How Performance Management may lead to Stress
A group-level analysis of performance measurement and employees’ stress

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Abstract
This article explores two issues of central importance among employees in the public sector: performance indicators and stress. It begins by considering the pros and cons of performing a group-based comparison, then goes on to present survey data from three groups of employees. A context-sensitive approach is advocated for the analysis, allowing for combinations of contributing factors. While stress in one group may be best explained using a classical model that looks at workload, clear indicators, and lack of control over the work situation, this does not tell the whole story. The group emerging as the most vulnerable to stress was found to comprise employees who experience freedom in their work, are highly engaged in their activities and who set high standards for themselves. This group felt that performance indicators did not help to create clarity about what was expected of them at work.

1. Introduction
Over the last couple of years, a prominent subject of debate particularly in the public sector has been performance management and its effects on employees. According to critics, it is difficult to convert core public services into quantitative operational indicators. As a result, there is a risk that performance indicators with low validity become goals in themselves, potentially distorting the work of public professionals (van Thiel & Leeuw 2002; Radin 2006). The various measurements are seen as a sign of mistrust towards public employees (which could promote further mistrust); and it is argued that public employees spend too much time documenting their performance – to the point that their focus is taken away from direct services to citizens (Radin 2006; Van Dooren et al. 2010).

On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine modern management not being based on systematic data about performance. Advocates of performance management argue that performance information could even prove beneficial for employees (Fletcher & Williams 1996; Van Dooren et al. 2010; Walker et al. 2012). Well-defined expectations about performance could potentially remove confusion about what is expected of employees and pave the way for greater autonomy as they
decide how to achieve the required results (Moynihan 2008). The documentation of results could also play a role in organizational development initiatives (O’Toole & Meier 2011; Boyne 2012).

Performance management has been widely discussed as an ideal typical management approach. However, knowledge is still limited about how much of their daily work groups of employees spend on performance measurement, just as we have very little knowledge about the mechanisms and contextual conditions influencing how performance measurements work in a specific situation.

It is a complex field. Performance indicators are criticized on the basis that numbers themselves don’t really play a role apart from the organizational context in which they function. At the same time, performance measurement systems change frequently; it is also difficult to isolate their effects from the way management and employees perceive and use them. Indicators are difficult to separate from perceptions of the purpose and value of a given public activity too. The public service may be the subject of disagreement politically, for example. These are just some of the circumstances that make it difficult or meaningless to look at performance measurement as a general and abstract phenomenon (Dahler-Larsen 2014a).

The aim of this article is to help increase knowledge on two fronts concerning performance management in the Danish public sector:

- First, our aim is to assess how much time and mental energy is being allocated to performance measurement documentation, according to public employees.
- Secondly, we want to explore the relationships between performance management and employee stress – by determining whether the group who seems to be experiencing the most stress is also that for which performance measurements appear to be the most extensive. It must be taken into account how each group perceives performance measurements and their impact. Our aim, then, is to develop hypotheses about the different conditions of the groups in order to understand how performance management works in different contexts.

Analyses take place at a social system level rather than at an individual level (Hofstede et al. 1993:487). To this end we use average scores enabling us to compare the groups for discussion in this article.

2. Studying the psychosocial work environment

Traditionally, research into the work environment has been largely concerned with identifying objective factors that cause stress. In the physiological work environment such factors have a physical presence. The rise in knowledge-based work in recent years, however, with its emphasis on flexibility and individualization in organizational tasks, structures and cultures, has changed the focus to the psychosocial work environment. This has created challenges for researchers.
For example, it is less clear how to identify and measure evidence of psychosocial strain – because such factors are less objectively measurable, and depend on how they are perceived culturally, collegially and individually. From the individual’s perspective, management, organization and collegial relations constitute important parts of the psychosocial work environment. It is people, then, that to a large extent make up and influence someone’s psychosocial work environment. This demands a new approach to research into the work environment, in which the traditional spatial and physiological paradigm of »the individual« exposed to »strains« in »the environment« is replaced by other more systemic ways of thinking (Allvin & Aronsson 2003; Sørensen et al. 2012; Pihl-Thingvad 2014a).

Increased individualism within the workforce poses a further challenge. As greater diversity and flexibility is introduced into the way people work, it becomes more difficult to view working conditions as something generic, structured and predictable. Rather, individuals are seen to have more influence over and responsibility for their own levels of stress. This has led to a rise in stress-avoidance or stress-busting initiatives that focus on the individual’s mind and inner wellbeing. Politically, the emphasis then moves away from common, structural solutions, as some researchers have observed (Bovbjerg 2011: 66). Emphasis of the work environment in research terminology remains popular however (Allvin & Aronsson 2003), despite the emphasis having shifted from the physiological and tangible to the psychosocial. In this spirit, our project seeks to identify organizational factors and work conditions that may influence and cause stress for particular types of work groups.

Two models in particular have dominated stress research to date. Karasek’s (1979) demand-control (DC) model sees stress as the result of a situation in which the employees are met with high demands but lack control over the means through which they are able to deliver on these demands. This situation can be improved with social support from management or colleagues (Johnson and Hall 1988; Karasek og Theorell 1990). Siegrist’s (Siegrist 1996; 2012; Siegrist et al. 2004) effort-reward-imbalance (ERI) model, meanwhile, sees stress as the result of an imbalance between the employees’ efforts and the rewards they receive. The imbalance is worsened if the employee is overcommitted to the job. This model is subject to structural conditions at the workplace and the labor market, in that job insecurity may be considered a missing reward for example. However, the model is general and we know very little about what is considered »effort« and »reward« to an individual in a specific situation. Similarly the optimum amount of commitment may be difficult to determine until it’s too late.

Empirical research around either of these two models typically involves survey-based studies. These studies – like our own – rely on subjective reporting of perceived strains. Additionally, psychosocial work environment research is often subject to endogeneity – ie factors affect each other mutually, making it difficult to separate cause and effect. For example, certain factors might cause stress, and once a person has reached a stressed state they will experience and report these
factors as seeming much more stressful. These complexities aside, it is still relevant to identify what is considered stressful at a group level.

3. Important notes about methodology

The results discussed below are derived from the study, *The Significance of Performance Indicators for the Psychosocial Work Environment of Public Employees*, financed by The Danish Working Environment Research Fund. The research was conducted as a mixed-methods study. A more thoroughly discussion of the methods can be found in Dahler-Larsen (2014b).

The results in this article are based primarily on the input of 2941 survey respondents from three groups – language teachers, upper secondary school teachers, and employment consultants. The three groups were chosen on the basis that the represented employees carry out typical modern welfare state tasks and are potentially candidates for stress. Previous studies have shown that teachers especially are at risk of stress, as are people who are regularly confronted with the personal and emotional problems of the people they deal with every day (NFA: 2012; Pugliesi 1999) – for example those working with the unemployed, or with students undergoing tests and exams. The three groups were also chosen because they are exposed to diverse performance measurement systems.

Across our three groups we expected that interesting and controversial issues would surface in relation to performance indicators. At job centers, employees experience intense public control in the form of statistical indicators and benchmarking between centers. The employment arena receives much public and political attention; statistically it is one of the most scrutinized policy areas of the entire public sector in Denmark. Indicators showing employment progress, and in getting particular groups of unemployed people into work, are published on a website – www.jobindsats.dk – making it possible to compare the relative performance of job centers on an ongoing basis.

The employment sector is unusual compared to many other public sector departments in that consultants may have come from a range of different educational and employment backgrounds – for example social worker, teacher or other profession. In the teaching profession, by contrast, employees are likely to have followed a more predictable path to their careers.

In recent years, upper secondary schools have experienced a strong control-based reorientation of an otherwise classic professionalized area. These schools are financially dependent on students’ enrolment and course-completion rates – ie on the performance of students, which in turn reflects their classroom experience and the quality of teaching. To this end, new assessment mechanisms have been applied in the form of student satisfaction surveys and publication of average grade performance. The professional credentials of upper secondary teachers come from academic degrees, although individual disciplines may range from humanities, social science and business to the natural sciences.
For language instructors teaching Danish to immigrants, the financial situation of their schools is almost exclusively based on the number of students completing each module against an elaborate national system of module tests corresponding to approximately 20 levels of competence in Danish. Language teachers may have different educational backgrounds, typically having completed supplementary education after being teachers, academics or something else.

Our survey went out to all language teachers providing services to immigrants in Denmark. In the case of the upper secondary school teachers, we selected a finite number of schools to target. Similarly for the employment consultants, we selected a fixed number of job centers for our research. For further details on our research methods, see Dahler-Larsen and Pihl-Thingvad (2014b).

3.1. Operationalization of our main variables

»Performance Measurements« are difficult to define – both theoretically, and practically. While any practical operationalization of our theoretical term is debatable, we found the Danish description »resultatmålinger« more fitting for our empirical work. Even so, there was the problem that specific actors in a given context do not identify a certain empirical phenomenon as »resultatmåling«, even though a theorist would do – or vice versa.

We chose not to ask only about specific forms of performance measurement in each organization. This is because we could not predict all practical use of language about such phenomena in advance, and we could not discount the possibility that many other forms would be present in each individual organization besides those which we as survey designers were able to identify. Although we acquainted ourselves with the national and regional performance measurement systems relevant for each group (through document studies and interviews), it would have been impossible for us to have predicted local systems present within each organization. At the same time we wanted a generic, common term so that wording alone would not create systematic differences between the respondents. In practice, we offered the respondents the following guidelines in the survey:

By »performance measurement« (in Danish »resultatmåling«) we mean a numerical calculation of the work by each individual employee – or group, or section, or the entire organization – that is done continually or periodically, and which can be documented or reported upwards in the organization. We term this performance measurement, irrespective of whether the registration takes place as a part of daily work, in separate documents, or electronically.

Performance measurements include, for example, the number of cases processed, the number of consultations or specific results for citizens, users, clients or patients. Performance measurements might also include time spent on specific tasks.
With this broad definition in mind, please provide your opinion on performance measurements in your organization.

We also gave examples of performance indicators as inspiration for each group – such as tests for the language teachers. While this compromise between theoretical definition and everyday language constituted our operational definition of «resultatmåling», we will refer to both »performance indicators« and »performance measurement« in the text that follows.

The concept of stress is much debated in the research, as stress is considered both something emotional, a mental condition, and an external strain or disease (Bovbjerg 2011; Buch et al. 2009:23; Bloch 2001:34; Agervold 1998). Thus, there is both a lack of clarity and a certain complexity surrounding the concept of stress (Allvin et al. 2006:135). This article aligns its definition with the traditional perception of stress in the classic work environment research. »Work-related stress occurs when the demands of the working environment exceed the employee’s ability to fulfill (or cope with) these« (Research on Work-related Stress. Det Europæiske Arbejdsmiljøagentur, 1999. Luxembourg 2000). For our purposes, then, stress is not considered a disease but a general response to specific incidents or working conditions, which over a longer period of time might result in both a physiological and psychosocial reaction in an individual (see e.g. Allvin et al. 2006:146).

The stress level of employees was measured by a number of standardized questions from COPSOQ (The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire II medium size). The following questions were used to measure stress:

These questions relate to how you have felt over the last 4 weeks.

- How often have you had problems relaxing?
- How often have you felt irritable?
- How often have you felt tense?
- How often have you felt stressed?
(Response options: All the time, A large part of the time, Part of the time, A small part of the time, Not at all).

The responses were indexed and converted to a scale ranging from 1 to 100. The scale has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.877.

3.2 The level of our analyses
In the following analyses we compare groups, not individuals – specifically the average statistical scores of the three groups. We do not ignore that a certain level of stress in a group may be serious for the individuals who perceive it, even if the average level of stress appears relatively low in the inter-group comparison. For additional analyses of the relationship between performance measurements and stress on an individual, within-group level, see Dahler-Larsen and Pihl-Thingvad (2014a).
The groups manifest many relative differences. If we examine one difference at a time, we risk overestimating or misrepresenting this factor’s influence. Yet we do not offer results based on statistical correlations. It is important to emphasize that we only compare whole groups, and that we offer hypotheses to explain the differences in stress levels between them. Our reasoning is that a given combination of factors in a group can lead to further findings, and sometimes a more comprehensive understanding, than can be achieved by focusing on one factor at a time.

Furthermore, our group-based analyses do not allow us to exclude factors that might induce stress at an individual level. Variables to explain differences in stress between two individuals within a group (for example gender, age etc.) might be different from variables that explain differences between groups. The same variables may play different roles at different levels of analysis (Hofstede et al. 1993: 487). There is scope then for us – and for other researchers – to find alternative or additional explanatory factors and mechanisms in subsequent analyses.

The comparison between groups is appropriate however, as it encourages consideration of structural conditions and contextual circumstances that would remain invisible when comparing individuals within a group. It is also appropriate to look for combinations of factors that characterize groups, rather than isolating individual variables. Most stress models operate with combinations of factors. Here, we will develop hypotheses about which combinations of factors might help us understand why the three groups do not exhibit the same levels of stress. Of course the three groups are not definitely representative of all public employees. However it is still valuable to analyze the groups in relation to the two aims of this article described above.

4. Results
We have already acknowledged that performance indicators rarely work in isolation. With this in mind, we will start by describing the three groups with respect to their perceived stress levels, followed by their general work situations – to provide background knowledge about how performance measurement is experienced in each of the three contexts. On that basis, we will finally look at how performance indicators may contribute to stress. The logic of the text follows the logic of table 1.
Table 1. Stress level, working conditions, and various aspects of performance indicators in three groups of employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Language teachers</th>
<th>Upper secondary school teachers</th>
<th>Employment consultants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRESS LEVEL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress level (0-100)</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>31.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKING CONDITIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most stress-inducing factor of the work environment</td>
<td>»My own work standards«</td>
<td>»My own work standards«</td>
<td>»High work pace«</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you decide the content of your work yourself?</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have to deal with other people’s personal problems in your work?</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>4.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m willing to work a bit beyond what I’m paid for if it helps achieve professional quality in my work</td>
<td>3.55*</td>
<td>3.73*</td>
<td>3.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you think about performance indicators?</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>2.84*</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance indicators are stressful</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.58*</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often does management react negatively to performance measurements?</td>
<td>2.64*</td>
<td>2.79*</td>
<td>3.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance indicators do not cover the core elements of my work</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance indicators lead to a one-sided focus</td>
<td>3.76*</td>
<td>3.48*</td>
<td>3.59*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New forms of performance measurement are being implemented constantly</td>
<td>2.87*</td>
<td>3.21*</td>
<td>3.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance measurement implies a lack of trust in my ability to do my work properly</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.90*</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My professional group is able to influence how performance measurement is carried out at my workplace</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance measurement supports development initiatives at work</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.86*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance measurement creates clarity about what we are required to do</td>
<td>3.33*</td>
<td>2.88*</td>
<td>3.62*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Unless indicated otherwise, the average scores are measured on a Likert scale, where 5 equals »strongly agree« or »very often«. The Stress measure is based on an index ranging from 0-100.

* This group differs significantly from the other two in a t-test.

The table shows the average stress level in each group on a scale of 1 to 100. It is significantly lower among employment consultants compared to the other groups, whereas language teachers and upper secondary school teachers have a higher stress level but do not differ significantly from each other.

The next section of the table shows some key characteristics of the working conditions of the groups. Respondents had the opportunity to assess the degree to which a number of different factors in their work were considered stressful. Upper secondary school teachers and language teachers indicated that their own
standards for performance – i.e. their own demands of themselves – were the most stressful factor in their work. For employment consultants, pace of work was deemed to be the most stressful factor.

Employment consultants differ from the other two groups in that they have far less influence on the content of their own work. As part of a larger organization bound by a number of managerial targets and legislative regulations, they do not enjoy the freedom of planning their own daily work as is the case with a teacher. All other things being equal, a traditional stress model such as the demand-control model predicts that high demands combined with the lack of freedom to meet them will result in stress. Here, however, consultants’ overall self-reported stress level is lower than that exhibited by the other groups.

Exposure to other people’s personal problems has also been cited as a source of stress in many public-sector jobs (Sørensen et al. 2007). All three groups in this study have a relatively high score on this variable. Language teachers often find themselves faced with the social and personal problems of immigrants. Upper secondary teachers may have to cope with the insecurities of young people – those on the verge of dropping out of school, or worried about not achieving the grades they need to pursue the higher education path or career of their dreams. Meanwhile employment consultants report, to a (significantly) higher degree, that they too have to relate to clients’ personal problems. Even so, as a group they are less stressed than the other groups.

As a measure of the groups’ levels of professional commitment, we asked respondents to rate how far they are willing to work more than paid for in the interests of achieving professional quality in their work. Here, the upper secondary school teachers scored highest, followed by the language teachers.

Summing up; a relatively high pace of work, lack of freedom to plan and organize their own work, and exposure to the personal problems of others were found to characterize the least stressed of our three employee groups, rather than the most stressed as might be expected for example in the DC model. The most stressed groups, on the other hand, was characterized by high personal standards and high levels of professional commitment. This observation is consistent with findings in recent stress research (Buch et al. 2009; Allvin et al. 2006) which has found that, among knowledge workers in particular, the combination of a high degree of autonomy and high personal standards can trigger stress. If high work standards experienced as stress factors represent over-commitment, these findings are also consistent with the ERI model.

If this short summary may suffice as an overview of some of the general factors in the work situation of each of the groups, we can go on to look more specifically at performance indicators.
Upper secondary school teachers devote considerably less time thinking about performance measurements than the two other groups. They also experience stress from performance measurement to a significantly lower degree than the two other groups. On the other hand, for language teachers and employment consultants, institutionalized performance measurements are very prominent in daily practice, both in terms of how much they think about indicators and how stressful they perceive these indicators to be.

We invited all respondents to rate a wide variety of potential stressful factors. The highest ranking factor is work pace (for employment consultants) and personal work standards (among both groups of teachers), as shown in the table. However, given the formulation of the question, all groups place performance measurement after such factors as work pace and their own standards as triggers of stress (the full analysis is presented in Dahler-Larsen & Pihl-Thingvad 2014a). In other words, there is no support for the claim that performance measurement in itself should generally constitute a predominant problem compared to other stress factors. If performance indicators lead to stress, our interest should be directed more towards their interaction with specific contexts and mechanisms.

Management most often reacts negatively to performance measurement among employment consultants, less so with upper secondary school teachers and least with language teachers.

That performance measurement does not cover core work tasks, and leads to a one-sided focus on the points being measured, are views reported by employment consultants and language teachers respectively. In neither case is this view particularly pronounced for upper secondary school teachers, however.

The frequency with which new performance measurements are introduced is also a point of discussion. Here employment consultants score highest, and the upper secondary school teachers in between, whereas language teachers have operated with the same basic module system for some years and thus report a lower frequency of change.

In seeking to determine whether performance indicators might be instrumental in explaining stress, we must take into account the following at this point. The most stressed groups do not experience the most common negative management reactions to performance measurement; nor do they succumb to the most negative distorting effects of performance measurements, nor the most frequent changes to performance measurement systems.

On the other hand, we need to consider the following variables. Upper secondary school teachers believe that performance measurements indicate a lack of trust – to a larger extent than the other groups. This could be explained logically in terms of self-awareness resulting from their educational background, their high profes-
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The question as to whether performance measurements help to create **clarity** reveals the largest differences between the groups in the entire table. Upper secondary school teachers register the lowest score. In their world, there are several performance indicators at play (pay-per-pupil systems, drop-out rates, grades and student satisfaction surveys). In addition, the conflict between performance measurements and the employee’s own professional values are strongest among upper secondary school teachers. They all have an academic background and, of our three groups, have the highest professional involvement and the most intense conflict between their own personal standards and their actual work practice (results are reported in Dahler-Larsen & Pihl-Thingvad 2014a). Given this background, they might also have the highest degree of resistance to the idea that performance indicators define a legitimate aim of their work. Among employment consultants, on the other hand, we find that performance measurements not only create more clarity over what is expected of them, but also that these indicators lead to development initiatives at the workplace and that employees have a say in how performance measurements are used. These three positive conditions of performance measurements seem to suggest – at least in terms of this group comparison – that the practice of performance management has at least some advantageous functions for employment consultants.

If performance measurements are to help explain that the two groups of teachers are the most stressed of the three groups in the study, the mechanisms are **not** negative management reactions or performance measurements’ distortion of work. The most likely mechanisms, we hypothesize based on the data, are rather connected to the feeling of distrust, the sense of a lack of influence in the professional group, and the fact that performance measurements do not appear to create clarity nor help to promote development initiatives. All this can be understood in the light of these employees’ own sense of professionalism. A key role in this story is also played by the teachers’ own work standards, ie. their personal expectations of themselves and of the work they do. A source of tension may lie in a discrepancy between their own standards and the lack of perceived meaningfulness and clarity in the performance indicators. For a further discussion of the relationship between employees’ own work standards and performance measurements within groups, see Pihl-Thingvad (2014b). In any case, this combination of factors is our best candidate for an explanation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The three groups of employees in our study did not experience performance measurements as the most stressful factor. Typically, »own standards« and »work pace« are perceived as more stressful.

The group that spends most time thinking about performance measurements daily is not the most stressed group. Nor is the lack of the freedom in determin-
ing tasks, or the need to confront the personal problems of others, particularly pronounced in the most stressed group. If performance measurements contribute to stress in the most affected groups, it is not connected to a high level of negative reaction from management, nor to any distortion of their work due to performance measurement. Quite contrary, for example, upper secondary school teachers, a highly stressed group, is characterized by feelings of distrust, of a lack of professional influence, and a significant sense that performance measurements do not provide clarity around work expectations. The professional involvement and high personal standards of the teachers might contribute to bringing these mechanisms into play. These findings are consistent with the ERI model. Although you experience freedom in your work, the work might still be stressful when you are very engaged in it, set high standards for yourself (which are then experienced as stressful), and furthermore feel exposed to performance indicators that are seen to be based on distrust and which do not create clarity. The lack of clarity is probably due to both lack of correlation between several indicators (grades, student satisfaction, and drop out) as well as a mismatch between some of these indicators and the professionalism and self-awareness of the teachers.

The differences observed between the groups should not be used as the basis for arguing that individuals in less stressed groups are not stressed. With the least stressed group, another configuration might contribute to stress (although of course at a lower, overall level for the entire group). Fast work pace, lack of job freedom, clients’ personal problems and management’s negative reactions to performance measurement results might, for example, lead to stress for employment consultants, just as the frequent introduction of new performance indicators might.

The analysis in this article is tentative. Substantiated hypotheses have been developed on the basis of the table and inspired by theories about sources of stress. A direct and isolated impact of performance measurements upon stress is hardly decisive, as it is lowest in the most stress-affected group(s), and we have other – and better – explanations for the stress being experienced here. This being the case, we have offered configurations of conditions that can be used for understanding how performance measurements work in different contexts at a group level.

Our findings have both managerial and organizational implications. A general, positive prescription for performance measurement does not seem helpful. An understanding of different combinations of contributors is warranted (see also Radin 2006).

For instance, one configuration includes a preoccupation with performance measurements, negative management reaction to the measures, fast work pace and limited professional involvement, but at the same time clarity of demands. This combination of conditions seems to be associated with a certain level of stress. A higher level of stress is found in another configuration characterized by high levels of professional involvement, high personal standards, and the feeling of dis-
trust and uncertainty connected to performance measurement. Factors such as the experience of distrust, involvement of professional groups in the preparation of how to measure performance, as well as organizational development on the basis of performance measurements, seem to be the obvious focus areas – if the aim is to promote the use of performance indicators managerially and organizationally, without simultaneously increasing stress.

In theoretical terms, we are suggesting a situation-specific and contextually-oriented approach to performance management. While the first situation described above (found among employment consultants), may resemble the work conditions described in the demand-control model, the characteristics of the latter situation (for upper secondary school teachers) lies closer to the ERI model.

Our findings about the ability of performance indicators to create clarity (which differs starkly across different contexts) are interesting. Even though all groups widely agree with the statement that performance indicators contribute to a one-sided focus in their work, the groups differ considerably in their assessment of whether performance measurements create clarity around what is required of them. Qualitative data from the overall mixed-methods study (interviews with language teachers) indicates that while the module test system evidently has pros and cons, its ability to create clarity about the demands on employees is ultimately a positive factor. Even though such a performance measurement system seems to colonize the definition of sound professional work, it also removes confusion about what is expected (Dahler-Larsen 2014c).

Increasing clarity in this way, then, would seem to be a sensible management strategy. This might involve removing ambiguity from a multitude of interacting or conflicting systems of performance measurement, to bring managerial messages into line with monitoring systems and to keep the frequency of change in performance measurement systems under control. However, all this is easier said than done and, to an extent, controversial. Ambiguity in performance management systems won’t be removed by clearer management signals alone. Many performance measurement systems are defined in ways and on levels – for example a national level – which are beyond the reach of the individual organization or individual manager. Furthermore, uncertainty may be a sign of tension within a particular combination of conditions – including professionalism, self-awareness and the individual’s own standards of performance for example. A debate about professional values is often also a debate on how to handle broader democratic issues in society.

An important overarching dilemma emerges too – from the observation that those professional groups which set high standards for themselves are also those that experience performance indicators as a source of distrust and uncertainty. A management dilemma, then, is whether to help these employees lower their own standards, with a view to increasing the acceptability of performance indicators. A more productive option might be to establish a dialogue between management
and employees about how individuals’ own standards are best understood and calibrated under particular conditions. Although in a modernized, individualistic culture, personal expectations and standards are perceived to be an issue only for the individual concerned, they are organizationally and sociologically the result of social processes (Pihl-Thingvad 2014b).

Our analyses were designed to stimulate debate. In this article we suggested a situation-specific and contextual approach to performance measurements and stress, since different models are appropriate to understanding different work conditions. Beyond that, we have pointed to the importance of two special issues that deserve attention. One is the role of clarity in performance management, the other the role of the employee’s own standards – neither of which should be considered easy to manage. In our overarching research project (Dahler-Larsen and Pihl-Thingvad 2014a), we explore differences between individuals in our groups, and elaborate further on the mechanisms discussed above.

Literature
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