and, as we shall see more elaborately at a later point in this paper, it can also be incorporated into the local power arena, as one of the many ‘power assets’ any party may draw on, to get his or her point across.

3 *close to the work floor but essentially not one of them*

In Watson and Harris’ presentation , most of the middle managers they have interviewed seem to expressly point at the people work they are expected to perform (Watson and Harris 1999). They particularly appear to relate how they have to deal with the fact that, on the one hand, they are close to the work force and that, on the other hand, they are definitely not one of them. They also stress how they are basically ‘left to their own devices’ when they perform the people work that is required from them. Watson and Harris even insist that ‘a capacity for self control’ – i.e., a capacity to manage ‘oneself’ while one is managing ‘others’ – should be seen as the ultimate managerial asset in this context (Watson and Harris 1999:115). They even coined the notion of ‘dual control’ to indicate the specific aspect of this capacity. In implies for instance a capacity to control one’s own emotions, i.e., to keep things down and ‘bite one’s lip’(Watson and Harris 1999: 143-4); it seems to even involve showing the appropriate emotions at the appropriate point in time, in any given situation, provided this is effective to convince others to move in the right direction. It involves the management of ‘proximity’ and ‘distance’, in an essentially relational sense of the word.

And again, my Dutch data mirror this predicament, although, once again, there are different accents to be observed. In the professional settings, for instance, the performance of ‘respect’ to the professional powers seems to particularly prevail, where this people work is concerned. The hospital cluster managers who were a part of a ‘dual management’ team, for instance, particularly discussed the establishment of a trusting relationship with their professional partners. The team chairs that were interviewed in the Dutch courts of law seemed to also focus on establishing good working relationships with their professional peers, as a part of their managerial practice. In their case, this ‘professional proximity’ seemed to even involve an extra requirement to ‘keep cool’(Burger 2009: 91-2) whenever you manage your way through personal confrontations. These team chairs appear to even experience this specific

kind of relation work as a distinctive shift from the capacity to perform a ‘quiet deliberation’ that, to them, remains essential to being a judge. They now have to play two essentially different roles.

The issues of proximity and distance the police managers are confronted with are essentially more ambiguity-ridden than those that seem to prevail in the professional world. On the one hand, these local bosses wonder: ‘In which way can I be there for my local personnel?’ (Dautzenberg 2009: 52). They even discuss the impact of an open door, and of having a room of one’s own as opposed to the open office available to these relevant others (Dautzenberg 2009: 75) They also claim that you have to be ‘in the know’ of what is locally going on, and prove to them that ‘you, also, can stand with your feet in the mud’ (Dautzenberg 2009: 79) should the situation demand this. On the other hand, however, it seems to be equally obvious to these managers that you are not to assume that you are ‘one of them’ (Dautzenberg 2009: 77): your behaviour should be exemplary, and you have to accept that your mistakes will be gossiped about for a long time, by definition (Dautzenberg 2009: 76 and 81). They confirm that you are there to show an example. And that, in all of these respects, you are essentially on your own.

In the various organizations providing care, the middle managers seemed to have a distinct preference for the people part of their assignment. However, in the organization providing home care to the elderly they were also forced to observe that this aspect of their work amounts at its best to 20% of their day to day negotiations (Mevius 2008). The location managers in the organization providing day care to children experience the same. These location managers, however, do also suggest, that being more ‘businesslike’ might in fact enable them to keep their work floor at a proper distance. ‘They got to get accustomed to me not being available all the time’ (Klaassen 2008: 69). The middle managers in the mental health care organization also seemed to particularly practice some distancing towards their work floors. As a part of the research project presented here, for instance, they developed a collective strategy to have a colleague take the phone and get in touch, whenever an employee stays home on sick leave, and then report it to the middle manager who is responsible for this employee (Wesdorp 2008). In these cases, the management of proximity and distance even seems to evolve into a defensive kind of boundary management on behalf of the managers themselves.

4 having to negotiate one's territory through contradictory claims from elsewhere

However, these front line managers can also be presented as having a territory of their own. Even more than that: they simply seem to be 'the only one there' (Watson and Harris 1999: 70) with this specific managerial function. Watson and Harris present them as the ones who 'keep[…] in touch with the real action' (Watson and Harris 1999: 72). Moreover, and second, they are also there to manage this territory through a number of quite contradictory logics. These logics can definitely be produced from the top down but they may also be a part of the ever recurring governmental efforts to keep track of what is locally going on in these organizations. And again, the New Public Management initiatives seem to be quite prominent indeed. These logics may, however, also be presented by the local exigencies provided by the diversity of these organization's client relationships, or by the complexity presented by the local environment that has to be negotiated on a day to day basis. Accordingly, and this is an aspect to which Watson and Harris pay very little attention, these logics can also be perceived as being produced from the bottom up. When taken into account, these considerations provide a much more complex meaning to such phrases as 'You are there to keep the [organization] running' (Watson and Harris 1999: 72) or 'I think of managing as involving yourself more than others in getting things done' (Watson and Harris 1999: 70). Watson and Harris do also show that some of these managerial efforts are externally directed and that, accordingly, they can be associated with 'knowing about the organization, knowing the faces' (Watson and Harris 1999: 91) and with finding ways to somehow 'manage' the power arena that is usually involved and which presents itself as the 'ego's, domination and back stabbing, interests and hidden agenda's, territorial rivalries' (Watson and Harris 1999: 80-5) they may encounter. To Watson and Harris this 'negative' people work is quite essential to these managerial repertoires. And again, and in line with Watson and Harris' assumptions, most of the data presented here, seem to also establish some sort of brokering activity as a part of these local managers' presentations. But, again, these are some different accents to take note of, and again these seem to specifically relate to the institution work these managers present.

For instance, the non-medical cluster managers in the Dutch hospitals do acknowledge how their day to day activities are quite precisely circumscribed by the professional prominence of the medical specialists in the Dutch hospitals they represent. They for instance claim that 'you got to acknowledge that this is a doctors' organization' (Hagen 2007:41). However, they also present themselves as the ultimate brokers between the organization's top and its work floor.

On the one hand they seem to acknowledge that they are dealing with an essentially unmanageable medical corps. The managing professionals they are usually dealing with, for instance, are usually not provided with a mandate by the professional peers they represent, and this implies for these managers that any manoeuvre they might wish to undertake requires quite a lot of time because, as a rule, it requires plenty of preliminary negotiations. This may particularly be the case when they are felt to manoeuvre 'against the grain' of some specifically professional preoccupations. In the end, however, these managers also claim that they often do succeed in such complicated negotiations, and that, once again, this amounts to much more than being 'little helpers' to their hospital's medical staff (Hagen 2007)

The team chairs in the Dutch courts of law claim, most of all, that they have to be able to 'shift gears at an instant' (Burger 2009: 96), and need to avoid 'surviving from one incident to the next' (Burger 2009: 100). To them, once again, their most legitimate role seems to involve that they present themselves as the ultimate 'intermediate' or even as a 'buffer' on behalf of their professional peers – not only versus the organization's top (Burger 2009: 70) but also versus the various external partners they have to deal with (Burger 2009: 73). They are there for the 'protection of their teams' (Burger 2009: 82) against work overload, turnover pressures, and money issues that can be associated with the currently quite dominant logic that aims at more efficiency in the Dutch courts. Accordingly, they definitely claim to be able to manipulate, on behalf of their teams, the 'organizational circumstances they are facing' (Burger 2009: 84) and to be more than 'serving hatches' (Burger 2009: 102) on behalf of the organization's top. To them, however, their actual performance may be much more determined by the way they are negotiate their position through some of the new expectations that directly address the functioning of their teams. Accordingly, the negative people work they perform on a day to day basis does not only involve the conflicts between the judges and the so-called juridical secretaries who now often prepare a substantial share of the juridical verdicts (Burger 2009: 92) or between the judges and their juridical administration, where, as a rule, 'professional independence' is confronted with 'efficiency measures. It is particularly related to the circumstance that, within their teams, they are formally expected to break through the traditionally quite 'closed' court culture which, to them, involves that people are not specifically inclined to comment on each others' achievements (Burger 2009: 96) To them, this assignment of having to provide feedback to their professional peers seems to involve the riskiest confrontations of all. (Burger 2009: 70)

In the police force, the permanent struggle for local legitimacy I discussed in the above, will also be affected by the impact of the power arenas that seem to particularly affect local police managers who try to move up a little bit higher. On the one hand, the day to day relations with the work floor of these managers seem to be bound to suffer when they do, for the simple reason that they may simply not be locally available, any more, and thus fail in the being 'present' and 'locally attentive' that is often felt to be decisive for their local authority, by their work floors – you 'got to earn it' (Dautzenberg 2009: 88). In fact, this may even hamper their local authority insofar as it relies on the two daily briefings that are typical for any police organization, rather than on the one-to-one individual feedback to local officers (Dautzenberg 2007: 71) which they are now required to perform as a part of HRM. On the other hand, however, and even if they are presented by the organization's top as the ultimate extension of its own controlling efforts (Dautzenberg 2009: 88), and even if they are sometimes presented, as 'serving a large number of Lords' (as the Dutch expression has is; Van der Torre: 95) – 'their phones are always ringing' (Van der Torre 2007: 96) – in the data presented here they are particularly presented as the 'local bosses' or 'local key players' who essentially keep 'the force' going. In fact, the need for some local flexibility on the work floor is almost unanimously accentuated by the local chiefs who were presented in this data (Dautzenberg 2009: 54ff) and so is the relative 'freedom' of the day to day police work on the streets (Dautzenberg 2007: 71).

As can be expected, the managers who were interviewed in the sectors providing care all seemed to accentuate the relative powerlessness they were relegated to, by their quite oppressive top management. They for instance claimed that they were particularly restricted in their day-to-day actions by the quite restrictive formats provided to them by their top management, or by the professional staffs assigned with the standardization of these efforts. In the day care centres this formatting for instance seemed to particularly stifle, to these managers' experience, the one-to-one conversations they were to have with their own personnel, or with their children's parents (Klaassen 2008: 63) although they were expected – by this very same top - to not only involve themselves with the professional qualities of their personnel but to actively take part in the local dealings with their little clients' parents, as well, even if they operated at some distance from their work floors (Klaassen 2008: 61-2). Some of these location managers, however, claim to circumvent the many frustrating rules and regulations that are provided by their top, with or without their local superior's consent. Some of these managers appear to be able to find ways of their own around the continuous

‘stream of computer formats’ (Klaassen 2008: 79) they are presented with, and thus avoid their organization’s quite forceful centralization. They even claim to keep the organization’s top at a proper distance with a ‘you’d better forget it, up there’(Klaassen 2008: 77). And we have also seen how the managers of the middle range who work in the organization providing mental health care (Wesdorp 2008: 43) and who experience a similar oppression from the top, developed a collective strategy of their own, to prevent the number of sick leaves on their locations from going up, again, in the future (Wesdorp 2008: 46/7). However, the fact that they presented this as ‘civil disobedience’ (Wesdorp 2008: 52) can be seen as quite illustrative of the power relations that prevail.

The local care managers in the organization providing home care to the elderly (Mevius 2008), in their turn, seem to be able to physically escape from this specific kind of pressure, at least to some extent, as a consequence of the geographic distance between their organization’s headquarters and the local communities where they perform their duties. However, the local leeway that these middle managers are looking for is framed as a as a local coping strategy by the fieldworker reporting on them (Mevius 2008). But, again, this essentially quite subservient behaviour may essentially be enforced by the specific institutional context they relate to. As a rule, this type of institution relies on the 24/7 care and surveillance it is to supply to an essentially dependent population, and, accordingly, it can be said to rely on ‘the management of dependence’ of these clients (Gastelaars 2009: 10). And, however odd this may seem at first sight, I would like to argue, here, that this institutionalized client relationship seems to produce a ‘chain of dependency’ throughout these organizations. Instead of attributing this, for instance, to the impact of NPM, I would like to point out, how the dependency relationships that may seem quite natural between its workers and its clients, seem to be mirrored, here, in the essentially quite paternalistic (or maternal) attitude aiming at a ‘guided self-reliance’ (Gastelaars 2009) at its best , that seems to prevail between these local managers and their workers, and between the organization’s top management and the local managers they address. It may very well seem true, in the end, that the ‘dependency’ that seems to prevail, here, does in fact mirror the ‘managed dependency’ that is essential to the core business that these organizations present.

Just like, in organizations where professional autonomy – or, in the case of the judges: professional independence – seems to present the main guideline for the middle managers presented there, causing their impact to rely on a typical kind of brokering efforts that seem to

be specifically informed by a separation of the managerial from the professional, in the first place, and, second, by the performance of mutual respect. And in an organization that seems to fundamentally rely on the situated-ness of its local practices in a very complex and dynamic local environment, such as the police force (Van der Torre 2007) where the higher echelons may very well develop into quite turbulent power arena's, as well, due to the ever changing public pressures they are confronted with, at their level. No wonder that these local managers, whom we have presented as the indispensable representatives of the organization's local territories-under-pressure in an earlier paragraph, can also be presented as the local 'punching bags' (Van der Torre 2007: 153) who appear to be taken to task by all.

Conclusion

At first sight it seems to be true that ambiguities prevail in the (self)presentations provided by and about the middle managers who were researched for this paper. Many of them for instance experience how the high expectations raised by their top management, are not combined with an equal level of trust, and consider for that reason to leave the organization (Klaassen 2008). Some of them feel definitely alienated from their professional peers and consider, for that reason, to return to the work floor (Burger 2009). And as we have seen in the above, some of them even expressly present themselves as the punching bags, in the power arenas where they are to perform. Although the ways in which they do so may differ, they all appear to consider their actual positions as quite indeterminate, indeed.

And yet, it might be just a little bit too farfetched to identify them as *non*-people in *non*-places, after all the data that is presented here. As far as this last term is concerned, for instance, Augé's description - 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé [1992] 1995, pp. 77-8) – may definitely require some qualifications. My data suggest that it appears to be very well possible to make a difference between settings, and that the 'somewhere' where these managers are professionally occupied, is more specific than this label suggests. In quite another way, the same may be true for the non-personhood that was implied as well. Again, it must be quite obvious, by now, that, in spite of the circumstances, most of these managers interviewed appeared to find some ways of their own, for instance to 'manage' the issues of proximity and distance they were facing with their work floors; to cope with the insistence of their top

management; and to negotiate the various contradictions involved with the external claims that they (or their organizations) they were facing; they even seemed to cope, somehow, with the power arenas they had to face. In fact, it might even be possible to establish that some actual learning has been underway, here, however much these managers, themselves, might may be inclined to suggest, that their present learning processes in fact amounted to a rather painful choice to either sink or swim (Cf. Watson and Harris 1999: 170).

Watson and Harris (1999) suggested in their book that watching others do the job, learning by doing and making mistakes – and being allowed to do so in particular – was experienced as quite instructive by the managers they interviewed, themselves. It was not included as a topic in most of the interviews presented here, but another Dutch author whom I have been quoting in the above seems to confirm this. 'At present, most learning seems to be intertwined with everyday practice, in one single process' (Van der Torre 2007: 151) That is why, to sum up this paper, I would like to suggest some inroads to try and make sense of the actual learning processes that might have been available, at least to some extent, to the middle managers presented here, however much these learning processes could (and maybe even should) have been addressed in more explicit terms.

Accordingly, and relying, at least to an extent, on Richard Sennett's concept of craftsmanship (Sennett 2008) and the associated learning, I would like to 'objectify' here their efforts to essentially 'localize' their practices, and at the same time find some locally adequate ways to contextualize them at the same time.

- One should start, then, from the observation that, like all other managers, these middle managers are dependent on organizations to perform at all, but that, unlike many other managers, they may in fact experience an advantage: there are the local territories to which they are connected by their organizations, and by definition. To quote, with Sennett, the famous Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck: this may provide them with a 'place and occasion' (Sennett 2008: 235) to start.
- This also means that local managers should, instead of relying on any 'given' format or on any 'given' job description, should mainly rely on what is available to them the here and now, and transform this into their own version of an essentially situated, but also essentially context-related practice.
- This learning should incorporate the classical learning by doing, instead of being performed through static courses. Accordingly, the practical situated-ness of this learning should present

the starting point, instead of the rather context-independent theorizing that is so often provided. The middle managers in the data provided here, who criticized the practical relevance of the courses provided to them, by the top of their organizations (Klaassen 2008; Wedorp 2008), may actually have been right.
- Given the often quite isolated position of the middle managers investigated here, the sharing of individual experiences with their peers in an informal 'community of practice' (Wesdorp 2008; see also Wenger 1997, for the term) might provide a valuable addition to the 'observing others while they do the job'. But, again, the talking can not replace the doing.
- The institutional specifications of their surrounding can be treated, then, as something that can be learned and developed though the so-called institution work these middle managers perform on a day to day basis, instead of treating it as a well-determined context.
And, finally,
- instead of thriving on their sense of ambiguity, these middle managers might actually rely on their ability to not only deal with the proximities and distances in relation to their work floors, but their ability to perform contextualization as a practice, as well, not to mention their practical ability to negotiate their territory through contradictory claims.

To Sennett, there is nothing like a long term day to day practice in which 'you (learn to) think and do at the same time' (Sennett 2008: 40) to accomplish this sort of thing. But even if this amount of time is not available to the 'emergent managers' I presented here, the actual encouragement to perform trial and error that it is associated with, may still remain valid. And so does the 'constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness' (Sennett 2008: 50) that should be performed as well. But we should also remind ourselves that, as a rule, the content and focus of these learning processes are also quite specific, indeed, and that, in the case of these middle managers, this amounts to contextualization as a craft, from an essentially local setting. Moreover, we should also remind ourselves of the observation that, as a rule, these middle managers do not perform in the limelight at all. This for instance implies that, more than some other managers might, they are basically in need of the attitude that, according to Sennett, a craftsman relies on: 'A desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett 2008: 9).

Marja Gastelaars, Amsterdam/ Utrecht, August 17, 2011

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