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Emotional Turmoil or Peaceful Agreements? A Phenomenological Study on Coping with Reforms in Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Promoting changes in an organisation is never an easy task. Coping with changes is an individual process and affects our individual physical and psychological well-being. This study attempted to analyse how university reforms were experienced by academic staff. It is framed by Self-Determination Theory, according to which there are three basic psychological needs that affect all people: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I conducted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) to gain insight into participants' experiences during the period of 4 years, 2014-2018. The participants came from two academic staff communities of the same institution. The data collection methods were observations, diary notes, and interviews. The data were analysed according IPA. The results reveal the important role of the sense of community and belongingness between academic peers and colleagues within broader academic staff communities. In fact, it may influence the individual's experience of reforms in both directions—peaceful confidence or alarming apprehension. The findings suggest that lack of autonomy about one's work life increases negative attitudes towards the reforms and alludes to emotion-focused coping strategies, whilst autonomy supportive and open working environment supports coping with reforms in an academic institution.

Keywords

coping strategies, organizational commitment, self-determination theory, teacher community, interpretive phenomenological analysis

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Emotional Turmoil or Peaceful Agreements? A Phenomenological Study on Coping with Reforms in Higher Education Institution

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Promoting changes in an organisation is never an easy task. Coping with changes is an individual process and affects our individual physical and psychological well-being. This study attempted to analyse how university reforms were experienced by academic staff. It is framed by Self-Determination Theory, according to which there are three basic psychological needs that affect all people: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I conducted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) to gain insight into participants' experiences during the period of 4 years, 2014-2018. The participants came from two academic staff communities of the same institution. The data collection methods were observations, diary notes, and interviews. The data were analysed according IPA. The results reveal the important role of the sense of community and belongingness between academic peers and colleagues within broader academic staff communities. In fact, it may influence the individual's experience of reforms in both directions—peaceful confidence or alarming apprehension. The findings suggest that lack of autonomy about one's work life increases negative attitudes towards the reforms and alludes to emotion-focused coping strategies, whilst autonomy supportive and open working environment supports coping with reforms in an academic institution.

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Introduction

Higher education in Europe has witnessed numerous reforms—from the Bologna Declaration in 1999 at an international level to still different ongoing policy changes at a national level, as well as to changes at the organizational level at a particular university. Nevertheless, the reforms followed by the implementation of the Bologna Declaration do not carry a common denominator; each country has its own motives and goals (cf., Annala & Mäkinen, 2017; Krücken, 2014; Seeber et al., 2015). The implementation of the so-called Bologna system, 3 years of B.A. studies followed by 2 years of M.A. studies, has initiated different reforms according to the specifications of each country. In 2014-2015, the Estonian state-funded public universities underwent reforms in higher education at a national level. B.A. level education became free at state-funded universities; students were accepted to universities based on their academic results. Before the reform, students had two options: to study for free when their secondary school academic results and national examination results were at a high academic level, or in the case of a lower academic record, they had a chance to study by paying for university tuition. As a result of the reforms, there is no longer an option to pay for one's higher education if academic grades were not high enough to study for free. This decision had a direct impact on universities' financial management; the previous income generated by

tuition fees were no longer available, whilst the budget provided by the state remained the same, thus university had to reorganise its financial principles.

Consequently, alongside the reforms regarding students, many academic institutions were affected by thorough changes in curricula, while others were combined or shut down altogether. This situation resulted in the reorganization of academic positions, either by cancelling employment contracts or by offering an alternative position. The changes involved both academic and non-academic staff. Changing and unpredictable conditions sowed doubts and feelings of uncertainty. Yet, within one institution, these changes were perceived differently. Some felt betrayed and bitter, whilst for others, changes were part of normal development, and even new career perspectives became realistic.

This paper aims to discuss namely the different perspectives of these reforms perceived in one institution. Changes and reforms at universities occur constantly worldwide, thus gaining deeper insight into academic staff's experiences and coping strategies will inform both the stakeholders and employees responsible for carrying out these changes to better plan and organise the reforms in order to reduce the tension and support the employees during the ongoing changes. The IPA study, consisting of observations and interviews before and after the reforms, offers multiple angles to comprehend and illustrate the issue.

Literature Review

The following aims to introduce the main concepts of this study and culminates with the research question. Self-Determination Theory will elucidate human basic psychological needs that might be affected during changes and reforms; Coping Strategies will illustrate how people react to changes and Organizational Commitment will explain the attachment to the institution.

Self-Determination Theory

According to Self-Determination Theory, also known as SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), all individuals are affected by the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory also suggests that an individual's well-being is affected by social conditions and engagement with the surrounding environment. Failure to satisfy any of the psychological needs will negatively affect well-being. Need satisfaction at a "between-person" level predicts life satisfaction or life setting, such as work, while need satisfaction at a "within-person" level predicts optimal functioning (e.g., Beckmann et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2015; Neubauer & Voss, 2018; Ryan et al., 2010).

SDT advocates that the effectiveness of changes and reforms taking place in organizations depends on the extent to which people who are involved in the process understand and internalize the importance of the reforms (Deci, 2009). Administrators who are responsible for reforms must internalize the structure of reforms before implementing them. Within SDT, "structure" is the aspect of social environment that explains the relationship between behavior and consequences. Depending on the institution, structure can be either autonomy-supportive or suppressive. The former facilitates the implementation of reforms, whilst the latter engenders insecurity and instability. People will be engaged and committed to reforms when they feel that reform structures are meaningful and support their psychological needs. To minimize job-related pressure that reforms provoke, it is essential to satisfy the psychological needs (Martinek, 2019). However, in order to facilitate change, there are certain ways that would be perceived as autonomy-supportive and less threatening, such as a recommendation to leaders to provide employees with a clear and honest rationale, to offer some choice and opportunities to be involved in implementing changes, and to acknowledge

people's feelings (Deci et al., 1994; Gagné et al., 2000). Encouraging and supporting autonomy is universally important and has a positive impact regardless the context. For example, a study conducted in a health facility demonstrates that the more employees enjoy support for their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the more motivated they are to implement changes and the higher their job satisfaction and well-being will become; moreover, patients whose need for autonomy and relatedness is supported are more motivated to participate in their treatment (Lynch et al., 2005). Similarly, a study outside SDT framework, by Thies and Kordts-Freudinger (2019), which explored the factors promoting positive emotions among German universities' academic staff, confirms that increased autonomy enhances the feeling of enjoyment and higher job satisfaction. However, Diya Dou and her colleagues (2017) shed light on situations in which teachers' perceptions about autonomy may be influenced by school management policy and where being autonomous may create tensions and problems. It is equally important to acknowledge the need for a positive sense of relatedness, as it is not only important for the teachers' own psychological needs, but furthermore, it affects their students' learning outcome (Marshik et al., 2017; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017).

Organizational Commitment

According to Allen and Meyer (1996) if employees identify with the organization and are emotionally attached to and involved in that organization, it can be referred to as full commitment. Gagné and colleagues (2000) found in their longitudinal study in a STD context that when employees are provided with an explanation about the need for changes, when their feelings are acknowledged, and when some choice to implement the changes are given, it leads to increased acceptance of change in a work organization and strengthens their affective commitment to the organization. Kuvaas (2009) conducted a survey among public employees about the relationships between job autonomy and work performance and concluded having autonomy for deciding one's job and relatedness, as well as cooperation with colleagues, strengthens the enjoyment of work. In addition, the supervisor's support for autonomy, competence, and development promotes intrinsic motivation, which leads to better work performance. On the contrary, extrinsic work goals undermine flexibility concerning the job and its working conditions, as it was suggested in a study, framed by STD, exploring unemployed individual's work values (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). In addition, organizational commitment plays an important role in the studies focusing on leadership, school climate, and organizational justice (cf., Li, et al., 2018; Sarikaya & Erdoga, 2016).

Coping with Reforms

Promoting changes in an organization is never an easy task, as people tend to resist them because of the fear of the unknown. When the objective of reforms is not shared adequately, there is a danger that the focus of the action will remain vague for the participating staff. Coping with changes is an individual process, and it affects individual physical and psychological well-being. Personal cognitive and behavioral strategies determine why some people become more perturbed and stressed than others. Lazarus (1993) proposes a distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. The former refers to task-oriented efforts to solve the problem if perceived solvable by the person, whilst the latter refers to self-preoccupation and emotional reactions and is perceived rather as unsolvable. Lazarus adds a third dimension, such as avoidance-orientation to both the above-mentioned strategies. These coping strategies are relevant in the context of a working environment. People who express an emotion-oriented coping strategy towards problems show increased levels of depression; in contrast, a task-oriented coping strategy promotes feelings of self-efficacy in the

work setting, whilst an avoidance-oriented coping strategy is mostly associated with health issues (Lazarus, 1993; Sears et al., 2000).

In educational settings coping strategies have been studied from different angles, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, demonstrating how complex this phenomenon is. In the context of this paper it is worthwhile to mention two kinds of studies, those from the teachers' and educational institution's perspectives. For example, studies about teachers coping with tensions in professional identity formation (Pillen et al., 2013), with occupational stress and burnout (Antoniou et al., 2013; Austin et al., 2005; Chan, 1998; Sharplin et al., 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015), with stress (Cancio et al., 2018), and with classroom management (Romi et al., 2013) have been in the focus. Studies about the educational institution have concentrated on relationships between coping strategies and academics' occupational stress (Mark & Smith, 2012), on coping strategies and study councellers' burnout (Li et al., 2009), and on coping with crisis (Cole et al., 2013). Although there is a myriad of studies exploring relationships between academics' perceptions of their well-being, work life and anxiety (cf., Kinman, 2016), coping with organizational changes or reforms has not gained attention.

Research Questions

Thus, the present study aims to contribute to this field and shed light on university teachers' coping strategies through the lens of SDT and organizational commitment by exploring qualitatively how they experienced the reforms. While most research on coping strategies are quantitative surveys; there are, however, qualitative studies too. For example, Lindqvist and colleagues (2019) used interviews to follow a grounded theory framework, Sharplin together with her colleagues (2011) analyzed interviews using an IPA method (Smith et al., 2009), and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) searched for thematic patterns in the interviews. For this study, the following research questions were asked: Which coping strategies emerged during the university reforms and which experiences developed into positive and meaningful experiences that supported academic staff's professional development. The study sits within IPA methodology in order to gather and make sense of experiential data.

The researcher of this study was inspired by the challenge to explore how her colleagues experienced the inevitable university reforms and changes. There were signals from the beginning of the reforms that within one university the academic staff perceived these reforms and the rationale behind it differently. The researcher was familiar to all participants—some of them had been her co-fellows over 15 years and some less than 5 years. Common professional background and history helped to establish a trustful relationship and conduct this IPA study. The researcher refrained from adding her point of view and aimed to reflect the experiences of her colleagues.

Methods

This study sits within the phenomenological approach, examining individuals' perceptions of the world through their lived experiences (Patton, 2002). It seeks to unveil meanings within specific social contexts, examining "multiple dimensions of a problem or issue in all of its complexity" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). This study's gaze is directed at the lived experiences of those who have endured university reforms which have directly changed their positions and duties within their professional lives.

To explore the effect of time on academic staff's experiences related to their coping strategies, IPA methodology was required. It examined the experiences of two teacher communities in the same educational institution. Their experiences were examined through observations and in-depth interviews during a period of 4 years. While much of the research in

SDT is quantitative and primarily based on self-reported data, I chose a qualitative approach because an IPA study enabled me to gain a fuller picture of the close-up reality of the participants' experiences and feelings over time and allowed for assertions at the organizational and psycho-social levels (Cohen et al., 2007).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) was conducted to understand the experiences they made sense of. Central to the IPA method is that participants in the studies share the experience of a particular phenomenon. In the current study, all the participants were working in the same university while the reforms were taking place. The IPA method utilizes three theoretical perspectives from the qualitative research paradigm: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenological perspective aims to describe the lived experience of participants, the hermeneutic perspective to interpret these experiences, and the idiographic perspective to understand the experiences and interpretations of participants. Participants' experiences may be compared and contrasted and theoretical generalisations made. IPA utilizes a double hermeneutic, involving two levels of interpretation: one by the researcher and the other by the person who is living the experience (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was selected because the research questions focused on participants' personal experiences. I sought to gather information about academic staff's coping strategies and how they might change over time and whether the basic psychological needs and organizational commitment played a role in forming lived experiences into meaningful experiences. IPA has been described as a method that can reveal what would it be like to walk in participants' shoes (Smith et al., 2009). The use of IPA to analyze data from in-depth interviews facilitates the researcher to identify and interpret a richer, more in-depth description and interpretation of emerging themes from participants.

Participants

Before the reforms set forth there were two teacher communities in two different departments in the same Estonian university who shared the same teaching field and the same disciplines but had different managers. The first community consisted of 18 teachers and the second community of 16 teachers. As one of the results of the reforms, these two teacher communities were to be combined into one collective and this plan was presumably the biggest source of stress and concerns as it was directly going to change the professional lives of both teacher communities.

Background of the 1st Teacher Community - TC1

At the beginning of the study the average teaching experience in this group in higher education was 20 years and the average teaching experience within this community was 6 years. Two thirds of the teachers were female. The highest academic degree that all the teachers of this community held was a master's degree. This community had almost no cooperation nor joint projects with other departments at the university; they were led by one manager whose primary task was managing.

Background of the 2nd Teacher Community – TC2

The average teaching experience in this group in higher education was 17 years and the average teaching experience within this community was 14 years. Half of the teachers were male. One third of the teachers held doctoral degrees whereas the rest had a master's degree. This community interacted actively with colleagues of other departments and disciplines. In

addition, they had interdisciplinary joint research projects in progress. They were led by a manager whose primary task was namely academic work and not managerial duties.

The participants were chosen according to IPA method. IPA typically involves a small number of participants because the idiographic perspective requires in-depth study of individuals (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the participants for this study were purposively sampled from a larger group of both teacher communities: their age, gender, working experience, and educational background (completed M.A. or Ph.D.) were taken into account in order to obtain rich and diverse data. As a result, 10 teachers from TC1 and 9 teachers from TC2 were invited as participants and were asked to indicate if they were willing to participate in interviews about their experiences. Altogether, 11 participants: 6 teachers belonging to TC1 (4 females and 2 males) and 5 teachers from TC2 (3 females and 2 males) indicated their willingness to participate.

In order to protect the participants and maintain their anonymity, so no single participant would be recognizable no further detail about their demographic background is provided.

At the time of this study an Institutional Ethics Committee of the university was not yet established. The research followed the Estonian guideline on research ethics and integrity which would respect the principles of the European Code of Conduct (ALLEA, 2017).

Data Collection

IPA requires “rich data” gained by enabling participants to freely share their experiences with the researcher (Smith et al., 2009). The data for the current study includes observational notes, field notes, and interviews. The data collection is explained in detail in the following section.

Firstly, semi-structured participant observations at official meetings of both TC1 and TC2 were carried out. These were the meetings I participated in and during which I was integrated into the activities at the site. The observations started as soon as news about the foreseen reforms were made public in 2014, that is, at the beginning of the reforms, while two teacher communities were still separate, and continued until the end of this study, in 2018. The purpose of the observations was to gather background information: attitudes and reactions of both teacher communities towards the reforms. Thus, I recorded verbatim the significant phrases by the participants expressing their attitudes and emotions. These phrases can be called “descriptive notes” or “observational notes” as used in this paper (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, “Can anybody please explain to me, why they [those responsible for reforms] want to get rid of us?” (TC1-A, irritated and sarcastic). This information would help to interpret the participants’ experiences. The observations during the meetings of both TC1 and TC2 involved the whole population of both teacher communities (i.e., the voices of all the teachers were equally important). Their reactions and comments were part of their experiences. Even though the whole population was not invited as participants for the interviews, it was important to understand how the participants communicated and interrelated with the other members of their communities. I informed the participants about an ongoing study and that their comments (made anonymous) were highly appreciated in light of the study. I also added that in case of objection or any discomfort the participant’s comments would be removed from my observational notes.

Secondly, a systematic recording of field notes into a research diary was executed simultaneously during unofficial gatherings. The notes included information about participants’ reactions, comments, and concerns, strictly and only related to the reforms. For example, “TC1-A: feels annoyed, repeatedly expresses discontent with the reforms.” The purpose of the field notes (during the unofficial gatherings) was identical to the observation

notes (during the official meetings): to collect complementary evidence. I considered it very important to understand which reactions and comments reflected the participants' inner convictions and beliefs and which ones were simply passing emotions. Both, observation and field notes helped to situate participants' interviews into context. The observation and field notes were used during the process of data analysis as complementary material about each participant to better interpret the interview transcripts. Comments from unofficial gatherings are not included as illustrative material in this paper, because they do not reveal new information, but only confirm the participants' convictions. The unofficial comments repeated, in a paraphrased manner, what the participants expressed during the interviews.

Thirdly, semi-structured interviews with participants of TC1 and TC2 were carried out. The same sample was interviewed during and after the reforms: the interviews took place during the implementation of the reforms, and again 4 years later. I created a framework of questions so that all participants were steered towards responses that addressed the research question. The semi-structured interview included open-ended questions about each participant's experiences during and after the reforms. The central purpose of the interviews was to understand how the participants first experienced the news about coming reforms and the initial phase of it, and then, how they recalled their experiences in hindsight. During the interviews, they were asked to consider how they have grappled with the reforms, and what kind of reactions and emotions they had lived through. Direct questions referring to SDT (about autonomy, competence, and relatedness) or coping strategies were avoided in order not to skew the results by guiding participants towards expected topics. For example the following question types were used (adapted from Smith et al., 2009):

Descriptive: Could you tell me what kind of changes related to the reforms are you experiencing already? (during the reform) / What kind of changes have affected your everyday work? (after the reform)

Narrative: How do you understand the need for reforms? (during the reform) / What has changed for you in your professional life after the reforms came into effect? (after the reform)

Evaluative: How do you feel about the reform? (during the reform) / How do you feel about the reforms now, after a while? (after the reform)

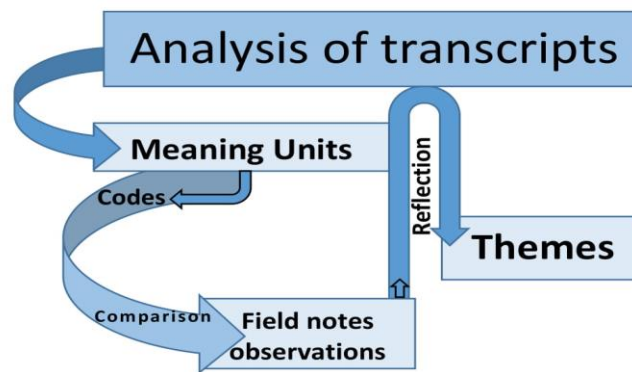
Data collection resulted in establishing rich information about each participant through observations, field notes, and interviews that served as a method of triangulation to ensure the validity by comparing several sources of information from the same participant and identifying points of divergence or similarity (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analyses

At the outset, comments from the observational notes, field notes diary, and interview transcripts were thoroughly read several times to encounter issue-relevant utterances that would convey the experiences, both positive and negative ones from the participants. Firstly, issue-relevant utterances, gathered during the observations, unofficial meetings, and interviews, were chunked into meaning units (i.e., small sections of text two or three lines long for detailed coding; Langdridge, 2007). Secondly, the meaning units were given codes according to the main ideas they were carrying, thus highlighting the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, that is, how they experienced university reforms. The purpose of this interpretative coding was to help the researcher dwell in the data, to get to know the participant and to

prioritise the phenomenon. Thirdly, the codes of the data of three different sources were then compared to each other in order to detect possible contradictions within the account and the subject positioning (participants' construction of their account). During this phase I verified whether the participants' own utterances and comments were consistent during the meetings, unofficial gatherings, and interviews. In addition, it served as triangulation and confirmed that the content behind the codes were similar in all the data from three sources. Fourthly, reflecting on initial coding and going back to the transcript data as the richest data source followed. This process yielded to the creation of a detailed picture of the participant's lived experience of university reforms and resulted in identifying themes. The themes were the words or phrases that carried a broader meaning, for example, the codes "Bitterness" and "Anxiety" led to the theme "Negative emotions and worries." Subsequently, the themes were compared to the keywords emerging from the theoretical concepts: SDT, coping strategies, and organizational commitment. For example, the theme "Sense of community" aligns with "Relatedness" from SDT. The following Figure 1 illustrates the process of data analysis.

Figure 1
Data Analysis Process



Rigour

At this point, the researcher should encompass co-researchers if possible to ensure the trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peer checking by another researcher familiar with SDT was carried out. In addition, both researchers were also experienced in conducting interviews and in qualitative data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data were anonymized first. The co-researcher engaged in independent initial coding of the transcripts of the interviews of one participant from both teacher communities, conducted before the reforms; then suggested a set of themes which were then discussed together. Consensus was reached via discussion. The issue of credibility is increased in IPA by the interpretative element of the analysis. The two researchers' (the author and the peer-researcher) interpretations and themes determined the final themes. Reliability for themes and interpretation of the themes was decided by consensus. For example, I proposed the codes "Learned helplessness," "Bitterness," and "Anxiety" under the theme "Emotions and worries." The peer-researcher proposed the codes "Incapacity," "Resentment," and "Anxiety about future" under the theme "Negative feelings." The final codes and themes, as a result of the consensus, are displayed in Table 1. The table shows examples of how meaning units were first coded (after the consensus) and how the themes evolved.

Quotes used in the Results section were translated into English for the purpose of making them available to the reader. They were originally in the participants' mother tongue.

Table 1
Examples of Coding

Meaning units	Codes	Themes	Theoretical concept
I am so lost sometimes. I still don't know who to turn to if I have a question and that upsets me. How should I know? I feel that nobody protects our rights. [in a sad and upset tone] (TC1)	Learned helplessness	Negative emotions and worries	Emotion-focused coping strategy
Should I ask for help? Who? I want to know clearly who is responsible for what matters and not to go and ask around about it. [in an irritated tone] (TC1)	Bitterness/resentment		
I am really scared as I don't know if my position will stay.(TC1)	Anxiety about future		
We have seen many reforms, it's tiring, and certainly one day there will be new ones, but we'll adapt, as always. I don't remember the last reforms affected me at all. (TC2)	Adapting to the situation	Adjustment	Task-oriented coping strategies
New people running the university means always new reforms. There's nothing new about it. In the end we do what we are supposed to do. Of course, it's disturbing though.(TC2)	Accepting the changes		
We [our teacher community] are doing so well, they [university management] just want to destroy something [our community] that functions so well. (TC1)	"We" spirit	Sense of Community	Relatedness (SDT)
I am glad I'll have new colleagues now. We only say 'Hello' to each other, but I actually don't know them the way I do my current colleagues who actually are also friends outside the workplace.(TC2)	Friendship		
How am I supposed to receive all the information if there is no one leading us in a proper way?(TC1)	Leadership style	Autonomy suppression	Autonomy (SDT)
I hope that one day I can decide more about my work, that these reforms would give me a sort of freedom to say 'No' to certain proposals. (TC1)	Limited choice		
I've always enjoyed the supportive and encouraging atmosphere we have. All the ideas have been welcomed and we are trusted. (TC2)	Trust and support	Autonomy support	
We know well how to teach; we are professionals who manage in different situations. Students' feedback has proven it. And the trainings we follow every year. (TC1)	Sense of collective efficacy	Competence	SDT
I will continue what I've been doing so far. Surely no one will interfere with my teaching. After all this is my expertise. (TC2)	Expertise		
I feel now what academic freedom means. I love being trusted as much as I love different opportunities for collaboration with other colleagues. (TC1)	Affective commitment	Enjoyment of work	Organizational commitment
I am actually happy that we have more people in our department now. It's easier now, for example, to supervise students' theses as before the teachers of ... [TC1] did not supervise at all, we [TC2] had all the workload. (TC2)	Matter of fairness	Organizational justice	
I am happy about the new possibilities I have now for my professional development, such as in-service training for my personal needs. (TC1)	Professional development	Work performance	

Results

This study sought to understand academic staff's experiences and coping strategies during university reforms. This section is structured into two parts: experiences before and after the reforms had taken place and both parts are based on themes that emerged from analysis.

Before the Reforms

Negative Emotions and Worries Versus Adjustment

The two teacher communities show a clear distinction between their reactions to reforms through the expression of their emotions. During the first informative meetings about the reforms, TC1 expressed only negative emotions conveying often feelings of resentment and bitterness.

We [our teacher community] are doing so well, they [university management] just want to destroy something [our community] that functions so well. (TC1-A)

No coherent reasons for reforms from the point of view of TC1 were provided at the beginning of the reform planning, and the explications stayed at a rather emotional level, which may explain the anxiety and fear. In addition, at the beginning of the reforms, and particularly after a quite long period of stability at the university, emotional reactions could be expected, hence, the coping strategy itself is not yet discernibly recognizable. Over the course of time, during the following regular weekly meetings, pessimistic feelings towards the reforms deepened and emerged constantly. The more TC1 discussed it the more there were tones of anxiety, anger, and bitterness. TC1 were united as a team with close interpersonal relationships led by their manager, and the group had very little collaboration with colleagues from other departments. As one interviewee said, they only knew the faces of other colleagues in the building but did not know them personally.

On the contrary, the initial reactions by TC2 were noticeably calmer. They had fewer meetings introducing the reforms, and all the meetings were open to people of different departments, which allowed more perspectives and interpretations for the rationale of the reforms:

I don't know, probably these reforms are necessary for someone for some reasons, I don't feel that myself, but there must be some kind of an explanation. (TC2-L)

In addition, TC2 had several ongoing projects and some shared courses with colleagues from other departments, which displayed their openness towards the university environment, whilst TC1 were a rather closed community. The attitudes of TC2 revealed their previous experiences with different reforms at the university, thus their comments convey certain fatigue towards reforms, yet they show readiness to accustom themselves with imminent changes. Another noticeable distinction between TC1 and TC2 was their rate of participation at meetings. The teachers belonging to TC1 highlighted that it was always near 100% as it was compulsory to be present, whilst according to the teachers of TC2 it was less than 50%, as only those interested in the changes and reforms participated. The rest of the teachers of TC2 did not seem to care or as one interviewee said, they had nothing to fear regarding their jobs and thus they may not have considered it important to their professional life at that moment.

Competence, Sense of Community, Autonomy Support, and Autonomy Suppression

Both communities expressed a sense of competence when discussing reforms. However, they exhibited it in a contrasting way. TC1 expressed their positive perceptions by always using the first-person plural (“we,” “our,” “us”), thus identifying their professionalism through their community:

Our team is very professional, students’ feedback is high, we are the best. (TC1-E)

The way teachers of TC1 verbalized their opinions implies that they had a strong sense of collective efficacy, as well as a strong sense of community within their own small collectivity. Whilst TC2 mostly utilized individualistic expressions, such as the first person singular (“I,” “me,” “my”):

I hope that after the reforms I’ll have the same courses I have now as I have elaborated them myself and I know how to improve them further. (TC2-O)

Several phenomena play an important role in relatedness—being part of a team, the cooperation with colleagues, and the feeling of belonging. TC1 expressed a strong sense of community by being one team, nonetheless, cooperation with colleagues remained somewhat lower. Whilst TC2 did not consider themselves as one team, they still developed strong friendships among themselves, and, at the same time, they collaborated with different people across the university.

The sense of autonomy could be noticed by interpreting both communities’ reactions to the reforms. The small, close community of TC1 perceived autonomy suppression rather than autonomy support:

If our department is going to be reorganized will there be a new manager who will tell us what and when to do like we are told now? (TC1-E)

These comments reflect that TC1 were used to receiving instructions and not having to make decisions for many years and now meant stepping outside one’s comfort zone. One participant of TC1 expressed her concern about who was going to hear their voices after the reforms, shows her habit of being used to a spokesperson instead of taking the initiative and speaking for herself. According to another participant from TC1, it was difficult to reject certain projects, because decisions were not always made by consensus, nor were they always democratic, meaning that individual aspects were not taken into account. Quite the opposite, the participants of TC2 described their manager as someone who never performed as a typical manager, but, rather, as a co-fellow who practiced an autonomy supportive leading style by never giving specific instructions, instead suggesting new ideas and welcoming a discussion about possible changes if necessary. Major decisions were discussed thoroughly collectively, sometimes leaving some issues unanswered if there were too many different opinions in order to return to the topic after the colleagues have had some time to reflect. Each teacher of TC2 took the responsibility for their specific work and duties.

To conclude, during the meetings before the reforms actually were enforced an explicit difference between the coping strategies of two teacher communities existed. Negative attitudes led to emotion-focused coping strategies, while reasonable discussions and argumentations led to task-oriented coping strategies. The satisfaction of basic psychological

needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness) play an essential role in forming a sense of collective efficacy which can in turn affect the coping strategies.

After the Reforms

Negative Emotions and Worries Versus Adjustment

Four years after the implementation of the reforms, emotional responses were still prevailing in most interviews with the participants of TC1, which suggests that some of them had still not overcome the consequences of the reforms nor were they willing to adapt to the actual situation:

I still don't understand why it was necessary to close down our department. We are doing the same work, nothing has changed. Oh yes, we had to move from one office to another, which we don't like at all. Such changes! (TC1-A)

The above-cited example as well as some other ideas and thoughts, revealed during the interviews, were alike, though the interviews were carried out individually. This suggests some teachers of TC1 might still discuss the reforms, furthermore, these discussions involve negative feelings as above-mentioned utterance allow to assume and may refer to a still existing collective sense of community. They miss their old working environment, including their offices, as during the reorganisations most offices were renovated for both teaching and administrative staff and some teachers were relocated then to new rooms. Furthermore, some participants expressed a certain extent of helplessness which may have roots in their previous work experience when they were one small rather closed department with specific and clear duties.

I am so lost sometimes. I still don't know who to turn to if I have a question and that upsets me. How should I know? I feel that nobody protects our rights. [in a sad and upset tone] (TC1-E)

At the beginning of the reforms, TC2 displayed concerns towards practical issues, such as questions over curricula and timetables, rather than distress about the changes. The interview questions regarding the reforms, that had taken place four years before, were taken with a slight surprise as if it had been almost forgotten implying that the reforms had not touched them deeply:

What reforms? [...] yes, I remember, but there isn't much to talk about it. I don't think it affected me in any way, I do the same things I did before. (TC2-N)

Enjoyment of Work and Work Performance, and Organizational Justice

A few teachers of TC1 have managed to recover from the perceived confusion created by the reforms. "Academic freedom" as a positive outcome of the reforms was mentioned and a satisfaction with possibilities for professional development was expressed:

I feel now what academic freedom means. I love being trusted as much as I love different opportunities for collaboration with other colleagues. (TC1-C)

I miss our team. We are now in different rooms; we barely see each other. On the other hand, I am happy about the new possibilities I have now for my professional development, such as in-service training for my personal needs. (TC1-B)

Teachers of TC2 did not show traces of frustration, instead, a sense of stability and routine work life was perceptible. There is also evidence that TC2 perceived a certain degree of organizational justice after the reforms, although the opposite perception never emerged explicitly before the reforms.

I am actually happy that we have more people in our department now. It's easier now, for example, to supervise students' theses as before the teachers of ... [TC1] did not supervise at all, we [TC2] had all the workload. (TC2-M)

To conclude, a strong sense of collective community exists as long as there are members to nurture it. In case of a continuous negative mindset or feelings towards the reforms, the coping strategies remain emotions-focused and do not alleviate the adjustment to the new situation. Organizational commitment can, however, mitigate the strong feelings. On the contrary, if task-oriented coping strategies are present at the beginning of the reforms, adapting to new changes is smooth and quicker.

Discussion

This study has offered a qualitative insight into how academic faculty members experience the reforms at their institution. This study is particularly dedicated to understanding how institutional reforms are perceived and experienced by two different communities of the same institution yet sharing similar academic profile and similar disciplines. Clear differences in experiencing reforms and coping patterns were shown.

When people are given a rationale for changes at their workplace it will facilitate the implementation process (Deci, 2009; Gagné et al., 2000). The findings of this study indicate that TC1 struggled to understand the need for the reforms, and they found it hard to accept them because they were not involved in open discussions. TC1 felt stressed about possible reorganizations that might change their routine, as well as about the idea of not having a representative or manager they could count on. Another facilitating factor regarding changes and reforms is autonomy supportive environment (Deci, 2009). TC1 did not have much choice about their work and nor were they accustomed to making choices about their own work, instead they relied on their manager. A sense of autonomy of the rather closed teacher community was perceived more in a suppressive way. They held feelings of bitterness and anxiety towards the changes even after the reforms had come into force. Thus, negative feelings that are not dealt with hinder the adjustment process even after the implementation of the reforms. This constant dissatisfaction with the work life aligns with Thies and Kordts-Freudinger (2019) who argue that when academic staff perceive autonomy in their work life they become more satisfied with their job. However, TC1 felt competent and experienced good collegial relationships within their own community, but they were not ready for changes. They had strong inner relationships that had been promoted through numerous meetings and extramural activities. In addition, the teachers of TC1 were not used to a collaborative relationship with colleagues outside their department. This situation, however, resulted in a strong sense of community. It can be argued that the lack of openness and external cooperation may have strengthened their sense of collective belongingness. Relying on a representative to take care of the small TC1 was, presumably, one of the key aspects in creating also such a

strong sense of collective efficacy, as many tasks were achieved collectively, preceded and followed by a joint discussion where no one had to have the sole responsibility. These aspects, in turn, may explain the vulnerability of a closed community, where continuous heated reactions, which can easily appear as received information, may be subjective and biased, whilst the access to outside information and external opinions is limited. Most participants of TC1 identified themselves with their community and not with the whole institution, thus it can be claimed, according to Allen and Meyer (1996), that teachers of TC1 were not fully committed to the organization (i.e., university). Kuvaas (2009) suggests that autonomy about job-related matters and cooperative relationships with colleagues lead to enjoyment of work. Although the cooperation with colleagues was present, apparently autonomy plays an important role in this combination and the case of TC1 shows dissatisfaction with work as the evidence reveal that their pessimistic attitudes towards the reforms deepened and emerged constantly. The findings of this study confirm that lack of autonomy increases negative attitudes towards the reforms and alludes to emotion-focused coping strategies, not usually considered as a constructive way to adapt to changes (Lazarus, 1993).

On the contrary, the attitudes of TC2 revealed certain inevitability but no negativity towards the reforms at the university, yet they showed readiness to accustom themselves with imminent changes, therefore their reactions could be interpreted as task oriented-feelings that support their adjustment and self-efficacy (Sears et al., 2000). This assumption is supported by the post-reform evidence that the participants continued their everyday work without reflecting on past reforms. In addition, TC2 always referred to themselves as employees of the institution and not of their particular department, they also had collaborative relationships with colleagues from other departments. Thus, their attitudes yield to being fully engaged to the university, aligning with Kuvaas (2009). The findings regarding TC2 confirm that autonomy supportive and open working environment supports coping with reforms in an academic institution.

Implications

The focus of this study was on university teachers' meaningful experiences about reforms. The study revealed that the working climate, or, more precisely, the atmosphere of a particular teacher community, plays a crucial role in the employees' coping patterns related to changes and reforms. One of the most surprising discoveries of this study was to observe over the course of 4 years how demanding and challenging it is for a unified group of people to experience and cope with changes if not professionally supported. The more the possibility for communication and interaction is limited to a certain group of people, the more they are exposed to a biased point of view. In addition, a meaningful reflection on ongoing processes is disconcerted. This result falls in line with the study conducted by Annala and Mäkinen (2017). In a long-term perspective, autonomy suppression might diminish the aptitude to take new initiatives and to have the courage to make decisions regarding work. However, both are important abilities when working in higher education. Promoting cooperation and supporting teachers' autonomy yields to better coping strategies.

The findings provide knowledge about academic staff's experiences about institutional reforms and changes and are the most useful to those responsible for carrying out the reforms. With enriched understandings of academic staff's coping strategies, teachers' psychological needs can be met and supported to alleviate possible stress in order to avoid a decrease in job satisfaction.

While this study contributes to the understanding about the lived experiences of academic staff with university reforms, I recognize there are some limitations. The experiences of the participants of this study may not be as relatable to other academic institutions going through changes or reforms. Differences in the satisfaction of academic staff's psychological

needs and commitment to organisation may result in different coping strategies. Future research could focus on support mechanisms during the institutional reforms.

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