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ORIGINAL PAPER

An Integrative Approach to Emotional Agency at Work

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Abstract
The concept of agency has recently emerged as a fruitful construct in understanding organizational practices and development. However, agency has tended so far to be seen as a rational and goal-oriented phenomenon, with little attention paid to the role of emotions within it. There is thus a need for theoretical discussion on both agency and emotions in organizations, and also on how the two phenomena are related. This paper aims to introduce an elaborated conceptualization of emotional agency at work, based on recent theories on professional agency and emotions in organizational contexts. We suggest that emotional agency can be understood as the competence to perceive, understand, and take into account one's own emotions and those of others, and further to influence emotions within organizational practices, actions, and interactions. Our paper provides an integrative definition of emotional agency at work (EAW), usable in future research. It also elaborates how emotional agency may function within organizations and their development practices.

Keywords Emotions · Emotional agency · Organizational learning · Professional agency · Work

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Introduction

In recent turbulent times, questions of how to flourish or simply survive have come to the fore in many organizations. Organizations have been forced to change, and personnel have been required to learn continuously during their careers. In recognition of these organizational and individual challenges, *professional agency* has emerged as a prominent construct for understanding and enhancing change and learning in organizations (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Billett & Noble, 2017; Bishop, 2017; Goller & Paloniemi, 2022; Goller et al., 2019; Hakanurmi et al., 2021; Tynjälä, 2013; Wallin et al., 2022). From an individual perspective, the importance of agency has been highlighted, insofar as individuals are required to learn continuously, take on new responsibilities, construct their professional identities and career pathways, be innovative, and find novel solutions to everyday challenges at work (e.g. Vähäsantanen et al., 2017; Lovett et al., 2015; Smith, 2011). For organizations professional agency has been seen as representing transformative power in efforts to develop and change organizational practices (e.g. Hökkä et al., 2017a; Imants & Van der Wall, 2020; Kerosuo, 2017).

So far, professional agency has largely been understood in terms of rational and goal-oriented actions directed at professional identity negotiations, and at developing work practices and cultures in organizations (cf. Hökkä et al., 2017b; Goller & Paloniemi, 2017, 2022). Only a few studies have sought to understand how professional agency is resourced, constrained, and influenced by *emotions* within organizations (e.g. Hökkä et al., 2019a). Moreover, there have not been many attempts to elaborate the nuances of the emotions that enter into employees' agentic actions. Overall, there is a need for new perspectives on the associations between agency and emotions as they affect organizations and individuals.

Recent research in organizational settings has shown that emotions form an extremely powerful force in the workplace, organizational behaviour, work performance, and leadership (e.g. Ashkanasy, 2015; Yamamoto et al., 2014; Zietsma et al., 2019), with emotions playing an important role for example in decision making, management, and change (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; George & Dane, 2016; Huy et al., 2014; Vuori & Huy, 2015). It has been claimed that it is erroneous to study *any* aspect of organizational behaviour without addressing the underlying emotional processes (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). In the field of professional learning and development, too, researchers have paid increased attention to emotions and learning at work (see Hökkä et al., 2020). In particular, current research has highlighted the role of emotions in learning from errors and problems (e.g. Rausch et al., 2015; 2017), team learning (Watzek & Mulder, 2019), and professional identity negotiations (e.g. Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). For example, a study by Rausch et al. (2017) found that errors at work, especially if public in nature, provoke negative emotions and negative emotions in turn provoke emotion-focused coping. This can result in learning if errors are analysed in-depth instead of quick error correction. Recently, the emotional dimension of learning has also been emphasized in higher and vocational education (Tynjälä et al., 2022).

Although emotions have been recognized as relevant in organizations, and in the learning and development occurring within them, they have also been seen as vague in

nature (Ashkanasy, 2003). In addition, there have been very many conceptualizations and approaches in efforts to elaborate emotions. In this paper, our guiding principle is to see emotions as having both individual (subjective) and sociocultural (contextual and situational) components (e.g. Butler & Gross, 2009; Zembylas, 2007). We understand emotions as *subjective experiences*, with different people experiencing different emotions in varying ranges. Emotions are further resourced and restricted by *sociocultural practices* and they can evoke both individual and social responses.

Based on these considerations, our purpose is to introduce a conceptualization of *emotional agency at work* (EAW), with recourse to recent theories on professional agency and emotions in the workplace. To date, a number of scholars have introduced some tentative conceptualizations of emotional agency (e.g. Hökkä et al., 2019a; Weenink & Spaargaren, 2016). However, these have failed to offer a well-defined and comprehensive description of the phenomenon. For example, they lack an exact definition of emotion, or of how emotional agency is related to other (allied) concepts such as emotional intelligence and emotional regulation. This paper aims to widen the discussion by offering an integrative definition of emotional agency at work – one that can be used in research, and to support organizational learning and development practices. We thus suggest that emotional agency at work refers to the *competence* to perceive, understand and take into account emotions in oneself and others, and further to *influence* emotions within organizational practices, actions, and interactions, thus exhibiting the potential to support organizational learning and development.

Below, we first present tentative perspectives on the relationships between professional agency and emotions, with reference to current discussions on emotional agency. We also overview the main strengths and limitations of existing conceptualizations of emotional agency. We then present some research on professional agency and emotions that seems particularly relevant in advancing a more elaborated conceptualization of emotional agency. We define our understanding of (i) *professional agency*, in line with the subject-centred sociocultural approach (SCSC) as agentic actions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen et al., 2019), and of (ii) *emotions*, applying a holistic perspective on emotion (Butler & Gross, 2009; Zembylas, 2007) and a competence-oriented approach to the phenomenon (e.g. Brasseur et al., 2013; Grobler, 2014; Kotsou et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2016). Finally, the paper presents an integrative conceptualization of emotional agency at work, utilizing relevant theoretical viewpoints on agency and emotions at work, and highlighting the implications of emotional agency for organizations, with regard to their learning and development practices.

Tentative Previous Openings on Emotional Agency

In recent literature on professional agency the treatment of emotions has been limited. Only a few recent studies have touched on this topic, including suggestions concerning the reciprocal relationship between professional agency and emotions (Hökkä et al., 2017b, 2019a; Ursin et al., 2020; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015). These studies have shown that, on the one hand, various pleasant or unpleasant emotions can *boost or hinder* the enactment of professional agency as it relates to transforma-

tions in work and in professional identity. For example, fear can hinder individuals from influencing or transforming shared work practices. On the other hand, a range of emotions can *emerge* from the enactment of professional agency – for example, satisfaction and enthusiasm can arise from meaningful career decisions. Overall, the findings suggest that the enactment of professional agency is not a matter of purely rational actions, but rather something that is strongly imbued with emotions. The studies demonstrate in particular how emotions influence professional agency, highlighting the importance of perceiving, understanding, and utilizing emotions in agentic actions (see also Hakanurmi et al., 2021). However, they do not elaborate how agency (considered as exerting influence) is actually directed at emotions.

In addition, some studies have used the concept of *emotional agency* in considering the relationship between agency and emotions (Hökkä et al., 2019a; Weenink & Spaargaren, 2016). Weenink and Spaargaren (2016) have recognized emotional agency within practice theory, aiming to make more use of emotions in understanding social practice. They see social practices as offering a platform for individuals' emotional engagement and manner of experiencing the world. In particular, emotions indicate what matters to individuals, in terms of how they are energized by the emotions in question. In this sense, such a perspective of emotional agency highlights the effect of emotion *on* agency (rather than vice-versa). It ignores how emotions are themselves influenced *by* agentic actions and competencies.

While Weenink and Spaargaren (2016) discussed emotional agency within practice theory, Hökkä et al. (2019a) have elaborated the construct of emotional agency from the viewpoint of leaders. In their study, which looked at leaders' emotions in enacting professional agency, they noted the strong role of emotions. As a conclusion from this study, they refer to emotional agency as "awareness, understanding and finding a balance between personal emotions and externally set expectations/roles and for acting accordingly in everyday work practices". They build on a subject-centred sociocultural approach to professional agency, with the focus on leaders' agency in respect of identity and relationships. However, this perspective is limited, given its focus on one organizational role, namely that of leaders. In addition, despite the lens of professional agency, it does not highlight the potential of including both behavioural and dispositional perspectives on professional agency.

Krone and Dougherty (2015) introduced the concept of *critical emotional agency*, with the aim of highlighting notions derived from research on emotions and the political aspects that emerge in organizational life. They addressed the need to clarify emotional experiences that empower resistance, with strengthened self-determination and the ability to make a difference within and beyond the margins of formal organizations. Critical emotional agency thus considers how a political perspective can be fostered – one that could support struggles against, for example, unfair treatment or gendered inequalities in organizational arrangements. It includes recognition of what triggers strong emotional responses in organizations, and an understanding of the potential unfairness of arrangements envisaged by the organization. In this sense, critical emotional agency can make a difference in the everyday life of organizational members, and support transformative social change. However, such a perspective could arguably run the risk of overlooking the more mundane practices of organizations.

Table 1 Previous perspectives on emotional agency

Reference	Definition of *Emotional agency*	Definition of *Agency* and *Emotion*	Limitations from the perspective of organizational learning and development
Hökkä et al. 2019a	Emotional agency refers to "awareness, understanding and finding a balance between personal emotions and externally set expectations/roles and for acting accordingly in everyday work practices".	*Agency*: A subject-centred socio-cultural approach. *Emotion*: A socio-cultural approach, considering leaders' emotions.	Over-narrow focus on a specific organizational role (that of leaders). Failure to consider both behavioural and dispositional perspectives on professional agency. Vague connection with individual learning at work
Krone & Dougherty 2015	Critical emotional agency refers to a "morally and politically attentive set of practices that involve acknowledging, processing and acting of emotion in support of transformative social change".	*Agency*: Feminist approach, gendered sense-making. *Emotion*: Emotion as a way to imagine and create a diverse and multi-vocal social world.	Focus on political standpoint. Inattention to mundane, non-political everyday activity at work. No connection to organizational learning and development.
Weenink & Spaargaren 2016	No definition of emotional agency; rather, exploration of the roles of agency and emotions within practice theories, to argue that "agency resides in emotions".	*Agency*: A practice-theoretical approach *Emotion*: Sociological approaches used with practice theories.	No focus on the work / organizational context. No connection to organizational learning and development.

Although previous studies using the term "emotional agency" have indeed contributed to discussion on agency and emotions within organizations, one can suggest that their perspectives have been limited, either due to a narrow focus (Hökkä et al., 2019a; Krone & Dougherty, 2015) or to ending up with a general level of conceptualization, lacking specification of the roles of both competencies and actions (Hökkä et al., 2019a; Weenink & Spaargaren, 2016) in emotional agency (Table 1). Following on from this, there remains a need to conceptualize emotional agency at work in a more nuanced way, utilizing more inclusive theoretical principles applicable to professional agency. Overall, the various suggestions presented so far do not fully cover the notion that agency at work can be conceptualized *both as actions and competencies*, and is related to the *emotions present in organizations*. The previous tentative conceptualizations suffer also from inadequacies in *defining* emotion, often understanding it as something that can be taken for granted or is self-evident.

In seeking a modified perspective on *emotional agency at work*, we may start by elaborating professional agency and its theoretical perspectives in ways that lead to a more advanced understanding of emotional agency. Thereafter, in line with our understanding of professional agency, we shall define how emotion is understood in this paper.

Professional Agency—Complementary Perspectives

In recent years the concept of professional agency has become widely used in learning and working life studies (Hakanurmi et al., 2021; Priestley et al., 2015; Smith, 2011; Imants & Van der Wall, 2020; Tynjälä, 2013). Despite a broadly shared understanding of its importance in working life, professional agency has many differing conceptualizations, some of which we shall elaborate below. In this section, our main aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of professional agency, but specifically to offer enough solid grounding for conceptualizing emotional agency. This is pivotal, since previous conceptualizations of emotional agency appear to lack a clear and/or comprehensive theoretical grounding and focus, in relation to both working life and learning at work.

Professional Agency as Behaviour and as a Competence

In general, professional agency has been seen as pertaining to work-related matters, notably work practices and environments, professional identity, and careers (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, 2014; Billett & Noble 2017; Hakanurmi et al., 2021; Harteis & Goller, 2014; Wallin et al., 2022). Against this widely accepted background, scholars have nevertheless debated the core nature of professional agency from different perspectives. One reason for this may be that the concept of agency was introduced in the social sciences with reference to the rational actions of individuals that can lead to social consequences (Giddens, 1984). By contrast, a traditional starting point in psychology has been to view agency as the human capability to influence one's own life circumstances and life course by one's own actions (Bandura, 2001). Currently, it appears that scholars still explore professional agency mainly as *behavioural action* or else as a *disposition* in work settings (Goller & Paloniemi, 2022; Paloniemi & Goller, 2017). Thus, agency is still mainly understood as (i) something that people *do*, or (ii) something that people *have* (Goller & Harteis, 2017).

An understanding of professional agency through the *behaviour* perspective relates agency to concrete actions, participation in social relationships, making decisions and choices at work, and the kind of influence on work-related matters that makes a significant difference to individuals' professional lives (Paloniemi & Goller, 2017). The behavioural perspective on agency has been emphasized particularly in sociocultural approaches to learning and development in organizations. Within the frames of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), agency is seen as enacted, for example, by explicating new potentials in the activity, envisaging new patterns or models regarding the activity, and taking actions to transform the activity (e.g. Kerosuo 2017). However, as we see it, one aspect that has been largely ignored in CHAT is that of *professional identity*, which encompasses professional values, interests, goals, and career prospects.

In contrast with the CHAT tradition, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) have adopted a s*ubject-centred sociocultural approach* (SCSC) on professional agency. This suggests a definition of professional agency as a practice-based process of action and behaviour; agency is practised when professionals influence, make choices and decisions, and take stances on their work and professional identities. This kind of theoretical under-

standing of professional agency (as a phenomenon directed at one's work and professional identity) has been enriched by evidence on the multidimensional structure of professional agency (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019, 2022). Its main dimensions include (i) *influencing at work* (e.g. making decisions regarding one's own work), (ii) *developing work practices* (e.g. making developmental suggestions regarding collective work practices), and (iii) *negotiating professional identity* (e.g. realizing professional goals in one's work). In a similar way, other studies have emphasized that agency can be manifested in terms of maintaining and developing one's professional identities and ways of working by engaging in identity work and job crafting under the sociocultural and material conditions of the workplace (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Wallin et al., 2022).

The concept of agency has been taken to refer, in particular, to exerting influence in human life (Giddens, 1984) and in work contexts (Eteläpelto, 2017; Paloniemi & Goller, 2017). Such influence and decisions in working life can be directed at one's own work practices and processes, and also to collective working practices, work conditions, and cultures. Professional agency, viewed in terms of actions, has also been assumed to have explanatory power to further our understanding of how and why individuals and communities learn within or for purposes related to professional contexts (Damsa et al., 2017; Goller & Paloniemi, 2022; Wallin et al., 2022).

As indicated above, professional agency at work has mainly been explored as a behavioural and action-based phenomenon, but has also been seen as a *disposition* tending towards influencing and acting at work (see Goller & Paloniemi 2022; Paloniemi & Goller, 2017). This implies that agency enables individuals to exert influence, make choices, and initiate actions that will allow them to take control over their lives and environments (e.g. Harteis & Goller, 2014). Thus, agency is seen as something that *leads* to certain kinds of behaviour, rather than being viewed as the behaviour itself. This perspective highlights individual capacity, dispositions, competencies, and personality as agency at work and in organizations (Paloniemi & Goller, 2017; see also Abdelnour et al., 2017). In line with this, Goller & Harteis (2017) have introduced a model of agency at work. This model suggests that agency at work includes three facets, namely *agency competence, agency beliefs*, and *agency personality* (see also Goller, 2017). In their study, Kreuzer et al. (2017) perceive intrapreneurship competence as a manifestation of agency at work; that is, agency is the competence to think and act in an innovative manner in challenging and varying situations at work.

Professional agency can indeed be understood in different ways. Nevertheless, the differing conceptualizations can be seen as a richness (Eteläpelto, 2017). Here, too, we view the various (behavioural and character-related) perspectives as complementary in efforts to conceptualize *emotional agency at work*. In line with Paloniemi and Goller (2017) we view professional agency as a driving force, encompassing the potential to influence something and to make a difference. To date, influencing has been addressed particularly in relation to work practices and conditions. However, such an influence-related perspective should not, in our view, ignore the pivotal importance of emotions.

Recognizing the Role of the Individual and of Context for Professional Agency

When agency – and especially professional agency – is conceptualized via different traditions, attention is particularly directed towards the subject, the social context, and their relationship. Different theoretical frameworks have offered differing viewpoints on these aspects (see Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In general, there has been prolonged debate on the agency-versus-structure relationship; thus, some scholars see both individual and organizational behaviour as largely a product of social structure, while others emphasize human agency as the power to act in such a way as to make a difference, more or less independently (e.g. Heugens & Lander, 2009).

Nevertheless, at the present time this kind of division is not generally adhered to; rather, the tendency is to recognize a continuum between these poles. For example, Gronn's (2000) understanding of the structure-agency debate focuses on giving both structure and agency the constitutive power they appear to deserve. In a similar way, one branch in conceptions of professional agency emphasizes the role of the active subject as an individual with a particular background in acting, influencing, participating, and learning in work contexts (Billett, 2011; Goller & Billett, 2014; Smith, 2012). If one adopts this kind of understanding with regard to the subject-centred sociocultural approach (SCSC; see e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013), one may be led to acknowledge professional agency as something that is always exercised for certain purposes and within/through certain (historically formed) sociocultural and material circumstances. It is also both constrained and resourced by these circumstances. In addition, professionals' individual backgrounds (including their professional experiences, unique life-narratives, and competencies) are seen as focal resources for agentic actions at work. This approach tends to integrate individual and social perspectives on professional agency. Similarly, in a review of several empirical studies on agency in organizations, Damsa et al. (2017) found that most of the studies highlighted the relational nature of agency at work, that is, agency as forming a bridge between individual and contextual affordances.

By contrast, Priestley et al. (2015) introduced an ecological approach in combining individual and social perspectives on agency. According to this approach, agency is not something that people *possess* (in the manner of a property, capacity, or competence) but rather something that people *do* and *achieve* (see also Biesta et al., 2015). Agency is, in this view, an emergent phenomenon, something that happens through an (always unique) interplay of individual capacity and the social and material conditions under which people act. Having recourse also to a theory of Emirbayer & Mische (1998), this approach sees agency as rooted in past experiences, oriented towards the future, and acted on in the present.

To conclude, professional agency can broadly be seen as something located and achieved in social settings and influenced by both individual and social factors. We believe that such a subject-centred sociocultural understanding is important in elaborating the construct of emotional agency at work.

Emotions in Organizations—Approaches with Different Emphases

The previously dominant idea of organizations as emotionally neutral environments has moved towards an understanding of the pivotal importance of emotions at all levels of organizational behaviour (Ashkanasy, 2015; Gooty et al., 2010; Watzek & Mulder, 2019). One challenge in discussing emotions at work is the wide variety of theoretical and conceptual approaches to defining emotion. However, it is widely agreed that one can see emotions as located at a crossing point between individuals and their circumstances, continuously mediating between contextual changes and the individual's experiences and reactions (Mulligan & Scherer, 2021; Scherer & Moors, 2019). Below, we shall present approaches to emotions that seem particularly relevant in our endeavour to build a foundation for an understanding of emotion at work – and ultimately of emotional agency more broadly.

A Holistic Approach to Understanding Emotion

Broadly speaking, there are two major theoretical approaches, emphasizing either individual or social aspects of emotion. We take the view that this is in fact as a false dichotomy, even if it has been widely applied in the literature on emotion (e.g. Scherer & Ekman, 1984; Zembylas, 2007). We would argue that in fact these should not be understood as exclusive categories; rather, they can be seen as complementary approaches with different emphases. Considered in this way, one can arrive at a more holistic picture of emotions at work.

In *psychological* theories, emotions have primarily been understood as individual experiences, and as essentially intrapsychic phenomena. In psychological theories there is also a long tradition of studying emotions as universally shared human phenomena. Emotions are then understood as separate discrete states, encompassing universally shared basic emotions (Damasio, 1999). For example, a recent survey by Ekman (2016) showed that among the most established researchers on emotion in the field of psychology there is a high agreement on the evidence for five modular emotions (anger, fear, disgust, sadness, happiness), together with universal signals (via face or voice) that allow one to apprehend emotion. However, within psychological theories there is a lively debate on whether emotions should be understood as modular (or discrete) or whether they are dimensional (in terms of valence and arousal) in nature (Feldman-Barrett, 1998; Harmon-Jones et al., 2016). In general, under the broad umbrella of psychological theories, emotions are mainly considered to be individual and subjective states that may lead to different behavioural manifestations and actions, including learning and development (Hommel et al., 2017). Emotions are then seen as physical sensations, the focus being on the psychological aspects of emotion that can be captured and studied decontextually as a trait, state, or ability (e.g. Schutz & DeCuir, 2002).

In the field of workplace research a recent study by Hökkä et al. (2020) reviewed how emotions are understood and related to learning at work. In this study, individual aspects of emotion were found to be dominant. Emotions were mainly understood as subjective and individual emotional experiences, or as responses within workplace practices. In addition, in the reviewed articles the relation between emotions and

learning was mainly elaborated by focusing on the active role of emotions in supporting or hindering learning (Hökkä et al., 2020).

Starting from the 1980s, within the fields of sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and cultural studies, emotions have been understood as *socially and collectively constructed* rather than as private experiences. The main premises of socially oriented views on emotion are that emotional expressions are dependent on learned rules (which are socially and culturally constituted), and that the interpersonal components of emotion should be acknowledged (Barbalet, 2001; Boler & Zembylas, 2016; Zembylas, 2007). Thus, emotions are not just phenomena that exist in the mind; rather, they are entities that shape and structure social interaction and its consequences (Hareli et al., 2008). The central idea is that emotions can also be understood as culturally coded social entities, referring here to socially produced categories and concepts that have the weight of tradition and of everyday experience behind them (cf. Russell, 2003). These are behavioural patterns that are socially accepted in certain contextual situations – for example in how individuals are expected to behave and show emotions in organizational contexts (e.g. meetings, negotiations), or in institutional contexts encompassing personal lives (e.g. weddings, hobbies, etc.). Emotions are then viewed as active processes that shape everyday practices, interactions, and their consequences, including within workplace contexts.

In the field of organization studies a social understanding of emotion is obviously valuable, but it can be seen has having limitations. In general, approaches utilizing a sociologically oriented view of emotion have been criticized as privileging the social over the individual, and as disregarding the feeling side of emotion (Leavitt, 1996). They also tend to disregard the way in which the body mediates emotion in the interplay between psychological and social aspects of emotion (Zembylas, 2007).

As indicated above, both psychologically- and socially-oriented approaches have been criticized as over simplistic in terms of understanding the multifaceted and dynamic nature of emotion. Hence, the psychological approach has been seen as reducing emotion to universal intra-personal feelings, disconnected from social and cultural contexts, and as decontextualizing the interpretation of emotion (e.g. Parkinson, 1995; Schutz & DeCuir, 2002). For its part, the sociological approach has been seen as tending to reduce emotion to words and meanings (Leavitt, 1996). Recently, there have been calls for *holistic models on emotion* that would aim to build an explicit bridge between these approaches and overcome the disadvantages of both, especially in in the field of organizational studies, and in studies on the lives of adults (Butler & Gross, 2009; Zembylas, 2007). In reviewing the social sharing of emotion, Rimé (2009) argues that a purely individualistic view of emotion is untenable, and that emotion opens up processes that support social behaviour, integration, and social cohesion within the larger community. He takes the view that in studying emotion one should address the fact that emotional events provoke both individual and social responses. On the basis of Rimé's central claims, Butler & Gross (2009) argue in favour of a dynamic systems approach that would integrate individual and social levels of analysis in studying adult emotion. This would go beyond a binary view of the individual versus society, with the focus rather on the interactions between these elements.

In seeking to bridge the gap between individual and social approaches there have been attempts to combine the domain of subjective states (individually oriented) with that of sociocultural experiences (socially oriented) in understanding emotion. Zembylas (2007) presented a holistic conceptualization of emotion, emphasizing the need to combine both private and social aspects of emotions. Thus, emotions would not be seen as purely psychological or social; rather, emotions would actually produce the boundaries (psychodynamic and social) that allow the individual and the group to interact. This kind of approach incorporates the notion that across a broad and possibly even universal repertoire of emotions, different people experience emotions in varying ranges. Within this experiencing, sociocultural practices operate as pivotal inhibitors or triggers of certain emotions (Savage, 2004; Zembylas, 2007). This means that the sociocultural circumstances (for example in organizations) form contexts in which different people can experience varying emotions, and that these should be studied within the real-life contexts in question (e.g. Ikävalko et al., 2020; Vuori & Huy, 2015).

To conclude, in this study we draw on both of the main traditions of emotion research (individual and social). Thus, we see emotions as intrapersonal individual experiences that are inhibited and boosted in sociocultural contexts and as entities that provoke both individual and social responses.

Emotions in Organizational Contexts

In the field of organization studies emotions have been studied widely via the concept of *emotional intelligence* (EI), which refers to individuals' ability to monitor feelings and direct their own thinking and actions accordingly (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Along similar lines, emotions have largely been studied via an EI approach in the field of workplace learning (Hökkä et al., 2020). However, the construct of emotional intelligence is highly debated, and has been defined in various ways. A meta-analysis of EI has defined it as the set of abilities (verbal and nonverbal) that enable people to generate, recognize, express, understand, and evaluate their own emotions and those of others in order to guide thinking and actions that can successfully cope with environmental demands and pressures (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004).

Generally, the construct of EI has been defined as including four dimensions, namely the *perception, assimilation, knowledge*, and *management* of emotion (Mayer et al., 1999; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). These four dimensions are seen as hierarchically arranged and inter-related steps; they follow each other starting from the perception of emotion and leading to the management of emotion (Mayer et al., 2001). Much of the psychological tradition has focused on developing the emotional intelligence of individuals, or on studying the links between EI and other work-related phenomena such as job performance (O'Boyle et al., 2011), well-being at work (Karimi et al., 2014), and employability (Nelis et al., 2011). However, the emotional intelligence approach has been heavily criticized on the grounds that it has failed to develop rigorous and valid measurement scales (e.g. Murphy, 2014), and has relegated the notion of emotions to something that is dominated by economic forces and the instrumental reasoning of business and organizations. Emotional intelligence

is said to have attempted to quantify and "tame" emotions, in the services of organizations that would seek to control the ways in which people feel and express their feelings at work, with some feelings being appropriated (e.g. empathy), and others, such as anger, being controlled (Fineman, 2000; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2019). Despite the disagreements concerning the concept of EI (see e.g. Hodzic et al., 2018) or the limitations of the concept in predicting what it might bring about (Grunes et al., 2014), this approach has been extremely useful in deepening our understanding of emotions in organizational contexts.

One of the debates on EI has concerned whether it should be treated as an innate trait or as something that can be taught, learned, and developed (Hodzic et al., 2018). Often, those who emphasize the potential of developing emotional skills use the term *emotional competence* (EC) rather than EI (e.g. Grobler 2014; Wang et al., 2016). These scholars thus underline the idea that emotional competence can indeed be taught and learned, unlike intelligence (Brasseur et al., 2013). For example, the study by Kotsou et al. (2011) indicated that adults' emotional competencies can be trained and improved via EC intervention, and that the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits are constant in nature. Scholars who prefer the concept of emotional competence do indeed regard emotional intelligence as a prerequisite for emotional competence. However, as they see it, to achieve positive results (such as improved job performance or personal development), emotional intelligence, viewed as a foundation, is not enough. For permanent development and results, emotional competence must be developed. In other words, emotional intelligence offers a certain potential (as a trait and via innate factors); however emotional competences are higher abilities which can be developed, and which lead to actions and performances (Goleman, 1998; Vaida & Opre, 2014). Recent developments in discussing emotional competence have brought new approaches to the understanding of emotions and their development at work. Taking a sociocultural lens, Ikävalko et al. (2020) see emotional competence as embedded in workplace practice. This perspective acknowledges the value of enhancing emotional competence at work within given sociocultural conditions, while still building on people's individual abilities to learn and develop with respect to their own emotions, and those of others.

Another widely studied construct in organizational studies – closely related to emotional competence – is that of emotional regulation. The underlying idea of emotion regulation is that individuals' actions – in addition to their emotional states – are shaped by how they regulate their emotions (Gross, 1998). This perspective encompasses the social aspect, via the individual and the individual's abilities to manage socially constructed emotions. It encompasses how people can manage their emotional responses in order to adjust to prevailing circumstances in contextually and socially acceptable ways. The circumstances and sociocultural contexts in question have an effect on emotion regulation and on the regulation strategies that people use, regarding for example how people suppress or inhibit their authentic feelings (e.g. Snyder et al., 2013). A more positive emotion regulation strategy, namely *cognitive reappraisal*, relies on active thinking as a way to reinterpret an emotional event or situation, with the possibility of changing its emotional meaning (Snyder et al., 2013). Studies show that this is a common regulation strategy used, for example, by teachers (Pappa & Hökkä, 2020).

In sum, the concept of emotional competence offers a solid basis to consider our understanding of emotions in the organizational context. We adhere to the idea of emotional competence as enabling individuals to perceive, understand, evaluate, and monitor their own emotions and those of others. In addition, we agree that emotional competence is something that can be learned and developed within organizational contexts.

Theoretical Groundings of Emotional Agency at Work

In this paper our aim has been to broaden the understanding of agency by elaborating its emotional aspects, and to introduce a definition of emotional agency. To this end, we have discussed and defined our understanding of the concepts of professional agency and emotion with a view to laying foundations for our conceptualization of emotional agency. In line with the considerations presented above, we rely on the SCSC approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), understanding professional agency as influencing at work, developing work practices, and negotiating professional identity (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). In the present paper, in the construct of professional agency, the focus is primarily on the dimension of *influencing*. In the case of *emotional agency*, influencing is viewed primarily in terms of emotions – rather than in terms of work practices and professional identity, which are the foci of professional agency.

Note also that in the professional agency literature, agency is mainly manifested in *behaviour* (taking a behavioural perspective, e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Haapasaari et al., 2016), but is understood also as a *competence* which can have emotions as its focus (here taking a disposition perspective, see e.g. Goller, 2017). In line with both of these perspectives, we acknowledge emotional agency as existing in *both actions and competencies* in which the focus is on emotions at work. For its part, (in accordance with the SCSC approach) professional agency is seen as connected to both the *individual* (e.g. via work experiences) and the *social* context (e.g. via power relations, social relations). We thus assume that emotional agency, too, is resourced and limited by individual factors, and also by the social aspects of the work environment.

In theoretical terms, our understanding of *emotion* can be placed within the holistic approach (Butler & Gross, 2009; Rimé, 2009; Zembylas, 2007). This means that we draw on both of the main traditions of emotion research (individual and social), seeing emotions as individual and intrapersonal experiences that are resourced (inhibited/boosted) and acted upon in certain temporal and relational sociocultural contexts. This understanding underlines the utility of seeing emotions through a process focus – in contrast with universalist approaches, whereby emotions would be seen as discrete, structured, and biologically determined (cf. Ekman, 1992). This means that emotions are seen as located within *continuous and dynamic systems of meaningful experiences*, for example within organizational contexts.

In addition to locating our understanding of emotion within the holistic approach, we adhere to the emotional competence approach, which highlights individuals' ability to perceive, understand, and manage both their own and others' emotions (Gerbeth et al., 2021; Goleman, 1998; Grobler, 2014; Hodzic et al., 2018; Vaida & Opre,

2014; Wang et al., 2016). This approach emphasizes that emotions are not (or are not merely) dispositions attached to an inborn ability or trait. Rather, emotional competence can be enhanced and learned throughout one's life course, including throughout adulthood (Grobler, 2014; Kotsou et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2016). This leads to the assumption that emotions also have a behavioural nature, encompassing a range of emotional manifestations; and further, that they act as forces in everyday interactions and communication with other people (Hommel et al., 2017).

The reader may note here our focus on the role of "authentic" emotions, rather than on the expression of emotions that are "managed" via mere performance, or even faked (cf. Hochschild, 1983). In emphasizing authentic emotions we mean that all kinds of emotions, whether pleasant and unpleasant (e.g. joy, happiness, sadness, fear), should be understood and accepted, not suppressed in organizational contexts. It is well known that, for example, organizational changes may cause many kinds of unpleasant emotions (Huy et al., 2014). It is important that individuals, work communities, and leaders should have the understanding and tools to deal with these, rather than that emotions should be silenced, suppressed, or forced into "fake-positivity". At the same time, we do not view authenticity as necessarily consisting, for example, of destructive or bad behaviour at work, triggered by unpleasant emotions. Organizational life demands emotion regulation, and every workplace has its own emotional codes and rules (Barbalet, 2001). In the best case, authentic emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, will be acknowledged by the individual and regulated using constructive strategies, involving for example cognitive change (e.g. Gross, 2015; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). Constructive emotion regulation at work has proven to be connected to individuals' learning behaviour, including within stressful situations bound up with failure (Fang He et al., 2018).

In previous studies the relationship between agency and emotions at work has been studied in manifold ways. Some studies have shown emotions as impacting *on* individual agency (manifested especially as influencing at work or identity negotiation; see e.g. Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011; Hökkä et al., 2019b), while other studies have elaborated how emotions are influenced *by* individual agency (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015; 2020; Darby, 2008). This discussion suggests that the relationship between agency and emotions at work is reciprocal in nature. In this paper, while recognizing the reciprocal nature of emotions and agency at work, we make a theoretical distinction, insofar as we here understand emotional agency as *intentionally influencing emotions* – this being the basis of our conceptualization of emotional agency at work.

To conclude, our theoretical groundings for emotional agency at work can be summarized as follows. Emotional agency at work:

- can most fruitfully be considered via an integrative approach, encompassing both individual and social aspects, implying that emotions are subjective experiences and also socio-culturally resourced and/or hindered,
- is a competence that can be enhanced and learned,
- is intentional, with possibilities to purposefully influence one's own emotions and those of others, as well as emotion-related practices at work,
- can act as a transformative power in organizational learning and development.

The Conceptualization of Emotional Agency at Work

Based on the theoretical groundings set out above, our notion of emotional agency at work underlines its nature as encompassing both *competence* and *influencing*. Viewing emotional agency as *competence* highlights its nature as something that can indeed be learned, rather than as an innate ability or trait (cf. Brasseur et al., 2013; Kotsou, 2011). Competence encompasses perceiving, understanding, and taking into account both one's own emotions at work and those of others. This can mean, for example, noticing and understanding one's own anxiety in stressful situations at work, in such a way that one does not suppress the emotions but deals with them. Thus, one's own emotions could be a source of information, and also a bridge to understanding others' emotions, for example, in tensioned situations. Through understanding and dealing with emotions it is more likely that one will act and behave in a constructive way, even in challenging situations. Emotional competence also allows individuals to become aware of their own emotions connected to their work, recognizing for example what inspires and excites and what stresses and harasses. Thus, emotional agency can act as a resource, offering tools for individuals' learning and development at work.

Emotional agency, in the form of *influencing* emotions, can be focused on one's own subjective emotions or on those of others, and also on the practices, actions, and interactions within the organization. Thus, our understanding of emotional agency stresses behavioural aspects. In stressing the dimension of influencing we do not mean any kind of manipulative or suppressive actions; nor do we see emotional agency as a means to tame emotions for the instrumental workings of business (cf. Fineman, 2000; McKenzie et al., 2019). By influencing, we mean constructive and supportive actions to deal with unpleasant emotions and to enhance pleasant emotions within organizations. Emotional agency at work can thus be manifested through individuals' actions that aim to increase joy and enthusiasm, or to create a supportive atmosphere at work. This conception also underlines emotional agency as having a potentially transformative power in organizational learning and development. It further acknowledges the (often tacit or underestimated) power of emotions in organizations (cf. Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002), plus the importance of understanding this potential (in association with purposeful actions) to enhance organizational development.

All in all, the definition of emotional agency at work can be summarized as follows. *Emotional agency at work means the competence to perceive, understand, and take into account one's own emotions and those of others, and further to influence emotions within organizational practices, actions, and interactions.* Overall, emotional agency can be seen as a multicomponential phenomenon comprising components that operate dynamically at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, amid temporal, relational, and contextual organizational circumstances. As we see it, this definition highlights the importance of studying this phenomenon within real-life circumstances and organizational practices.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we have addressed the relationship between professional agency and emotions in order to arrive at a conceptualization of emotional agency at work, with a view to understanding and enhancing change and learning in organizations. We have argued that previous work using the concept of emotional agency has failed to support this aim (Hökkä et al., 2019a; Krone & Dougherty, 2015; Weenink & Spaargaren, 2016) due to vague definitions of agency and/or emotions, and a narrow focus on the field of organization and workplace learning. We suggest that the theoretical grounds of the subject-centred sociocultural approach to professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), taken together with holistic and competence-oriented perspectives on emotions at work (Butler & Gross, 2009; Goleman, 1998; Grobler et al., 2014; Zembylas, 2007), allow a more fruitful means to define emotional agency at work. This kind of integrative approach gives due weight to the role of emotions in agency, and to the relationship between the individual and social functioning of agency in workplace contexts.

Our work contributes to previous knowledge on professional agency (e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Goller & Paloniemi, 2022) by building on previous conceptualizations and on the subject-centred sociocultural approach, and by focusing on agentic actions towards emotions, which have been neglected so far. The notion of professional agency (as both a behavioural and a dispositional phenomenon) positions emotional agency at work as *active and intentional behaviour focused on the emotional component in organizational life*. It strengthens the notion that emotions, emotional awareness, and emotional competences can be enhanced and learned (Ikävalko et al., 2020; Grobler, 2014; Wang et al., 2016). This definition thus gives due weight to emotional competence, while suggesting that such competence alone may not be sufficient to enhance the flourishing and developing/learning of an organization. There is also a need for *deliberate actions aimed at supporting one's own emotions and those of others*, and at building supportive collective emotional practices. The definition of emotional agency at work also emphasizes that emotions can indeed be influenced through individual action. This in no way conflicts with the sociocultural idea that emotional experiences and expression are based on learned norms and rules, and that these can vary in different circumstances and cultures (Barbalet, 2001; Hareli et al., 2008; Zembylas, 2007).

Furthermore, emotional agency at work can act as a transformative power – bearing in mind that emotions are extremely powerful forces within organizations (Ashkanasy, 2003; Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2003; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Organizational development poses requirements for individual's learning and identity constructions. Moreover, organizational change often includes interventions initiated by others. These processes are imbued with emotional aspects, such as individuals' anxiety, fear, and enthusiasm, which may also serve to facilitate change in organizations (Huy et al., 2014; Vuori & Huy, 2015). In considering how to acknowledge and utilize the power of emotions in organizations, emotional agency at work contributes new possibilities. It offers a tool for understanding, not only emotional competence, but also organizational members' active influencing related to emotions at work during the rapidly changing landscapes of organizations.

In terms of practical implications, the construct of emotional agency at work could lead to new directions in development and leadership practices, for example in efforts to build, collectively, a supportive emotional climate within an organization. In giving attention to emotional competence and to deliberate efforts to influence emotions in a constructive way, leaders can identify needs for educational efforts (e.g. improving their team members' emotional skills) and put more emphasis on empowering people to influence emotions at work. Sometimes, instead of merely buying training for emotional skills, leaders need to look in the mirror and collectively initiate norms of behaviour in their workplace, supporting their members to enact emotional agency at work. This is where the concept of emotional agency suggests avenues for use in practical workplace development. For leaders, an understanding of the premises and power of emotional agency at work can be of value in dealing with, for example, critical incidents (cf. Yamamoto et al., 2014) or employees' emotional stress (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017). When dealing with these kinds of challenging situations in the workplace, leaders can better identify reasons and developmental solutions if they are able to draw attention to competences and actions connected with emotional agency.

From the perspective of professional learning and development, one can usefully explore further the connection between emotional agency and learning at work. Although Tynjälä et al. (2022) suggest that both emotions and agency should be taken into account in elaborating and supporting learning, researchers have mostly addressed professional learning at work from the perspective of *either* emotion *or* professional agency (e.g. Goller & Paloniemi, 2017; 2017). For example, it has been argued that professional agency can advance professional learning, but strengthened agency can also be a consequence of the learning process (Billett, 2011; Tynjälä, 2013). We theoretically approach the connection between (i) emotional agency and (ii) professional learning and development along similar lines, viewing their relationship as mutual and reciprocal.

Several main conclusions emerge from our theorizing in emotional agency. Firstly, emotional agency is something that can be learned and developed through individual and social learning processes. This means, for example, that through learning processes people can cultivate their general understanding of emotions in organizational practices, learn ways to perceive and deal with their own and others' emotions at work, and develop practices to create a positive emotional atmosphere in the workplace. In this way, individual learning can be advanced via emotional agency. However, professional learning takes place on both individual and social levels, including through individual reflection, and also the practising and sharing of experiences (e.g. Tynjälä, 2013). We similarly see that the learning of emotional agency can occur through collective processes, manifested through efforts such as training interventions within workplace communities. Such efforts can enable teams or larger communities in the workplace to collectively create a shared language and/or practices to deal with emotions at work.

Secondly, emotional agency can be recognized as a resource for learning and change within larger organizational settings. In her overview of organizational learning in professional and workplace learning, Tynjälä (2022) noticed that the literature seldom approaches organizational learning explicitly from the perspective of emotions or agency. For their part, Shipton and Sillince (2013) argued that emotion

should be acknowledged when considering how to enable and support the shared construction of new ways of thinking and behaving in the direction pursued by the organization. Although the power of emotions is well known in many organizations, organizational transformations, structural development, or mergers are nevertheless often implemented merely through cognitive reasoning, even though these kinds of changes are known to cause a great deal of organizational resistance and anxiety. Given how challenging this is, we suggest that emotional agency could be adopted and embraced as an *integral aspect of practices supporting change in organizations*, for example, through project management practices applied during the change, or systems to evaluate change implementation. Organizational policies focused on people and on systems supporting these policies (such as competence development or reward systems) might take into account aspects such as the actions of organization members to create a supportive emotional climate in the workplace, and to develop the various aspects of emotional agency. Intentional actions and decisions to interweave emotions as part of organizational structures and practices would enhance both organizational and individual learning and change. This would be pivotal in turbulent times such as the present, which are packed with uncertainty, emotional stress, the problems of integrating remote and hybrid work, and technology anxiety.

In terms of the implications for research, the question of defining emotional agency is related to the methods by which it might be studied. In the present study we have offered a theoretical definition of the relationship between agency and emotion, mentioning also the conceptual distinctions that apply. This, we suggest, will be needed in efforts to analytically develop, study, and validate the structure of emotional agency at work. In the context of the proposed definition of emotional agency, we suggest the following as applicable to future studies. First of all, future studies should test and validate the structure of the suggested definition of emotional agency. This would have to be done in relation to other concepts that are closely allied to emotional agency. For example, future studies should study the relationship between emotional agency and certain established emotion-related concepts, notably *work engagement* (e.g. Schaufeli et al., 2019) and *emotional climate* (e.g. Parke & Seo, 2017). For example, one might well suppose, *a priori*, that emotional agency and work engagement are closely and positively connected, in a similar manner to professional agency and work engagement (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019, 2022). Empirical research could investigate whether emotional agency is a precondition for work engagement, or vice versa. Furthermore, emotional agency could be investigated in relation to professional agency, encompassing at the same time the role of work engagement in this relationship.

In recent years, scholars have also developed *quantitative measurements* to explore agency as a behavioural phenomenon (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019), and as a character-based phenomenon (Goller, 2017). In future there will be a need for both qualitative and quantitative research on emotional agency if the construct is to be developed further. Being connected to everyday practices, ethnographic investigations, too, could offer a fruitful basis for studying the complex and dynamic systems within organizations (Zembylas, 2007). All in all, we suggest that emotional agency could serve as a promising conceptual tool for understanding and enhancing individual and organizational development within rapidly changing work contexts and organizations.

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Conflict of Interest None.

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