

Becoming Clergy: How Agency and Identity are Afforded to Novice Professionals Through Traditional and Ritual Practices

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Abstract

The article contributes to the growing research interest in professional agency and identity by examining how novice clergy experience their first years as parish pastors in the Church of Norway. Based on focus groups with newly graduated ministers, analysed with practice-theoretical and socio-cultural perspectives, we identify two modes. The first emerges when pastors enter traditional, well-established practices that lend them authority, clarity of task, and relational traction. The second mode is also afforded by enrolling in a traditional pastoral role but avoids defensiveness by being more improvisational and expressive, expanding the professional role in time and space. We argue that previous contributions (Campbell-Reed & Scharen, Reite) have tended to downplay the importance of ritual, stability and receptiveness. We further discuss (with Heikkilä) the relationship between our theorised modes, the clergy's linguistic expression of their experiences, and the material and symbolic reality of the practices in which they participate.

Keywords

Clergy, novice professionals, newly educated, pastoral practice, passivity, practice theory, professional agency, professional identity

Introduction

This article contributes to the discussion of how newly educated candidates move from being novices to becoming accomplished professionals (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Schutz, 2018)¹. Seeing the process “as negotiations conditioned by interchanging social and historical frames” (Reite, 2013, p. 48), we ask: How do novice professionals develop identity and agency in their interaction with professional practices? What are critical turning points and recurring dynamics in this complex process? The article follows the lead of an increasing number of scholars in making professional agency and identity a central perspective across institutional domains (Castelló et al., 2021; Edwards, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Heikkilä, 2022; Hökkä et al., 2012).

Based on an empirical project on newly educated clergy in The Church of Norway, we argue that professional agency can be experienced as passive and receptive rather than as active and initiating. This implies that an emerging professional identity is less about how an authentic person struggles to fit into an objective, externally given role, but rather about how a given role mediates an authentic professional self. The context for these dynamics is professional practices that are relatively stable and offer well-defined tasks and roles. The article considers how this agency of stability develops when it is challenged, identifying defensive mechanisms and more inventive and improvisational approaches. We first argue that stable practices and roles should be appreciated as providing possibilities for developing professional agency and identity. Second, we argue that the more experimental mode need not be a departure from existing practices but can be seen as improvisations over well-known themes. Third, we consider implications for how a practice-theoretical and a more discursive approach to professional agency and identity are negotiated.

Situating the article

Literature on novice clergy’s professional agency is limited and does not centre around certain salient discussions that one finds in other professions, e.g., on teachers’ or therapists’ professional agency in accountability regimes (Buchanan, 2015; Krikken-Mulders et al., 2024). Hence, we will not provide a comprehensive literature review, but present two contributions that provide our point of departure.

¹ A popularised presentation of the article’s main findings have been published in Norwegian in the research report *Pastoral entré* (Felter et al., 2025, p. 89f).

A normative account of professional learning as formation: Campbell-Reed & Scharen

In a North American context, Campbell-Reed and Scharen have conducted the longitudinal project *Learning pastoral imagination* (LPI). It explores how novice clergy move from being students who are “imagining ministry” towards the “pastoral imagination” of the experienced pastor (Campbell-Reed & Scharen, 2011; Campbell-Reed & Scharen, 2023; Scharen & Campbell-Reed, 2016). The authors are central contributors in the field of practical theology, employing theories that have a great impact on the discipline. Although the terms are not much used, the project is interested in how young clergy develop agency and identity, highlighting moments when “action, understanding, and a new sense of situated possibility come together” (Campbell-Reed & Scharen, 2011, p. 325).

In spite of similarities, *LPI* differs from our project in two important respects. First, the social and collaborative aspects of pastoral agency seem undertheorized, as the authors focus primarily on the individual pastor’s embodied and spiritual wisdom. This is signalled in the prevalent use of Dreyfus’ novice and expert theories, and in the foregrounding of the “intangible qualities” of pastors who “embody habits of mind, and enact wisdom (...), seeing in depth and of creating new realities” (2011, p. 325). Although the development of pastoral skills is described as taking place “immersed in the practice of ministry” (2011, p. 338), the project tends to portray this practice as general rather than as specific and contextualised. This makes it difficult to zoom in and theorise the concrete, mediated interaction between specific, contextualised institutional practices of the novice clergy.

Secondly, Campbell-Reed & Scharen have a particular interest in how novice clergy navigate the changing and fluid landscape of religion. We see a risk of making a false dichotomy between “ministry, in a traditional, mainstream congregation” and “emerging models of ministry” (...) that require[s] improvisation, imagination, and initiative for the work to be vibrant” (2011, p. 333). There is a tendency to highlight the impact of particular situations, the “holy cow!” or “aha moments,” (2011, p. 339), rather than studying the importance of regular and recurring practices.

An account of professional learning as networking between blackboxing and unfolding: Reite

Reite’s research interest is in how professional learning is mediated and conditioned in a changing knowledge society.² She argues that clergy is a fitting case for welfare professionals in general, because increased secularisation and cultural diversity have given clergy “a status of ‘in-between’—and professional learning may be at the core of their challenges” (Reite, 2013, p. 48). Where *LPI* leans into a theological, virtue-ethical and expertise-based understanding of maturing professional knowledge, Reite brings actor-network theory and socio-

² Reite and this article’s first author wrote our PhD dissertations within the same overall research project 2012-2016, both employing socio-material theories to the fields of professional and religious learning.

material perspectives into the field, in which professional learning is seen “as enacted” and “as networks” (2013, p. 49). She draws upon Latour’s research on laboratory work as processes of *blackboxing*, where scientists work to establish facts as “unproblematic and certain” (2013, p. 50). Transferred to professional knowledge, “the ‘blackbox’ can represent the facts and routines that seem certain and appear unquestioned” (2013, p. 50). Professional learning, then, is stretched out between the poles of framing existing knowledge (standards and routines) and of “handling the innovative and new.”

Based on meticulous shadowing of five pastors, Reite identifies two modes of *blackboxing* and *unfolding* respectively, and adds *tinkering* as a third, median mode (2013, p. 53). Professional knowledge as *blackboxing* is conceptualised as “standardising and routinising networks,” and as “expertising ‘the message.’” For Reite, pastors within this mode enter a role “instead of acting individually.” Emphasis on routines and recycling material “seems to lead to disenrollment and exclusion,” “little agency,” and clear separations between clergy and people and between professional and private emotions (2013, p. 54). Contrasted to professional learning as *blackboxing* are dynamics of *unfolding*. Reite observes this when technical equipment breaks down, and the pastor must find a new solution, and when new liturgical material throws local clergy off their routines. *Tinkering* is found when *blackboxed* practices become uncertain or are situated in a not clarified field between work and private life, with negotiations taking place between clergy and a large number of actants.

Reite’s approach expands conventional theological accounts, and the three modes provide fruitful perspectives on the processes of professional agency and identity we discuss below. Still, we see a need for additional contributions. First, our empirical focus is on novice clergy in transition from university to a professional career, not on experienced mid-to-end-of-career pastors. Second, we question Reite’s extension of Latour’s conceptualisation of scientists’ knowledge creation to professionals who engage relationally with other humans. The latter context is not about creating theory or stabilising laboratory experiments, but to let knowledge unfold in ways that support practices such as learning, health, art, or religion.

Theoretical perspectives

There has been growing interest in the concept of “professional agency” (Edwards, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Hinojosa-Paredes, 2020), often discussed in close connection with professional identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). The concept is primarily developed in research on teachers, with discussions on accountability regimes as a backdrop (Buchanan, 2015), but seems to be moving into other fields (Castelló et al., 2021).

Agency is a highly theorised term. Its meaning varies depending on academic contexts, and it may still be seen as a “source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought,” with “an elusive, albeit resonant, vagueness” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). Agency is often positively framed as being able to learn, change and shape both surroundings and one’s own

professional identity (Day, 2018; Giddens, 1984, p. 3), since “identity construction and negotiation is not simply a matter of adopting certain socially pre-existent and prescribed identities” (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 651). Still, agency should not be limited to groundbreaking and innovative actions, “connected to subjects’ autonomy and self-fulfillment, acting as a force for change and for resistance to structural power” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 46). Rather, it should include everyday, routinised interaction, although that tends to be under-communicated.

Our conceptualisation of agency is aligned with a practice-theoretical perspective. With Ahearn, we see agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (2010, p. 28), and with Hökkä, “as socially shared, culturally, historically and socially shaped, and provided through mediational means” (Hökkä et al., 2012, p. 86). With Biesta & Tedder, we hold that the “concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of an environment rather than simply in an environment” (2007, p. 137). This implies that we focus on the interaction between actors and practices (Edwards, 2015, p. 780). Agency is not seen as “residing in individuals,” but “as an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction,” “*achieved* in concrete settings and in and through particular *ecological* conditions” (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). This further entails that issues of professional agency are intimately interwoven with issues of professional learning and identity. Central contributors to this field have been Lave & Wenger (1991), whose theories conceptualised learning as processes of moving vertically from legitimate and peripheral towards fuller participation, and Engeström (2001), who emphasises how late modern organisations are destabilised and decentred, with learning being seen as horizontal and expansive.

Heikkilä argues that an undertheorized concept of agency, explored with “conventional humanist qualitative methodology [...] easily guides the researcher into thinking of humans as separate from each other and from the wholeness in which we all live” (Heikkilä, 2022, p. 2). At the same time, she is attentive to how agency is linguistically and narratively constructed (2022, p. 2): People “position themselves in various ways, sometimes as victims and sometimes as agentic beings” [...] and that “they shift constantly between these positions.” Such stories are not personal or individual, but rather “grammatical resources,” “embedded in a web of cultural narratives.” In this way, Heikkilä’s approach is similar to ours in the emphasis on the inherently social nature of agency, and at the same time, there may be some tension between her post-structural and narrative perspectives and our emphasis on practices that are materially mediated (Reckwitz, 2008).

Material and methodology

The article is based on two research projects on newly educated clergy and their professional learning and knowledge. The main project has followed theological candidates in Denmark, Norway and Sweden from their last term at university through their first one and a half years

Becoming Clergy

as clergy in Scandinavian-majority churches (Kaufman et al., 2024; Ideström et al., 2025). Although decreasing, church membership is still high in these countries (per 2024, Norway 62%, Sweden 51%, Denmark 71% of the total population), and the share of funerals being conducted in church is higher than the membership number (in Norway 2024, 82%). This influences the work week and relationships of parish clergy.

A delimited pilot project invited a group of Norwegian ministers who graduated from MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society in Oslo three years earlier to participate in focus groups around how they experienced their first years in ministry (Felter et al., 2022). In Norway, the standard way to become a minister in The Church of Norway is to attend a six-year-long professional education at university level, where theoretical and more 'practical' elements are integrated. The participants in the pilot project were in their late 20s or early 30s. This article is based on the pilot project material, but is also informed by the analysis of the main project.

Eight people (four men, four women) participated, forming two focus groups with four participants in each. The groups were randomly assigned, apart from equal gender distribution, and moderated by three teachers/researchers from MF and one Danish researcher (Felter). The first author did not take part in the focus groups, as he was at the time in charge of the program in which the informants had participated.

We chose focus groups to allow different stories interact and highlight commonalities and differences between the informants (Finch et al., 2014). We developed a short interview guide based on two questions: "tell us about things in your work where you feel that you succeed/that you master," and "tell us about things where you do *not* feel that." We had follow-up questions, but wanted the focus group dynamic to play out as a creative and reflective conversation. Each group lasted almost two hours, followed by a shorter plenary session with all participants, group leaders and the first author. All conversations were recorded and transcribed.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, there was a joint analytical stage where the research group met and discussed preliminary, mainly inductive findings. We loosely followed Malterud's text condensation strategy (2012), moving from highlighted sections in the transcriptions towards theoretically informed statements. We ended up with two ideas for articles: One that primarily thematised the relationship between the (hidden) curriculum and the first work experiences (Felter et al., 2022), and this article, which considers the professional agency of the novice pastors.

Second, the first author coded the material in atlas.ti, to make sure that nuances were registered and that elements that contradict the overall idea were considered. He worked through all the code reports, distributing excerpts into the article sketch. During the whole process, we had meetings in the project group, giving feedback on analytical ideas, outlines and drafts.

The project could be characterised as research on one's own practice, and we have been aware of the pitfalls of becoming too normative, defensive or critical both vis-à-vis the program and the informants. All five authors are ordained ministers, although all now work in academic positions. Three of the authors have been involved in the academic program at MF and had knowledge about the informants that is not expressed in the material. This has been discussed repeatedly in our meetings. We have been intent on letting both critical and surprising insights be heard, even when they felt unwelcome or irrelevant. It is also important to emphasise that the projects are not evaluation research, but that the goal has been to understand more of the dynamics involved in professional learning in the transition from university to ministry.

We notified Norwegian centre for research data (SIKT) about the project. The project has been conducted in accordance with established research ethical norms.

Analysis

During the analysis, two modes of professional agency and identity emerged. This was a result of the condensation and coding procedures conducted with the whole material as one case. It became clear that each mode corresponded with one of the groups respectively (see the discussion section 3 below). In other words, the research participants who are quoted in the first part belonged to group A, and the second part to group B.

1. *Ritual practices mediate agency and identity*

Asked to share examples of when they felt that they succeeded, mastered, and felt joy in their work, the group A participants gave relatively brief answers.

a. Settled practices—Settled agency and identity

Anne: My first thought was the funerals, really, and I did not expect that when I graduated. But that may be the area where I feel the safest from start to finish. And it is so concrete. It is delimited and I know exactly what to do at any given time. [...] And that's probably also [the area] where I get the most positive feedback.

To her surprise, Anne found funerals to be her favourite field of work. The other participants agreed. First, they described funerals (and worship services) as representing concrete, well-formatted tasks, with set rules and agreed-upon division of labour. They were able to draw upon a richly textured theological and cultural knowledge when they prepared and conducted the rituals, and they had developed skills in "building and putting it together." Further, this role clarity also constituted and promoted the relational aspects of pastoral work. The novice clergy experienced this in the conversations with families ahead of the funerals, where "people come because there is a reason," as one participant says. This makes it possible for families to share both personal memories and grief. It was also felt in the funeral itself: "To stand in front of the people and leading [them] with the liturgy in my back," as one informant said.

Becoming Clergy

There is a sense that the ritual works, which leads to the “most positive feedback,” which again strengthens the clergy’s sense of knowing what to do and how to relate.

This implies, secondly, that the clergy’s subjectivity in the practice, and hence identity, is strengthened. The novice clergy experience that they are being lent authority grounded in a traditional role that stretches back for centuries. It is a form of authority that the novice receives more than achieves. They tell about how in their first internships as very young students, they are recognised as the pastor in the moment they enter a new home. “The long line of priests before us have contributed to a fundamental trust,” one participant reports.

“I did not expect that,” Anne said. She seems to suggest that there is a distance between the initial motivation that brought her to theological studies and ministry, and the experiences that have contributed to her professional agency and identity. The change is not primarily cognitive, as if novice clergy were persuaded by lectures or literature. Rather, it is by entering into the practice field of the rituals that they are attuned to its embodied, constitutive performances. The practice lends agency and identity.

b. Rituals and their openings—Possibilities and threats

Abigail: So, I’ve become good at improvising church services. [I] feel safe in the liturgy [...] and discover new ideas and inventions along the way and use them to make the service better. I think I am good at including co-celebrants in the service, confirmands and volunteers to read in the service, and I get a lot of good feedback on that.

Even the most traditional and regulated ritual needs to be ‘done’ and accomplished continually. This implies possibilities for improvisation, change and conflict. We read “I feel safe” not as a defensive statement but rather as an expression of a good circle where clarified agency and identity work is nurtured by, and nurtures, relationship building and improvisations. “I’ve become good” signals that learning takes place in the work, facilitated by the structure of the practice. At the same time, experiences of cracks in established practices point to areas where novice clergy do not feel mastery:

Alan (edited): The pulpit is one of the few places in our society where you are allowed to say whatever you want. No one comes up and contradicts you. That’s part of what also makes it a bit vulnerable and that’s part of what I was talking about with funerals and funeral services. Someone has lost a child; how can you say something meaningful about life and God then?

The *liturgical* and *biblical* words are there to be recited, with a script that someone else has made, sometimes many centuries ago. The *sermon’s* words, however, often uttered from a salient pulpit, are not scripted but provide the minister with an open situation. Issues of agency understood as free choice and space for a more personal expression come to the fore: What do you do with words? The dilemma is intensified when those listening are not regular

Becoming Clergy

churchgoers who know the priest and will hear a new sermon next Sunday, but families who have come this one time to church because of a specific and often emotionally charged incident. “The fear of saying something wrong is in the back of my head,” one of the participants says of the funeral sermon, «which often makes me use an old sermon I know works.”

The unquestioned authority that is a strength in the liturgical part now is turned into a threat. Alan wishes that they had worked more on the content of funeral sermons during training and suggests that theological students should do internships where “each make a funeral service and work a little with them.” Together, that would produce a stock of sermons that could be shared among the priests-to-be. Other participants also call for more skill training in areas where they feel out of their depth.

The unstable and open character of the practices is visible in the role and identity of the young clergy.

Anthony (edited): When you experience disasters, people lean on you quite a bit and look for the priest in small and big ways [...] When something doesn't work in the congregation, it's also the priest people look for. Last Sunday when no one had turned on the coffee machine for church coffee, it's the priest they come and talk to. Without it being the [responsibility of] priest at all, but people look at the priest because the priest is considered a leader in the context of church services. Whereas in the staff it's not necessarily like that.

The quote pinpoints two challenges: First, the clearly defined ritual role of the pastor is not easily translatable into the hybrid web of practices that constitute a congregation and a parish, including seemingly mundane, material issues such as a broken coffee machine. How not to be exhausted by these conflicting expectations, how to know when to simply act on them and when to lead people to someone else? Abigail shares how her new congregation assumed that she would be an excellent child and youth minister, due to her young age (and maybe gender). However, “I have no idea” about children, she sighs.

Second, the last sentence in the excerpt indicates that although most lay parishioners see the priest as the obvious leader, the other church employees do not necessarily share that view. This brings us to our third observation.

c. Professional agency and identity when practices change, are threatened and in decline

Even well-established practices may become marginalised, face declining support and, hence, weakened credibility and meaningfulness in society. This again affects the professionals engaged in them. We see traces of this in the material and will point to two representative examples.

Becoming Clergy

First, the traditional image of the minister has been that of the one main character surrounded by a group of helpers. However, this does not go well with more collaborative and relational ideals for professional work and leadership in society and church. The material provided stories of good collaboration between professional groups and between professions and volunteers, but there are also testimonies of difficulties. Anthony shared how he would like to work “interdisciplinary” around an educational activity, but “usually, it’s only multi-disciplinary”:

Anthony (edited): I collaborate quite a bit with the catechist who does not have a church education [and] a rather different church background, and then I feel my professional pride quite a lot. [...] I am challenged by the catechist that I can just forget about liturgical terms, it is so foreign [for people] we cannot have that. We must rather have a pleasant, fun gathering. And then I have to choose my battles a bit.

Anthony felt that the catechist neither knew nor respected established liturgical practices. The catechist’s argument was simply that “it is so foreign” for the typical participant. Thus, Anthony is taken out of the clear role and agency identified above. When the logics of the traditional practices are not convincing to his colleague, he is challenged to find a meta language to argue for his way of doing things, or to simply “choose [his] battles a bit” and let it be.

The second example is Alan’s story about a conflict with a local funeral director. Funeral directors meet most families the same day or the day after a person has died, and in this meeting, most practicalities around the funeral are decided, including the choice of hymns.

Alan: They have decided on the hymns and printed the program before I find out that I will be the priest at the funeral in question [...]. Then I feel that, [...] I am more than just him who will come in here and then leave again. I would rather lead that ceremony. And in a way use my knowledge and skills to consider what fits together in terms of theme and text and situation and hymns and order of hymns.

At the outset, the conflict between Alan and the funeral director revolves around scheduling and information. It may, however, be symptomatic of changing trends in the larger field of funerary practices, where religious actors are placed in a sub-contractor role vis-à-vis the widened role of the funeral directors (Walter, 2017). Similar to Anthony above, Alan is not allowed to simply ease into the traditionally wide professional agency and identity but feels forced to argue against the limited role that the funeral director assigns him.

2. Agency and identity through exploring the boundaries

In the other focus group, Benjamin was first to raise his hand, sharing a story about his sermon at a recent confirmation service. In Norway, the share of 15-year-olds who are confirmed lies

Becoming Clergy

at around 50 % of the population, which makes confirmation a well-established practice similar to the funeral, with churches filled with festive families who often have little regular contact with the church.

a. Improvisation over settled practices

Benjamin enthusiastically shared how his sermon merged philosophy and theology, in an attempt to communicate that the “Christian search for truth” is identical with “all humans’ search for the truth.” He combined St. Paul’s journey to Damascus with how ISIS were also on the way to Damascus at the time. He was conscious of the communicative challenge, trying to reach both confirmands and their families, being well aware of how a sermon “sounds for an irritated uncle who didn’t find a parking spot.” Benjamin shared “the incredible feeling when you have reached the end of the sermon, but it feels like I could have gone on for an hour.” He felt that the congregation went along with him on a journey.

Benjamin told the story to highlight the importance of academic theological training. His own personal background is very “churched;” for him “faith is a word and a language to navigate within.” At university, however, this closed religious practice was opened and given new impulses. He was introduced to intellectual and rhetorical resources that helped him attain an analytical distance and made it possible to now be “out on the town square as a priest.”

Benjamin’s story lasted many minutes and set the pace for the rest of the group. Barbara described how she had come to enjoy improvisation. Similar to Abigail in the first group, she met expectations to be the perfect pastor for children and youth. Contrary to Abigail, however, this did not make her frustrated: “‘fake it till you make it’ has been my approach!,” she said. This opened up for a more daring approach that she developed during her first years. She told stories of how she sometimes went against the advice of her superiors, and about taking chances during worship services.

Barbara (edited): I had a family service, and then I opened up for the children to make suggestions, and a boy says “maybe God is not a man, no, maybe God is neither man nor woman. Maybe God is everything, and like God standing by the coffins.” I love that! Now I get to use my theology, now I get to use my expertise and extract the theology from what that 5-year-old says.

Benjamin and Barbara shared the experience of the first focus group, which found that traditional, well-established practices foster professional agency. However, they differ in that they treat them more as points of departure and playgrounds, rather than becoming defensive when countering the open and sometimes tension-filled aspects.

b. Networking through settled practices

Bianca's story takes us out of the church building. She shares what she did just a few days ago, leading an information meeting for confirmands' parents in her parish.

Bianca (edited): I came home that night and thought about how I *love* parent meetings [everyone laughs]. I really like the role you get as a priest. Both trying to be like [hesitates] cool enough to be a youth priest that the young people like, and at the same time show myself as a steady, solid, safe adult that [the parents] can trust take care of their children when they are in church.

The others are amused that a parental meeting is a pastoral success story, as it is usually seen as a management activity necessary for more important activities to run smoothly. However, Bianca sees the leadership potential in inviting parents, building relations and communicating her role as relevant for both groups present. She also makes an ecclesiological point: Church is more than what happens in the church building on Sunday morning, but is a community interwoven with the local community. This entails that a pastor is also a pastor in a wider, public time-space. A seemingly unimportant meeting becomes a venue for communicating how the whole community should be characterised by care and human dignity. Rather than seeing a hybrid identity as a problem, Bianca embraces and utilises it.

One of the tasks of the Church of Norway clergy is to visit homes on behalf of the police to inform about the death of a loved one. Ben shares a particularly demanding visit, where he felt that "I can't fix this. This is too intense." But gradually, as he approached the flat, he calmed down. "I know how to behave, and I know what signals to look for in the person. What kind of attitude I should have. I know what role I have in a situation like that." This echoes the insights from the first group, that there is a role identity available that lends agency in the demanding situation. Ben's visit reflects a 'settled' practice, as most Norwegians know what it means if a minister stands outside their door in the middle of the night. At the same time, however, there are signs that new, less scripted practices emerge:

Ben: There was one instance where I thought that I cannot do this. A pupil in one of the high schools in my area had died [...]. They ask for a priest and then I come as a priest. But what about being a priest do they need and want? And how am I supposed to give an obituary at a school? [...] Still, I think that is something of the most meaningful, I have never felt so small and so important as I did then.

Ben's immediate reaction is that "I am not equipped for this!" There was no course at university about improvising and conducting memorials in a school setting. For Ben, the expectation needs interpretation; he does not know "what about me as a priest they need and want?" After the initial bewilderment, however, there seems to be enough interpretive resources to avoid being paralysed. He finds agency that works creatively outside the traditional settings.

Discussion

In the following, we take our point of departure in the two modes that emerged from the analysis, and we discuss the theoretical implications of these. First, in a discussion with Reite's conceptualisation of professional learning, and second, in dialogue between an expert theory and a more practice-theoretical based notion of agency. Third, we discuss how the activity of interpreting and articulating experiences of ministry in a focus group setting also influences and plays back on these experiences.

1. Professional agency and identity experienced as passive and received

Our analysis points to a different kind of agency than that which is typically portrayed as proactive initiative, as breaking with conventions, and as professionals being encouraged to *manage* identities "as distinct from coping with them" (Day, 2018, p. 61) and renegotiate established work identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 647). For Campbell-Reed & Scharen, pastoral agency and identity are developed in dramatic and overwhelming *situations* more than in the routines of traditional *practices*. We argue, however, that professional agency can also be experienced as 'found by' and 'lent to' professionals, and even come as a surprise when they discover it.

One may ask: Is this agency at all? It seems paradoxical that agency, which is etymologically related to being active, could have such strong *passive* elements. Still, we argue that this makes sense. First, even the most scripted parts of being a pastor are about expressing and performing, similar to how an actor is agentic in a play, even though words and choreography are given. Further, the settled pastoral practices create spaces for clergy to enter into caring relationships with families, to interpret and give expression to a life lived, and relate it to Christian traditions in an interplay between the ritualised and the improvised.

This is also why the analysis' second mode is not dichotomously separated from the first. The first mode also includes dynamics of improvisation and expansion, but it tends towards defensiveness, because professionals experience reciprocal trust within the traditional and stable roles, but become insecure in their openings and emerging contradictions.

What we identify in the second mode is not a departure from the settled practices, but rather more innovative improvisations over these preexisting themes. The second mode includes exploration and pushing of the boundaries of both time and space that typically stabilises traditional pastoral practices, and in this way also makes the pastoral role more complex and multi-layered.

As such, the second mode challenges the tendency in Reite's account to paint an opposition "between the facts, routines and the innovative and new" (Reite, 2013, p. 49). We argue, rather, that *black-boxed* practices are potential starting points and resources for *unfolding* practices. Also, the second mode is not well captured by Reite's term *tinkering*, since we find

an intimate dialectic between a passive and ‘found’ agency and an agency that explores boundaries and expands pastoral practices.

We make one caveat: Our project followed newly educated clergy, whereas Reite studied clergy who had been in the job for many years. This suggests a need for more research into whether the same practices that lend agency and identity in an early phase of a professional career risk becoming tedious and draining in the longer run.

2. Professional agency as afforded through enrolment in integrative practices

As stated above, one way to theoretically understand the interplay between a passive and active agency, and between a given and improvised identity, is to see them as constituted by practices. Practices are lending their practitioners clothes, buildings, rites, tasks, texts, etc. Novice clergy find agency and identity by moving into and doing what is laid out for them, and by gradually improvising and challenging these preexisting tasks and roles. In that way, they re-constitute and change the same practices.

For Campbell-Reed & Scharen, moving from imagined ministry to pastoral imagination entails a shift from “self-focused worries [...] to focus on the needs in the situation” (2011, p. 324), aligned with Dreyfus’ theories of expertise. They take as an example tennis legend Federer, and see his play as an expression of “embodied knowledge,” “muscular and neurological,” that makes the game “masterful, imaginative, even beautiful,” beyond “mere mastery, strategy, and skill” (2011, p. 326).

This is consistent with our analysis. However, we see it less as an inner process and more as a dialectic process between the affordances of specific practices and the participants becoming enrolled in them. There is no “athletic promise” without an athletic practice that mediates a web of doings, material spaces and equipment, norms and standards, and often a particular atmosphere. Decisive is whether the hard work of practising is experienced as with little reward, or if it resonates with embodied talents and provides space to gradually move freely and express oneself with the identity of an accomplished player.

This approach challenges binaries between the social and the individual. Materials, rules and people within a practice constitute learning as increased participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and this includes the embodied and neurological dimensions involved. We agree with Campbell-Reed & Scharen that experiences of “overwhelmings” and “crises of responsibility” can lead pastors towards exhibiting “pastoral imagination.” It is also easy to understand that it is “amid such seeming complications and disruptions that the pastor’s role and soul begin to come together” (2011, p. 331). What we challenge is the implied dualism of “role” and “soul”, similar to how Reite sees black-boxed professional learning as “entering a role—employing an actant—instead of acting individually” (2013, p. 54). Our analysis shows that the ‘role’ mediates the ‘soul,’ with soul meaning an authentic and capable, and at the same time found and received, professional agency and identity.

At the same time, the analysis made clear that practices contain openings and disturbances. These are integral to the practices themselves, e.g., when pastors need to formulate their own words between the scripted words. They also become visible when practices come under pressure from processes of change, e.g., when established pastoral *roles* and *tasks* are challenged by new professions in the local church, and from the wishes of funeral directors and families.

Of interest, then, is how novice professionals relate to these. Here, Reite's portrayal of black boxing that "lead to disenrollment and exclusion" seems apt, where many "pastors draw a distinction between 'we' and 'them'" (2013, p. 54). The safety of a 'found' agency and identity can have as its byproduct a defensiveness when stability is challenged, where novice clergy is concerned with drawing lines around their pastoral identity. Another expression is when participants call for quick-fix solutions, which risk reducing the complexity of 'wicked problems' (Grint, 2010), such as "finding words against death" (Davies, 2008) to manageable recipes.

The generative aspects of 'found agency' is consonant with theories of communities of practice that are often quoted in literature on professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). That there is a downside in the form of defensiveness fits, on the other hand, with the criticisms raised by Engeström (2001) and others that a community of practice approach risks becoming nostalgic. It may overlook, partly, how deep-seated societal changes reconstitute traditional practices, and, partly, that participants are never taking part in a single practice but weave together many different engagements. There is a need for an ontology of the social that accepts the "tensions inherent within the social structure itself" (Ahearn, 2010, p. 33), and that theorises the fundamental changes taking place "as work and organisations are increasingly operating in unstable, fluid and poorly bounded arrangements" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 13).

We agree with Engeström's warning against nostalgically pretending that there are stable professional practices that play the role of unquestionable 'habitus.' However, we will argue against too quickly turning this into a normative plea for change, because this comes with its own risks of overlooking the value of stable practices and the need to nurture these. Our analysis has shown that novice professionals may find agency and identity through embracing the *vita passiva* of traditional practices, but also that they may tweak, tinker and innovate them through improvisation and expansion in time and space.

3. A socio-cultural account of agency—Mediated by narratives

When we analysed the material, there was little doubt that the participants talked about the same overall field of practices, recognisable across geographical and cultural differences. This is not to deny that the stories are interpretations, but they came across as shared constructive efforts. It is difficult to show in very short excerpts, but to us as researchers, it was clear that the focus groups worked as intended: The participants commented on each other's reflections, elaborating or expressing nuances. What was more surprising was how different the

two groups turned out, and that the two modes we identified in the analysis corresponded to the two respective focus groups. This was not by design; participants were randomly assigned to the groups. Why, then, were the groups so different from each other?

It is easy to see the role of the first ‘responder.’ Anne made her point briefly, focusing on the general practice of the funeral, and then invited the next participants to share. Benjamin told his story with passion, detailing one particular situation as a self-contained unit. The difference not only affected pace and focus for the rest of the group but also influenced how participants portrayed their own professional agency. We are well aware that this is speculation, but based on our knowledge of the participants, we find it probable that if any one of the participants had changed group, he or she could easily have followed the discourse established by the first speaker. Participants in group A could have told stories that fit better with mode 2, and vice versa.

If we are right in this assumption, it confirms Heikkilä’s argument that people position and define themselves through narratives, and that these are not only personal and individual but also social and cultural. What story participants tell may be dependent on how they feel that day or the group they are part of. Our interest, however, is not primarily in a post-structuralist view of narration and narrative practices, but rather in how these narratives reflect and capture tensions and contradictions in and between practices that affect the subjectivity and agency of novice participants. This is also where Heikkilä’s emphasis on the “incomplete and intertwined character of agency” makes sense for us (Heikkilä, 2022, p. 2f). Even the most stable practice is changing, creating imbalances and tensions that may lead to stagnation, conflicts or expansions and reorientations. The stories told are not stable descriptions of who the participants are, but rather testimonies of the tensions that condition their professional agency and identity.

This instability is, further, a reminder of the fragility of doing qualitative research with focus groups, and even to enter the role of a non-directive leader of a supervisory or therapy group. There is a distinctive power in the first speaker’s ability to set the tone and pace, and it is challenging to interpret what tensions and contradictions the first story is a testament to, and what other stories could also have been told.

Conclusions and implications

A main contribution of the article is to reconsider the importance of practices that convey roles and tasks stable enough to lend novice professionals agency and identity. We draw attention to a receptive form of agency and identity that is experienced as ‘found’ or ‘given.’ When traditional practices are under pressure from global and local change processes, we will argue that one should offer resistance and not underestimate the importance, and surprising viability, of a stable context for professional life.

Further, the article argues that there are two modes of agentic negotiation when the practice field is becoming less stable and more porous. On the one hand, we have identified a defensive approach that is in many ways similar to what Reite terms a *black boxed* mode. On the other hand, we have identified a mode of agency that is improvisational. As such, it could be called an *unfolding* mode, but compared to Reite's concept, our professionals seem to identify more strongly with the traditioned tasks and roles and then explore expansive agentic spaces based on these.

Finally, we have argued that a socio-cultural and socio-material approach does not preclude an interest in the discursive aspects of practices. An apt example is how the dynamics of a focus group invite participants to highlight certain aspects of their experiences over others. We argue, however, that the two modes are more than discursive resources; they point to contradictions within and between the material and symbolic practices.

What do these conclusions entail for universities that qualify candidates and for the institutions that welcome them as novice professionals? We will point to two areas: First, we argue that the present day's attention to how societies and institutions are changing and fluid may carry a risk that we become inattentive to aspects of practices that are more stable. Research, teaching and institutional leadership should be as curious and explorative towards stability as they are towards change. Second, this balancing has important implications for how professional agency is taught in academic programs and invited in institutional settings. Our article contributes to a view of agency that is more trusting and less dependent on constant initiatives from the professional taking part. Maybe even non-religious professionals could take inspiration from a view of agency that is given, lent and, in a mystical way, characterised by passivity.

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