Managers are tasked with navigating a constantly changing business environment, so they are often on the lookout for new ideas that they could adopt. Many of these ideas can be labeled management fashions – relatively transitory collective beliefs that a certain management idea is at the forefront of management progress. Their creation and spread is well theorized and studied, but the role of employees in implementing them has not been properly acknowledged. As a result, the adaptation and implementation processes of management fashions are still not well understood.

This dissertation presents an ethnographic case study of an organizational implementation of the “agile” management fashion from the employee perspective. It develops a dynamic model of management fashions and demonstrates how their translation is more complex than what the prevailing theory implies. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that employees are an essential, yet somewhat neglected, group of actors in determining the fates of management fashions such as agile.
The employee perspective on translating management fashions

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Managers are tasked with navigating a complex and constantly changing business environment, so they are often on the lookout for new ideas that they could adopt. Many of these ideas can be labeled *management fashions* – relatively transitory collective beliefs that a certain popular management idea or technique is at the forefront of management progress. Created and disseminated by fashion setters such as management consultants, management fashions are a prominent feature of contemporary organizing and our daily working lives.

Management fashions change and are changed as they travel globally and are adopted locally. Their creation, spread, and inter-organizational adoption are well-theorized and studied, but the key role of employees in implementing them has not been properly acknowledged. As a result, the intra-organizational adaptation and implementation processes of management fashions are still not well understood. Instead, fashions are often treated merely as having been either adopted or rejected, and their users are thought of as rather passive recipients of ideas invented elsewhere.

In contrast, this dissertation presents an ethnographic case study of an organizational implementation of the "agile" management fashion from the employee perspective. To find out how employees shape the fashions they confront, I conducted 140 days of observations and 73 interviews over 17 months in my case company OP Financial Group during its transformation into a more agile and self-managed organization. In addition, I also collected hundreds of press releases, news articles, and internal documents about the change. My study coincided with the global COVID-19 pandemic, leading me to develop the "organizational hybrid ethnography" methodology which I outline in this dissertation.

In analyzing my data, I use the *translation* approach, which highlights the context-dependency of the interpretation of ideas when they are implemented – ideas acquire new meanings through the acts of translating. I argue for a dynamic model of the evolution of management fashions and demonstrate how their intra-organizational translation processes are more complex than simple adoption-rejection dichotomies. This challenges the prevailing one-way direction of the "fashion lifecycle," which assumes that a sharp decline in one fashion is always followed by a sharp increase in the next. Understanding the role of employees in the translation process helps in developing a more nuanced view of management fashions, i.e., how and to what degree they are adapted, consumed, and rejected inside the companies that decide to adopt them. I also show how managers strive to make management fashions legitimate in the eyes of employees, and critically analyze the role of the popular media by reflecting on its participation in the legitimation of management fashions. Ultimately, I argue that employees are an essential, yet somewhat neglected, group of actors in determining the fates of management fashions such as agile.

**Keywords** management fashion, translation, employee perspective, ethnography, case study, discursive legitimation, critical discourse analysis, agile, remote work

Johtamisen muoti-ilmiöt muuttuvat ja niitä muutetaan, kun ne matkaavat maailmanlaajuisesti ja niitä otetaan käyttöön paikallisesti. Niiden luomis- ja levimisprosessit tunnetaan verrattain hyvin, mutta työntekijöiden roolia niiden muokkaajina ja käytännön soveltajina ei ole yleisesti tunnistettu ja tutkittu. Tästä johtuen johtamisen muoti-ilmiöiden todelliset toteuttamistavat yritysten sisällä ovat yhä huonomsti tunnettuja. Muoti-ilmiöiden ajatellaankin usein olevan vain joko käytössä tai ei käytössä, ja niiden käyttäjiä pidetään melko passiivisina muualla kehitettyjen ideoiden vastaanottajina.


Avainsanat: johtamisen muoti-ilmiöt, kääntäminen, työntekijänäkökulma, etnografia, tapaustutkimus, kriittinen diskurssianalyysi, ketterä, etätyö

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The further I progressed in my studies, the more deeply I felt how little I knew. So it may be that a doctor will graduate only when he humbly admits to himself that in reality, he knows nothing. –Sinuhe, the Egyptian

My slow descent towards knowing nothing began in 2017. It has been the ride of a lifetime with many ups and downs, including a serious knee injury, getting married, Finland finally qualifying for the EURO finals, a pandemic, and a childbirth. Luckily I have had many great people by my side along the way.

I would like to start by thanking my supervisors: Professor Rebecca Piekkari and Professor Carl Fey, two invaluable sources of endless wisdom and guidance. Rebecca, besides your academic excellence, you also seem to possess a superhuman ability to know what I want to do before I know it myself! Carl, what I admire the most in your work is the ease with which you are able to bridge academia with the “real world” in terms of both substance and writing style. In addition to the scholarly skills both of you possess, and although we have had our disagreements, you are also genuine and kind persons. Thank you for believing in me and being there for me whenever I needed help.

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Like Sinuhe the Egyptian, I can now humbly admit that I know nothing.

Espoo, 13 September 2023
Riku Reunamäki
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Riku Reunamäki is the lead author of the essay. He developed the research idea as well as the theoretical framework, and was responsible for the literature review, data collection and analysis, the discussion of results in light of data, and the theoretical contributions. The second author, Hannakaisa Länsisalmi, contributed to the overall narrative and to the analysis of findings, fine-tuned the theoretical framing, and provided the managerial implications.

**Essay 2.** Reunamäki, Riku. “Let the smarter and better-paid people decide!” Employees as translators of a management fashion. *Unpublished essay.*

Riku Reunamäki is the sole author of the essay.


Riku Reunamäki is the lead author of the essay. He developed the research idea and was responsible for the research design, literature review, data collection, most of the data analysis, and the discussion of results in light of data. The second author, Carl Fey, contributed to the overall structure of the essay, the presentation of the findings, and the positioning of the study within existing research, and performed additional data analysis.

**Essay 1** has been presented on August 7, 2023, at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management in Boston, MA, USA. **Essay 2** has been presented on December 9, 2022, at the 48th Annual Conference of the European International Business Academy in Oslo, Norway. **Essay 3** has been presented on September 19, 2022, at the 42nd Annual Conference of the Strategic Management Society in London, UK.
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The formerly quite stable banking industry is at a turning point. Banks have often been early adopters of new information technologies (Bons et al., 2012), and the ongoing “Digital Revolution” has already dramatically transformed the financial industry (Mühleisen, 2018). Computers and smartphones have enabled consumers to move first online and then to mobile for their banking and payment needs, and a new breed of fintech (financial technology) start-ups is taking advantage of this shift in consumer behavior (Pousttchi & Dehnert, 2018). The accompanied new regulation such as the Revised Directive on Payment Services (PSD2), which decrees that banks in the European Union must open up their customer interfaces for third-party developers, is helping these new service-providers enter the digital payments market. In addition to fintech, bigtech (large technology) companies have also expanded into banking with financial services such as Apple Pay and Amazon Lending, and “Big Tech’s move into the core banking business has been long feared” by traditional banks (Bradshaw et al., 2022, p. 5). The ease of digital banking and payments means that physical branch offices are becoming obsolete. In the developing world, leapfrog technologies such as Alipay and WeChat Pay are further facilitating the large-scale transition away from cash and directly to mobile (Vives, 2019). This increased and diversified global competition and industry-wide disruption means that incumbent banks must constantly invest in updating their legacy technologies to stay relevant in the digitalizing world.

What is more, recent financial and economic crises have resulted in a tight regulatory environment. Supervisory frameworks such as the Basel Accords for capital and liquidity requirements are restricting the ability of banks to invest the savings of their customers, thus greatly affecting the banks’ strategic decision-making (Bons et al., 2012). Moreover, when negative interest rate policies were introduced in 2014 for the first time in history, a legitimate concern was that commercial banks might suffer due to not being able to transfer the negative interest to their clients’ deposits. The traditional earning model for banks that is based on the net interest income – the difference between the interest paid by the customer to the bank and the interest paid by the bank to the customer – has become less effective and unreliable in recent years. All in all, tightened regulation and low interest rates resulted in banks being more pressed to find new avenues for profitability in the 2010s (Vives, 2019).

Finally, because of the recent critique of capitalism and the growing condemnation of its short-termism and sole purpose of maximizing shareholder value
(Adler, 2019; Barnett, 2022; Ghoshal, 2005; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Wolf, 2019), banks – as well as other large companies – are increasingly scrutinized in their roles as employers and societal actors. The zeitgeist is forcing banks to move from providing standardized products and services to a customer-centric and more personalized business model, while at the same time highlighting how they are combating climate change and promoting employee equality, work wellbeing, and mental health. The late 2010s in particular saw a rise in demands made by younger generations for a better work-life balance, more humane leadership, and more meaningful, ethical, and environmentally sustainable jobs (see e.g., Adler, 2019; Armstrong, 2021; Graeber, 2018).

***

It was within this macro-level context that I walked in through the door to the headquarters of the largest bank in Finland, OP Financial Group (OP), in late 2019 to begin my research. To respond to the macroenvironmental concerns of the financial industry and to maintain its competitiveness in the era of digital banking, OP had decided to become agile – a less hierarchical and more self-managed organization in order to be more responsive to the tumultuous and rapidly changing business environment. Inspired by the Dutch bank ING (see Barton et al., 2018; Birkinshaw, 2018; Mahadevan, 2017), OP embarked upon this structural and cultural transformation in the beginning of 2019, undertaking one of the largest adoptions of agile outside the information and communications technology (ICT) industry globally.

I have always found retail banking a fascinating field of business with a rich history and a significant presence in the lives of ordinary people. Having myself worked in the Finnish retail banking industry – including in OP – for more than five years in total before starting my doctoral studies, I especially wanted to learn how the people at OP, and employees in particular, experienced the new way of working and the radical transformation process that their organization had begun. OP was supportive of my objective, because one goal of its agile transformation was also to enhance the employee experience of the company. Thus, my dissertation became an ethnographic case study of the organizational change that OP was implementing.
Part I: Summary
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent decades, various streams of research on management ideas have sought answers to questions about why and how some new ideas become popular and globally adopted. In studying these phenomena, scholars have employed many different terms and metaphors such as the travel and translation of ideas (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996, 2005), management innovation (Birkinshaw et al., 2008), managerial fads and fashions (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996), and even viral infections (Røvik, 2011). In this dissertation, I adopt the management fashion perspective, because it helps in understanding widely popular success recipes for organizing and managing such as the recent “agile” way of working, which is the management idea at the heart of my study.

Previous research has proposed that management fashions follow “fashion lifecycles” with distinct stages (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019), and one aim of the study of management fashions is to explain these stages (see Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020, for a review). Previous studies have also identified various actors contributing to the travel and flow of management fashions: Since the early 1990s, studies have focused extensively on the roles of consultants, gurus, and best-selling business books (e.g., Collins, 2019, McCabe, 2011; O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016; Wright, 2019) as well as academic and practitioner journals (e.g., Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Barros & Rüling, 2019; Giroux, 2006; Røvik, 2002) in creating and spreading management fashions. Other actors that have been studied include academics and business schools (Bort & Kieser, 2019; Engwall & Wedlin, 2019), multinational corporations (Kern et al., 2019), governmental agencies and public sector organizations (Brorström & Norbäck, 2022; Schofield, 2001; Zbaracki, 1998), and top managers and middle managers of companies (McCabe & Russell, 2017; Outila et al., 2021; van Veen et al., 2011; Zbaracki, 1998). Thus, it has been established that management fashions affect and are affected by wide array of different organizations and individuals.

However, the voices of employees – who are the actors applying management fashions in practice and who “may reject, re-label, twist, turn or otherwise re-shape the fashions they confront” (McCabe, 2011, p. 185) – have still not been adequately heard in the management fashion literature (Heusinkveld et al., 2011; McCabe, 2011). As a result, although the creation and spread of fashions are well-studied (Clark, 2004; Newell et al., 2001), their intra-organizational adaptation and implementation processes in companies are still not well known.
Introduction

(van Grinsven et al., 2020; Madsen & Stenheim, 2013; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). Instead, fashions are often treated merely dichotomously as adoption/rejection (Røvik, 2011), and their users have long been thought of as “rather passive recipients of ideas invented elsewhere” (Scarborough & Swan, 2001, p. 9) – even though research has also established that management fashions vary as they spread and are adopted as practices in organizations (Ansari et al., 2010). Understanding the role of employees in this process helps in developing a more dynamic and nuanced micro-foundational view of the “fashion lifecycle,” i.e., how and to what degree management fashions are adapted, “consumed” (Bort & Kieser, 2019; Heusinkveld et al., 2011), and rejected inside the companies that decide to adopt them.

One approach to exploring how management fashions spread and are adapted into local contexts by employees is the notion of translation (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Latour, 1986). In the past few decades, management research has gradually moved from focusing on diffusion to focusing on circulation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) and translation (Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011; Spyridonidis et al., 2016), as diffusion has been viewed as not properly evoking the social aspects of the circulation of managerial ideas (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). The translation approach, and particularly Scandinavian institutionalism (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996), explores how ideas change and are changed as they move across boundaries. A key principle of the translation approach is that “ideas or practices may diffuse under the same label but acquire different meaning when they are implemented in different organizational contexts” (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009, p. 190).

Besides embracing the social elements of how fashions spread, translation also helps in constructing a more dynamic model of their circulation. Management fashion theorizing is largely based on models of static stages (Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019) and deterministic one-way processes, where “the sharp decline in one fashion [leads] to the sharp increase in the next fashion” (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, p. 723). Instead, the translation approach allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of fashions, for example by acknowledging “chains of translation” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) and simultaneous or competing translations. Through showing the changes that fashions undergo as they are adapted in various ways, translation recognizes the possibility of a fashion evolving – or “mutating” and regaining popularity as a slightly different “variant” (Røvik, 2011).

Translation thus offers an analytical lens through which it is possible to explore the roles of different organizational actors in shaping the adopted management fashions, because it highlights the context-dependency of their interpretations and their active participation in adopting, modifying, and circulating fashions. Still, and similar to the management fashion literature, the view of employees as translators is somewhat overlooked in the translation literature as well (Børve & Kvande, 2022; Cassell & Lee, 2017). The focus of translation studies is often on the transformations of the ideas themselves (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), on the social processes by which they become imitated and edited (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), and on “those who translate management models
introduction into their own organizations” (Westney & Piekkari, 2020, p. 60, emphasis added) – usually, top managers and middle managers (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). This leaves the role of employees in further translating and implementing the adopted management fashions inside their organizations understudied.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

Previous studies on management fashion and translation assume that employees, as the end-users of management fashions, do not have a significant role in the management fashion “lifecycle” (Heusinkveld et al., 2011) and do not actively participate in the translation of fashions (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). Instead, employees are mostly thought of as passive recipients of fashions translated to them by managers. Further, existing research also claims that management fashions have one-way trajectories with static stages (Abrahamson & Piazzo, 2019), fashions are only either adopted or rejected in organizations (Røvik, 2011), and one fashion is always replaced by the next (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

The main objective of my dissertation is to highlight employees as an important group of actors in the management fashion and translation literatures. I aim to understand how management fashions, once they have been formally adopted by an organization, are further adapted as they are made sense of and implemented by employees. Through focusing on employees as translators, I attempt to show that management fashions are translated multiple times within organizations (see also Andersen & Røvik, 2015) and are subject to intra-organizational chains of translation and feedback loops. The employee perspective enables an examination of how management fashions can take on various forms even within one company: Although a company has adopted a single concept in principle, in practice it has to adjust to several manifestations of it at the employee level. I highlight the under-researched key role of employees as the translators, implementers, and sensemakers of management fashions and the ways in which employees are shaping how the organizational transformation plays out. I contend that ultimately, it is the employees who decide on the fates of management fashions and thus the degree to which the top management’s visions for the organization are realized.

Moreover, I also contribute to management fashion research by presenting a more complex, dynamic, and nuanced view of the evolution of fashions. I argue that rather than one-way bell-shaped popularity curves where one fashion is always replaced by the next (Abrahamson, 1996; Huczynski, 1993), the management fashion “lifecycle” can in fact take the form of an actual cycle – a cyclical process within which fashions can be translated and re-translated back and forth between managers and employees. This enables management fashions to evolve according to the organization’s needs and continue to exist in modified, or “mutated” (Røvik, 2011), forms.

Translating a management fashion involves interpreting and making sense of it in an actor’s own terms (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). It is a form of adaptation which anchors the fashion in context through acts such as
omitting or altering its components (Røvik, 1996; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Translation of a fashion also includes its implementation, which turns the fashion into a materialized object such as a text, a model, or a practice (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Translation, in simple terms, can therefore be seen as a process where a general idea is applied in a local setting. Accordingly, the main research question of my dissertation is:

_How do employees translate a management fashion that has recently been introduced into their organization?_

In connection with my main research objective, I also aim to show how management fashions are adopted by organizations and made legitimate in the eyes of employees. When management fashions travel within organizations, they get translated multiple times at different levels of hierarchy and through different logics (Andersen & Røvik, 2015; Linneberg et al., 2019). The managerial translation of management fashion into an organization forms the basis for employee translations inside the organization (see Figure 1 below), which is why understanding the managerial perspective is helpful in trying to understand the employee perspective.

In order for managers to maintain that an adopted new management idea or practice is not just another flavor-of-the-month managerial fad or old wine in new bottles, the adoption often requires “discursive legitimation” (Vaara et al., 2006). In the management fashion literature, however, managers are often depicted as passive consumers of fashions at the mercy of influential “fashion suppliers” such as consultants (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; van Veen et al., 2011). In contrast, I argue for the active role of managers in adopting fashions and subsequently legitimizing them to their organizational audiences. I also critically analyze the role of the popular media, reflecting on its participation in the legitimation of management fashions (Lamertz & Baum, 1998; see also Scarbrough et al., 2005, for the role of professional media). Managers can use the popular media for “driving the organization’s agenda and communicating the necessity of change to customers, stakeholders, and the firm’s own personnel” (Ylä-Anttila, 2022, p. 187). I therefore also ask the complementary research question:

_How do managers and the media legitimize management fashions in the eyes of employees?_

Finally, my objective is also to make methodological contributions to organizational studies through my dissertation research. My empirical fieldwork was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced employees into extended periods of remote work, alternating between working at the office and working from home. Similarly, my fieldwork also followed the ebb and flow of the pandemic. Through what I call “organizational hybrid ethnography,” I participate in the ongoing discussion of what “the field” in fieldwork actually is (Eggeling, 2022; Howlett, 2022). I propose that rather than a strict requirement
of physical on-site presence, it is more important to try to “live with and live like those who are studied” (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 242).

Thus, the methodological question that I explore in this dissertation is:

*How to conduct qualitative organizational research and study employees’ lived experiences in the era of disruptions such as COVID-19?*

I answer these research questions through studying how the “agile” management fashion was adapted to the local retail banking context in Finland. My case company, OP Financial Group, adopted agile throughout the organization starting in 2019, aiming to reorganize around self-managing teams. I examine agile from the perspective(s) of employees translating it from managerial visions and principles into everyday practices.

Figure 1 presents the main research questions of this dissertation and shows how they relate to each other. At the center is the employee perspective on management fashions, which this dissertation adds to the management fashion and translation literatures. I propose that the employee perspective is influenced by the managerial translation and legitimation of an adopted fashion, and it subsequently results in the employee translations of the fashion. In addition, employee translations are influenced by disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic – which required the adaptation of management fashions into the remote work setting.

**Figure 1.** The framework and research questions.
In Essay 1 of this dissertation, I consider the *managerial translation*. Together with my co-author Hannakaisa Länsisalmi, I study how senior executives legitimize management fashion adoption and what the role of the media is in fashion legitimation. Thus, Essay 1 serves as a precursor for the other essays by answering the complementary research question of this dissertation. We analyzed texts covering OP’s organizational change in prominent Finnish newspapers and magazines, showing how the media participated in legitimizing the change by criticizing the former CEO as having been carried away by the promises of digitalization. This complements the legitimation strategies of OP’s senior executives, who delegitimized “the old organization” as a sort of bureaucratic nightmare by telling ludicrous anecdotes but did not name any culprits.

Essays 2 and 3 then focus on answering the main research question of how employees translate a management fashion. While Essay 2 presents a comparative study of how the agile fashion was translated in different employee teams within OP, Essay 3 focuses on the continued translation of agile in light of an external shock – here, the global COVID-19 pandemic.

In Essay 2, which is the main essay of this dissertation, I present the *employee translations* of a management fashion. I consider the employee translations of agile, asking how employees translate the management fashion from organizational principles into everyday practices. I find that depending on the type of task and individual, employees of the two OP teams I observed translated agile either pragmatically, making use of it in their work, or skeptically, resulting in subsequently abandoning it as incompatible with their work. I also argue that including employees in the study allows for a more dynamic view of the evolution of management fashions, and that employees are an essential group of actors in determining the fates of management fashions.

In Essay 3, I contribute a *remote work translation* on the agile management fashion. Together with my co-author Carl Fey, I leverage the forced remote work period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to find out how to make agile work best remotely. We explore what the main drawbacks of using agile in remote work are and what could be done to mitigate these drawbacks. We identify five problems and present solutions to implementing agile in a remote setting and discuss the situations and types of teams in which the different aspects of remote agile work and do not work. While Essays 1 and 2 are written mainly for an academic audience, Essay 3 complements them by providing concrete examples and actionable guidelines – based on academic research – for practitioners. In this way, Essay 3 contributes to the main research question by showing how employees engage in the translation and implementation of a management fashion under uncertain circumstances.

In addition, Essays 2 and 3 detail my *organizational hybrid ethnography* research method, which is also extensively discussed in the summary part of the dissertation. I engaged in ethnographic observations and interviews amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, alternating between fieldwork periods of on-site observations and interviews at OP’s headquarters, and “remote observations” and interviews via Microsoft Teams. Over a period of 17 months between November 2019 and March 2021, I conducted altogether 140 days of observations and 73
interviews during four “rounds” of two to three months each. I propose that at its core, organizational hybrid ethnography entails on-site observations when research participants are on-site and remote observations when participants are working remotely. This way, organizational ethnography can maintain its relevance even as organizations and work itself are increasingly shifting towards the “new normal” of hybrid work.

Table 1 introduces the titles of the three essays and their research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of essay</th>
<th>Research question(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>How managers and the media discursively legitimize a management fashion</em></td>
<td>How do senior executives legitimize the adoption of a management fashion? What is the role of the media in legitimizing a management fashion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Let the smarter and better-paid people decide!” Employees as translators of a management fashion</td>
<td>How do employees translate the agile management fashion from organizational principles into everyday practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote agile: Problems, solutions, and pitfalls to avoid</td>
<td>How to make agile work best remotely? What are the main drawbacks to using agile in remote work? What can be done to mitigate these drawbacks?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The employee perspective on management fashions</td>
<td>How do employees translate a management fashion that has recently been introduced into their organization? How do managers and the media legitimize management fashions in the eyes of employees? How to conduct qualitative organizational research and study employees’ lived experiences in the era of disruptions such as COVID-19?</td>
</tr>
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1.3 Structure of the dissertation

The structure of this dissertation is as follows: In Chapter 1, I introduce the background for the research, the research objectives, and the overall research questions. I also show how the essays are connected to each other.

In Chapter 2, I present the main concepts and theoretical approaches of my dissertation. I begin by reviewing the literature on management fashions, including the groups of actors identified as having a role in their propagation. Additionally, I recount the emergence of agile, which was first implemented as a project management tool in software development and subsequently imported into business organizations and management in general. Then, I introduce the notion of translation, including Scandinavian institutionalism, which is concerned with the “travels of ideas” across time and space. I conclude Chapter 2 by showing how the translation approach has been used to study management fashions and arguing that the employee perspective is somewhat missing from the two theoretical approaches. This is more distinctive within the management fashion literature, but it also applies to the translation literature to some extent. Thus, they present an incomplete picture of the trajectories of management fashions and the actors involved in shaping them.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of my dissertation. I begin with explaining the ethnographic research approach I employed, after which I present a brief
history of my case company OP in order to familiarize the reader with the intriguing contextual background for my study. Highlighting the strategic vision of the previous CEO and the subsequent total strategic turnaround under the current CEO’s leadership, I recount how the history of the financial group led to the ambitious “OP Agile” change program, which is the essence of my study. Then, I detail the data collection and data analysis of my research. My data consists of observational fieldnotes, interviews of employees and managers, media texts, press releases, and internal documents, which I analyzed through thematic analysis (fieldnotes and interviews) and critical discourse analysis (media texts and press releases) to be able to answer the main research question and the complementary research question. As I was doing fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, I developed the concept of “organizational hybrid ethnography” and present it here as an answer to the methodological research question. I argue for its ability to explore work in a modern organizational setting – especially in the post-pandemic “new normal” of hybrid work.

Chapter 4 consists of the extended summaries of the three empirical essays that form the second part of the dissertation. Chapter 5 then concludes Part I by discussing the theoretical and methodological contributions of this dissertation as well as the implications for research and practice.

Part II consists of the three empirical essays as outlined above.
2. Theoretical approaches

2.1 Management fashion

Simmel (1904, p. 133) called fashion “a universal phenomenon in the history of our race,” and Blumer (1969, p. 290) argued that fashion “should be recognized as a central mechanism in forming social order in a modern type of world” because it permeates almost all walks of life. Management is no exception to this – management fashions, in the form of both broader movements such as work-life balance and decentralization, as well as more specific applications such as employee experience design and agile project management, are a prominent feature of contemporary organizing and our daily working lives. Tasked with navigating a complex and constantly changing business environment, managers often face problems relating to organizational changes, structures, strategies, processes, productivity, human relations, and leadership. Therefore, they are always on the lookout for solutions provided by new management ideas or practices that they could adopt. (Sturdy et al., 2019.)

The study of management fashions is interested in questions about why and how some management ideas become popular and widely adopted. Ever since the 1990s, management fashions have been researched extensively, with the aim of finding out where they come from and where they go, how they are used and what their effects are, and who is producing, disseminating, and using them. Perhaps the most influential figure within this stream of research is Eric Abrahamson, who first took a critical approach to the dominance of what he called “the efficient-choice perspective” in the idea diffusion literature – a model “in which adopters make independent, rational choices guided by goals of technical efficiency” (Abrahamson, 1991, p. 590). When applied to management, this perspective assumes that organizations can freely and independently make rational decisions in choosing to adopt new ideas and are relatively certain that these ideas help the organizations to achieve their goals. As a result, ineffective management methods are rejected, and effective management prevails.

However, according to Abrahamson, the problem with the efficient-choice perspective is that it only works when organizations are not influenced by outsiders, when organizations are not uncertain about the efficiency of management models, and when organizations do not imitate each other. In contrast, Abrahamson (1996, p. 257) proposed the perspective of management fashion, defining it as “a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management
progress.” One of the central arguments of this perspective is that instead of efficient choice, organizations are influenced by outside actors in their decision-making, imitate each other, and are often uncertain about the efficiency of different management innovations. In other words, the notion of management fashions claims that the choices that companies make are frequently neither independent, rational, nor efficient. (Abrahamson, 1991; Røvik, 1996.)

On the other hand, the interdependence and transitoriness of fashions can also be seen as cumulative knowledge-building within the management industry (Rifkin, 1994). Blumer (1969, p. 283) distinguished fashions from fads and crazes, which “have no line of historical continuity; each springs up independently of a forerunner and gives rise to no successor.” According to him, fads come from nowhere and lead nowhere, whereas fashions are part of a continuum and build on their predecessors, keeping up with the changing zeitgeist. Similarly, Clark (2004, p. 298) noted that each fashion cumulatively builds on the previous one, developing a particular trajectory: “skirts become narrower, whiskers less popular, and organizations less bureaucratic with each passing fashion.” Most recently, Guthey et al. (2022) have argued for the ability of fashions to advance management practice through a constant learning process regarding how to fulfill the expectations that are set for leaders. They distinguish Abrahamson’s technical and instrumental approach to management from the more moral and emotional leadership approaches such as servant leadership and transformational leadership.

Abrahamson (1996) also explained that there exists a fashion-setting process which is guided by two societal norms: norms of managerial rationality, i.e., expectations that managers use those management ideas that are the most helpful for their firms, and norms of managerial progress, i.e., expectations that managers adopt new and improved ideas over time. The fashion-setting process, which involves the creation, selection, processing, and dissemination of management fashions, maintains a somewhat continuous flow of managerial ideas that are believed to be the cutting edge of management practice.

That the management ideas usually follow wave-like popularity curves akin to swings in fashion has been well documented (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Bodrožić & Adler, 2018), and distinctive stages within these “fashion lifecycles” have been identified. For example, Abrahamson and Piazza (2019) list innovation, diffusion, institutionalization, dormancy, and rebirth; Røvik (2011) prefers the virus metaphor and talks of infectiousness, replication, incubation, mutation, dormancy, and reactivation. Regardless of the terms used, most researchers agree that especially the early stages of creation and innovation as well as the spread of management fashions are well researched (Clark, 2004; Malmi, 1999; Newell et al., 2001; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). In addition to studying the characteristics of management fashions through a more macro-oriented lens, researchers have also identified various groups of actors who are involved at a more micro-level. Below, I look at these fashion setters and fashion adopters in more detail.
2.1.1 Fashion setters and adopters

Drawing on institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), Abrahamson (1996) theorized that there exists a market for these management fashions where “fashion setters” maintain a continuous supply of new ideas for organizations and their leaders. Abrahamson proposed that fashion setters such as consulting firms, management gurus, business mass-media publications, and business schools are those most influential producers and disseminators of ideas, who portray themselves as experts on the latest management thinking, commercializing concepts and selling their services to clients. According to Benders and van Veen (2001), an important element of the fashion-setting they perform is “interpretive viability” – a certain degree of ambiguity that allows potential adopters to recognize themselves in the description – which increases the marketability of the fashion (see also Kieser, 1997).

The primary examples of management fashion setters (or suppliers) are management consultants and consulting companies (Abrahamson, 1996), who are especially skilled in identifying relevant and timely management fashions (their demand) and then packaging them into marketable products that can be sold to companies (Wright, 2019). For example, O’Mahoney and Sturdy (2016) explicitly point out McKinsey & Co as a powerful and networked key agent in the creation and spread of new (or “new”) management fashions (see also Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022). Another group of influential fashion setters are the self-proclaimed gurus and business speakers who seek to profit from offering their knowledge, experience, and advice to companies. Like consultants, management gurus are described as great orators and storytellers who are able to present fashions as widely applicable in the organizations of their managerial audiences (Clark et al., 2015). Accordingly, Collins (2019, p. 217) argues that instead of dismissing gurus as mere snake oil salesmen, they need to be taken seriously “because they have changed the ways in which we think about, talk about, and practise the work of ‘management.’” On the other hand, McCabe (2011) claims that gurus have less power than assumed because their ideas do not translate to practice unproblematically – instead, organizational actors play important roles in interpreting and filtering guru ideas through their particular contexts.

Further research on management fashions has shown that there are a variety of actors beyond consultants and gurus who are taking part in the shaping of fashions (e.g., Perkmann & Spicer, 2008). Academic journals, business magazines, and best-selling business books are crucial in the legitimization and popularization of new ideas (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Barros & Rüling, 2019; Benders & van Bijsterveld, 2000; Giroux, 2006; Røvik, 2002). For example, Røvik’s (2002) examination of how the management literature creates “recipes” for success outlined that management publications help in authorizing (linking to successful organizations or people), universalizing (presenting as widely applicable), and commodifying (transforming into products) fashions. Academics and business schools subsequently teach these latest ideas to their business students (Bort & Kieser, 2019), including in Executive MBA programs that have as “students” highly influential businesspeople who become significant missionaries of the management fashions taught to them (Engwall & Wedlin, 2019). But
the relationship between business and academia can also go the other way, as Benders and van Bijsterveld (2000, p. 62) explain: Although it is often the case that the rhetorics of fashions “are at odds with academic criteria and methodological efforts to arrive at accurate descriptions of reality,” academics are increasingly intertwined with – and dependent on – businesses, and as they “must appear legitimate in the eyes of corporate sponsors,” they might be “subject to a pressure to conform to managers’ view.”

Multinational corporations and their “globalizing actors” such as expatriate managers and other boundary-spanning individuals are important carriers of globally standardized ideas which they modify to fit local contexts (Kern et al., 2019). Governmental agencies and public sector organizations are also sometimes keen to take on the newest innovations (Brorström & Norbäck, 2022; Schofield, 2001; Zbaracki, 1998). Finally, top managers and middle managers themselves also contribute to the creation and spread of new management fashions (Birkinshaw, 2014; McCabe & Russell, 2017; Outila et al., 2021; van Veen et al., 2011; Zbaracki, 1998). For example, Zbaracki (1998, p. 613) develops an evolutionary model of management fashions inside an organization, which consists of nested cycles of variation, selection, and retention: “After leaders decide to implement TQM [Total Quality Management], they pass it to other members in the organization. These members face variation in their practices when they meet requirements to use TQM. They select specific elements of TQM to use in their jobs and then retain some of those elements.” Top management then observes the results and modifies their original version accordingly. In another example, van Veen et al. (2011, p. 154) present the story of a Dutch management fashion called MANS that was “developed, distributed and implemented by managers themselves who were also involved in the discourse underlying the concept” – without any input from consultancies or print media. These studies show that besides the “usual suspects” of consultants and gurus, other fashion setters as well as the fashion adopters inside organizations are actively taking part in the management fashion arena. This has prompted some researchers to coin terms such as “co-production” and “co-consumption” (Bort & Kieser, 2019; Heusinkveld et al., 2011) to highlight that management fashions evolve as they are spread and put into practice in organizations.

Further, one critical issue for managers is to establish and maintain the legitimacy, the acceptance by the environment, of their organization (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). To appear legitimate, organizations must comply with regulations, conform to established cognitive structures (i.e., with what is “taken for granted”), and align their organizational values with the normative values of the society (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999, Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The fashion perspective holds that although managers are expected to make knowledgeable and rational decisions, they frequently act with limited knowledge or simply imitate other companies (Abrahamson, 1991). Thus, there is a need to legitimate their decisions for internal and external audiences (Wilhelm & Bort, 2013). One way to do this is when implementing organizational changes related to adopting management fashions, whereupon managers can engage in “discursive legitimation” (Vaara et al., 2006) of new organizational models and practices in order
to appear legitimate in the eyes of various stakeholders (Wilhelm & Bort, 2013). This again underlines the active roles of organizational actors in shaping the management fashions they adopt.

However, managers and other intra-organizational actors such as average employees are generally somewhat less researched within management fashion studies and often portrayed merely as passive recipients of ideas sold to them by the suppliers of fashions (Bort & Kieser, 2019; Heusinkveld et al., 2011; van Veen et al., 2011). At times, managers have even been presented as “gullible consumer[s] of concepts” (van Veen et al., 2011, p. 159) or as “dupes of influential [idea] carriers” such as gurus and consultants (Morris & Lancaster, 2006, p. 207). This suggests that the legitimacy of management fashions – and thus by extension the legitimacy of the organizations that adopt them – is largely in the hands of external consultants. A contrasting view is presented by Groß et al. (2015), who argued that managers are an active, selective, and dynamic audience rather than a homogenous collective which is passively consuming the fashions presented to them by business gurus. I contend that the two seemingly opposite perspectives are not mutually exclusive: Managers can be susceptible to the ebb and flow of management fads and fashions propagated by consultants and at the same time actively shaping the ways in which these fashions are adapted in organizations. In such situations, the involvement of consultants may nevertheless sometimes provide a certain stamp of approval, as Mazzucato and Collington (2023, pp. 8–9) write: “The consulting industry often provides legitimacy for controversial decisions. When a corporate senior manager wishes to convince their board of something, ... a supportive report from a [big consulting] firm can go a long way.” Huczynski (1993, p. 443) called this “the conscious and unconscious collusion between managers as consumers of management ideas and consultants as suppliers of such ideas,” while Heusinkveld et al. (2011) described the co-production and co-consumption of fashions. This study attempts to show the active roles of managers, as well as employees, in the adaptation of agile, a currently popular approach to organizing which I consider a management fashion (see also Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020).

2.1.2 Agile

The aim of the organizational change of my case company OP was to become more agile in a dynamic operating environment. Agile can be described as “a set of recommendations for a more adaptive and efficient approach” to project management (Annosi et al., 2020, p. 62). What is today considered the agile approach to work is an umbrella term for several philosophies, principles, and practices of organizing and project management, some derived from the famous Toyota Production System, but most originating in the field of software development (Rigby et al., 2016a).

Agile has shown some promise in advancing the “best practices” of management (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018; Chen et al., 2016), but it is discussed by some of its proponents uncritically as “poised to transform nearly every other function in every industry” (Rigby et al., 2016b, p. 50) and “revolutionize how business works in virtually every industry” (Sutherland, 2014, p. viii). As such, labeling it
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a management fashion is reasonable, as fashions are criticized for being ambiguous by design (Benders & van Veen, 2001) and presented as universally applicable panaceas on the one hand (Røvik, 2002; Örtenblad, 2015), but lauded as vehicles for cumulative management knowledge-building on the other hand (Clark, 2004; Guthey et al., 2022).

Origins: Agile software development

“Agile software development” originally comprised of multiple approaches, such as Extreme Programming, Lean Development, and Scrum (Boehm, 2002; Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). A major event in the history of agile was when a group of software developers created the Manifesto for Agile Software Development (Beck et al., 2001). Following it, the debate in the software development industry pitted the agile approaches against “traditional,” “plan-driven,” or “waterfall” approaches – methodologies that relied on extensive up-front planning and detailed, codified processes that were closely followed throughout the development process (Boehm, 2002).

Proponents of agile argued that the internet had brought about dramatic increases in complexity, turbulence, and the pace of change to the information technology and software development industries. They reasoned that because changes in the external environment were inevitable during project lifecycles, it would be better to anticipate and adapt to change than try to eliminate it. Planning should occur continuously rather than only at the beginning of a project and plans should be modified as needed rather than remain fixed throughout projects. To achieve this, agile developers advocated for development in small teams, where skilled people would be situated physically close to each other and thus be able to brainstorm and share information in person. They also emphasized early delivery of works-in-progress as a useful way to understand what they have achieved so far and to receive timely feedback from end users already during the development phase. (Cockburn & Highsmith, 2001; Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001.)

Those who continued to support plan-driven software development viewed agile methods as sloppy, creating pressure for immediate results, focusing more on people skills than analytical skills, and even as an attempt to make the lack of a plan preferable to having one (Glass, 2001; Rakitin, 2001; Skowronski, 2004). While the defenders and opposers argued for and against agile, some also viewed the agile and plan-driven approaches as complementary to each other (Boehm, 2002; Boehm & Turner, 2003; Williams & Cockburn, 2003). Agile methods were deemed to work best with small and colocated teams of experts, who were working on projects with simple designs and few inter-team dependencies, continuously and incrementally improving their works, and operating within dynamic business environments and empowering organizational cultures (Boehm & Turner, 2003, 2005; Little, 2005; Reifer et al., 2003).

Eventually, the arguments of the pro-agile camp resonated with the software development community and agile methods were widely disseminated and adopted within the industry. By 2007, agile was considered a buzzword. Erdogmus (2007, p. 4) speculated whether it might have been due to “its lingo’s
all-too-often-diluted overuse” or “its principles’ indiscriminate overapplication in infinite regress in arbitrary and sometimes completely inappropriate contexts.” Due to its increased popularity, agile also increasingly became a research topic; the tone was largely critical. Literature reviews (Conboy, 2009; Dybå & Dingsøyr, 2008; Erickson et al., 2005) and special issue introductions (Abrahamsson et al., 2009; Dingsøyr et al., 2012) called for more clarity on what constitutes agile, more coherence between various streams of research, and more high-quality empirical studies that would go beyond “lessons learned” reports and anecdotal evidence. For example, Conboy (2009, p. 330) claimed that “to state that a particular method is or is not agile is almost meaningless given the lack of consensus on what the term ‘agile’ refers to.” Similarly, Dingsøyr et al. (2012, p. 1217) attributed the lack of “theoretical underpinnings or empirical support” for the stated benefits of agile practices to their evolution “from the personal experiences and collective wisdom of the consultants and thought leaders of the software community.” However, and despite various difficulties in adopting agile at a larger scale in companies and a lack of academic research on the topic, the majority of practitioner articles still reported on the benefits of agile compared to the waterfall approach (Dikert et al., 2016).

**Application: Agile business**

After agile had permeated the software development industry, it began to spill over to other businesses in the early 2010s through the IT departments of companies. In general management, however, there was some time lag, perhaps in part due to a conceptual overlap: With some exceptions (e.g., McFarland, 2008), agile in the management realm was understood as the *strategic agility* of an organization. Rather than stemming from the values outlined by software practitioners in the *Manifesto*, strategic agility built instead on the body of academic research in strategic management and alternative forms of organizing, such as the organic organization (Burns & Stalker, 1961), adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1979), heterarchy (Hedlund, 1986), and matrix management (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1990). Doz and Kosonen (2008, p. 95) proposed that the core elements of strategic agility are strategic sensitivity, leadership unity, and resource fluidity – in a strategically agile company, “top management constantly adjusts courses of action and development trajectories and does not satisfy itself with periodic strategy reviews.” Thus, while agile in software development referred to a practical production philosophy and various team-level approaches to work, in management it continued to signify organizational-level meta-capabilities and the top leadership’s flexibility in strategic planning.

Amidst the growing popularity of agile in IT and the growing importance of IT for companies, management consultancies were quick to capitalize on the fashionability of the agile terminology, but the conceptual confusion regarding organizational-level capabilities (agility) and team-level practices (agile) continued. For example, in a 2015 issue of *McKinsey Quarterly*, one article describes companies as agile when they are able to strike a balance between speed and stability, measuring speed “by asking survey respondents how often they observed their leaders making important decisions quickly” (Bazigos et al., 2015,
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p. 34). This indication of a top-down decision-making structure might fit the leadership-oriented strategic agility, but it is not compatible with agile values. In contrast, another article in the same issue stays mostly at the individual level, describes agile as decentralized and intuitive, and explicitly mentions agile software development as an example of an experimental approach to decision-making (Birkinshaw & Ridderstråle, 2015).

The mainstream breakthrough of the software development version of agile in management was described in and further influenced by Rigby et al.’s (2016b, p. 50) Harvard Business Review article, which boldly declared:

> Agile innovation has revolutionized the software industry, which has arguably undergone more rapid and profound change than any other area of business over the past 30 years. Now it is poised to transform nearly every other function in every industry. ... Those who learn to lead agile’s extension into a broader range of business activities will accelerate profitable growth.

Articles about the agile ways of working began to appear more frequently in managerial journals. Some provided “lessons learned” reports of the agile transformations in specific companies such as Cisco Systems (Chen et al., 2016) and ING (Barton et al., 2018; Mahadevan, 2017). Others offered more generalized accounts and guidelines for implementing agile at a larger scale (Repenning et al., 2018; Rigby et al., 2018) or focused on how to make agile work in specific business functions like HR (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018) or the executive team (Rigby et al., 2020). Recently, some have also tried to bridge the gap between agile and strategic agility, claiming that although the two are distinguishable from each other, they are not mutually exclusive: Companies can implement strategic agility which enables them to “be agile” without adopting agile methods, and teams can “do agile” even if the organization has not incorporated agility into its overall strategy (see Doz & Guadalupe, 2021; Girod & Králík, 2021).

Today, adopting agile is commonly seen as a way for organizations to become less hierarchical, more flexible, and more responsive to a fast-paced and constantly changing operating environment. One of the most popular agile frameworks – and largely synonymous with agile today – is the Scrum methodology. Its idea is that small, autonomous, and cross-functional teams reorganize their project work into two-week cycles called “sprints” and have short daily meetings to stay updated on each other’s progress, changing direction as needed (Rigby et al., 2016b; Sutherland, 2014). Although the majority of practitioner articles predominantly report only on the benefits of agile and strongly encourage its adoption almost regardless of the field of business, more recently, articles have also identified and discussed the downsides and potential pitfalls of agile. These include loss of knowledge and lack of coordination (Annosi et al., 2020) as well as the undermining of careful planning and preparation (Bryar & Carr, 2021).
2.2 Translation

To explain how management fashions spread and become adopted, my study employs the notion of translation in addition to the management fashion approach. According to Latour (1986, p. 266–267), there are two ways of explaining the spread of an idea. The first is the model of diffusion, which assumes that an idea is endowed with an “inner force” that needs no explanation – what should be explained instead is the slowing down or acceleration of the idea as it is “spread through society which is seen as a medium with various degrees of resistance.” In other words, the diffusion model assumes the transfer of an idea “in its entirety” and consequently “everything may be explained either by talking about the initial force or by pointing to the resisting medium.” Thus, the diffusion model closely resembles literature on the transfer of knowledge and practices (e.g., Kogut & Zander, 1992; Szulanski, 1996).

In contrast, the notion of translation is often used in management studies in place of diffusion, because diffusion has been viewed as not properly evoking the social aspects of the circulation of managerial ideas (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). Latour (1986, pp. 267–268) explains:

This model of diffusion may be contrasted with another, that of the model of translation. According to the latter, the spread in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artefacts, goods – is in the hands of people; each of these people may act in many different ways, letting the token drop, or modifying it, or deflecting it, or betraying it, or adding to it, or appropriating it. ... Each of the people in the chain is not simply resisting a force or transmitting it in the way they would in the diffusion model; rather, they are doing something essential for the existence and maintenance of the token. In other words, the chain is made of actors – not of patients – and since the token is in everyone’s hands in turn, everyone shapes it according to their different projects.

A key assumption of Latour’s idea of translation is thus that ideas are modified as they are disembedded from one spatial and/or temporal context and re-embedded in another.

2.2.1 Approaches to translation research

In this study, I adopt the Scandinavian institutionalist view of translation, which builds on Latour’s ideas but emphasizes that each translation is unique. Translation has been studied from multiple perspectives, and they are arguably underpinned by distinct theoretical and philosophical approaches (O’Mahoney, 2016). For example, whereas the diffusion perspective is primarily building upon scientism and the neo-institutional expectations of isomorphism and homogeneity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), actor–network theory is committed to actualism (i.e., focusing on tracing “what happens”) and Scandinavian institutionalism is underpinned by social constructivism (O’Mahoney, 2016). In this way, the neo-institutionalist assumption that ideas diffuse relatively unchanged is challenged by the translation approaches (Røvik, 2016; Wæraas & Sataøyen, 2014). The “Latourian” actor–network theory stresses the

Scandinavian institutionalism is inspired by actor–network theory, but their underlying difference is that while actor–network theory subscribes to a realist ontology, Scandinavian institutionalism emphasizes the socially constructed nature of ideas (O’Mahoney, 2016). Further, the two approaches differ in their objects of study. Whereas actor–network theory stresses techniques that are used by someone to convince other actors to support a specific translation, Scandinavian institutionalism is primarily interested in how general management ideas flow globally and are adapted locally (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). Describing this continuous flow as the “travels of ideas” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), Scandinavian institutionalism in particular highlights the interpretive sensemaking processes when practices are decontextualized into ideas and applied again as practices in different contexts by organizational actors. True to its foundations within the theoretical archetype of social constructivism (O’Mahoney, 2016), a key principle of this translation approach is that “ideas or practices may diffuse under the same label but acquire different meaning when they are implemented in different organizational contexts” (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009, p. 190). This study adopts the Scandinavian institutionalist approach to translation, as my interest is primarily on the social (re-)construction of a management fashion and on how and why individuals and small teams make sense of it in their own contexts – I am less focused on the “tactics, maneuvers, tricks and discursive techniques to convince other actors to embrace a certain point of view” which are often investigated in studies applying actor–network theory (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016, p. 242).

The different focus areas of translation research are identified as translations, translation processes, and translators (Westney & Piekkari, 2020) – meaning the transformations of the ideas themselves (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), the social processes by which they become imitated and edited (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), and “those who translate management models into their own organizations” (Westney & Piekkari, 2020, p. 60). *Translations* are essentially local materializations of ideas in different forms, such as books or presentations (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). One of the main sources of these materializations is the work of management consultancies:

It is interesting that there seem to be “idea-bearing” organizations and professional roles which deal mainly with translations. This is, to an increasing extent, the role of professional consultants. Like traveling salesmen, they arrive at organizations and open their attaché-cases full of quasi-objects to be translated into localized ideas (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990). Often they bring in the whole equipment needed for the materialization of an idea, but almost always they spill some extra ideas which might then materialize through some local translation — or might not. They are designers and distributors, wholesalers and retailers in ideas-turned-into-things, which then locally once more can be turned into ideas-to-be-enacted. (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 36.)
Materialization can also come in the form of organizations that have adopted an idea with success and are therefore viewed as “exemplary” (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and “prototypes” for others (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). What follows is that other organizations will want to imitate their success, but contextual factors often necessitate the disembedding, modification, and re-embedding of the materialized ideas (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

As a consequence, actors engage in various translation processes in order to render ideas fit for their local needs. These processes of translation have been widely studied from multiple perspectives (e.g., Boxenbaum, 2006; Cassell & Lee, 2017; Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2020; Lamb & Currie, 2012; Zilber, 2006). For example, van Grinsven et al. (2020) examined the role of identity work in the translation process, whereas Westney and Piekkari (2020) drew from interlingual studies to shed light on the processes of domestication and foreignization of management ideas and practices. Sahlin-Andersson (1996) developed three sets of “editing rules” when an idea that has been successful in one company is translated by consultants as an exemplary for other companies to imitate. The editing rules concern the context (disembedding, abstraction), the logic (rationality, problem-solving), and the formulation (labeling, dramatization) of the idea. Andersen and Røvik (2015, p. 2) also asked whether “translation processes have any rules or regularities?” and developed three logics of local translation regarding lean management: changing the idea for own use, copying only the tools and leaving the philosophy out, and leaving out the most controversial parts to have better buy-in from employees. Røvik (2016) subsequently outlined four “translation rules” for knowledge transfer processes: copying, addition, omission, and alteration. An important difference between Sahlin-Andersson’s and Røvik’s research is that Sahlin-Andersson focuses on translations between organizations, whereas Røvik’s focus is on translations inside organizations (see also Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014). Like Røvik, I focus on the intra-organizational translation processes and build on his conceptual work, but I investigate translation in an empirical context, which enables me to specifically address his concern of outlining “a set of theoretical concepts that, so far, have been sparely empirically researched” (Røvik, 2016, p. 304).

More recently, and especially within international business studies where the growing complexity of multinational organizations has increased the need for translations across different organizational and geographical boundaries, research has theorized a “translation ecosystem” (Westney et al., 2022; see also Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). This ecosystem consists of translating actors at the micro level, organizations and organizational units at the meso level, and larger social and linguistic contexts at the macro level (Westney et al., 2022). This study specifically focuses on the translators at the micro-level, which I now turn to in more detail.

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1 The primary examples in this dissertation being the “Spotify model” of agile and the Dutch bank ING’s adoption of it – see section 2.2.3 below.
2.2.2 Translating actors

The Scandinavian institutionalist approach upholds Latour’s (1986, p. 267) remark that translation “is in the hands of people.” This stream of research views organizational actors not as passive adopters but active translators, and translation “is thus considered inseparable from the translators who are embedded in specific institutional contexts” (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2020, p. 391). Accordingly, organizational translation research “has centred on translators and translating processes in the receiving organization or context” (Westney et al., 2022, p. 4, see also van Grinsven et al., 2020).

At a more macro- and meso-level, Morris and Lancaster (2006) drew from Sahlins-Andersson’s (1996) editing rules to look at lean management in the UK construction industry. They concluded that policy makers and top managers of companies had difficulties in operationalizing lean management, which left room for project managers to translate it into various practices according to their own preference. Somewhat similarly, Wæraas & Sataøen (2014) investigated how communication directors in Norwegian hospitals adapted the practice of reputation management to their local contexts. Drawing on a linguistic approach, the authors identified three “translation rules,” which produced a field-level translation of reputation management. Although reputation management was translated into the Norwegian context, different hospitals translated it similarly, which somewhat challenged the Scandinavian institutionalist assumption that “every translation leads to the emergence of new and unique local versions” (Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014, p. 251).

Empirical micro-level research in the receiving organizations has looked at various translating actors and translation processes inside companies in more detail. For example, Boxenbaum (2006) studied how human resource managers translated the American diversity management practice into companies in Denmark, where societal values were somewhat in odds with diversity management’s principle of differentiated treatment of individuals. She found that in order to have it implemented in Danish companies, the HR managers strategically reframed the practice to highlight financial performance and grounded it in the locally more acceptable idea of corporate social responsibility. Attention at the micro-level has also been paid to middle managers as translators. For example, Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) reviewed the literature on the micro-practices of middle managers when translating management ideas. They concluded that middle managers organize and manage the “travels” of new ideas through managing the translation network and through legitimizing their own role in it. This happens particularly by using persuasive narratives in meetings and informal conversations as well as gaining visibility by exploiting the middle manager’s position as connecting different organizational layers. Recent empirical research on middle managers as translators include van Grinsven et al. (2020), who studied middle managers in charge of implementing the lean management fashion. They developed the perspective of translation-as-identity-work and explained “how individuals’ (subjective) values and goals can be central to their engagement in translation work” (van Grinsven et al., 2020, p. 889). In the field
Theoretical approaches of international business, Gutierrez-Huerter O et al. (2020) provided a framework of the micro-processes of translation of a practice from the headquarters of a multinational enterprise to its subsidiaries, identifying middle managers as the primary translators. Similarly, Outila et al. (2021) analyzed the translation of empowerment from the Finnish headquarters to a Russian subsidiary. They focused on the agency of middle managers in the receiving subsidiary “who often find themselves in situations where new management concepts are imposed on them rather than sourced on a voluntary basis” (Outila et al., 2021, p. 1582).

Finally, some research at the micro-level has also begun to include considerations of how employees translate management ideas. Andersen and Røvik (2015) studied lean management at three hierarchical levels (division heads, internal consultants, and staff) in a hospital setting. They found that while internal consultants tried to stay true to the lean ideology, managers left out parts of it and relabeled it “patient pathway work” to make it more acceptable to staff. Thus, “on its way through the hospital the idea of lean was translated, so that it eventually represented something different to the staff than it did to the top management that introduced it” (Andersen & Røvik, 2015, p. 8). Linneberg et al. (2019) explored how frontline employees in Danish hotels translated sustainability strategies into everyday practices. They distinguished a high-mode translation, meaning upper management’s transformation of the corporate sustainability idea into strategies, labels, and standards, from an operational-mode translation, where employees not only translated the top-down strategies in their work but also proactively engaged in bottom-up translation of sustainability through their own initiatives. Børve and Kvande (2022) showed how employees were transferred from an organization’s Norwegian headquarters to a newly established subsidiary in the United States to act as skilled translators of the Nordic values and principles in a new setting. They demonstrate that knowledge and experience both about the idea in the source context as well as about customs and traditions in the receiving context are key for successful translation between contexts.

Overall, these examples indicate that management fashions undergo meaningful changes as they travel inside organizations and are adapted by individuals and teams. However, the outcomes are often discussed at higher levels (such as “managers” or “staff”), which still underplays the dynamism of translation processes. For example, although Andersen and Røvik (2015) acknowledge that the top management’s idea of lean was different from how employees translated it, they did not articulate whether employees agreed on one single translation or whether the result was multiple different translations at the employee level. My study attempts to shed light on this important element of translation through acknowledging different employee translations of a management fashion.

2.2.3 Translation as a way to study management fashions

Translation has long been a suitable approach to study management fashions. For example, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996, p. 24) elaborate that while translation “sounds like a micro-process, something that happens between two people or maybe three,” what makes ideas spread lightning-fast is the fashionability
of those ideas. They then ask which translated fashions become institutionalized and which do not, arguing that much depends on their presentation by organizational actors during the translation process. This can involve rhetorically attaching qualities of dramatization, excitement, and convenience to the idea to make it seem both necessary and logical to adopt it to solve an organization’s problems. Using decentralization as an example, they explain:

[D]ecentralization can be almost any change in organizational structure, but by labeling actions in such ways, desired associations are created to master-ideas such as ... democracy and autonomy. Words are turned into labels by frequent repetition in an unquestioning mode in similar contexts, so that a possible “decentralization, why?” will give way to “decentralization, of course!” and therefore decentralization will become what we happen to be doing in our organization. (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 32.)

The translation approach has been used to study a wide variety of contemporary management fashions (van Grinsven et al., 2016). These include well-known examples such as Total Quality Management (Giroux, 2006; Kelemen, 2000), lean management (van Grinsven et al., 2020; Hultin et al., 2021; Morris & Lancaster, 2006), diversity management (Boxenbaum, 2006), empowerment (Outila et al., 2021), and corporatization (Abrahamson Löfström, 2015), as well as some of the less well-known fashions such as the “Gung Ho!” philosophy (McCabe & Russell, 2017) and the Dutch MANS concept (van Veen et al., 2011).

In this dissertation, I add agile to this stream of research that applies the notion of translation to studying management fashions. Agile has been translated from software development into other industries during the past decade, becoming a management buzzword along the way. An influential organizational translation of the agile management fashion was by the Swedish music streaming company Spotify, which adopted the Scrum agile methodology but modified it to make organization-wide knowledge sharing easier (Kniberg & Ivarsson, 2012). The “Spotify model” which added tribes, chapters, and guilds into the agile terminology became the standard reference for subsequent translations, such as the Dutch bank ING’s adoption of it (Barton et al., 2018; Birkinshaw, 2018; Mahadevan, 2017). The widespread popularity of the Spotify model outside software development shows how companies often imitate and refer to others that are widely regarded as successful and translate the ideas and practices of these “exemplary” organizations into their own contexts (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Similarly, my case company also utilizes a translation of the Spotify model of agile – to which it was introduced through ING, showing an example of the inter-organizational “chains of translation.”

All in all, the translation approach, with its connection to management fashion research, its emphasis on the “receiving end” of ideas, and its focus on the micro level actors, offers an analytical lens through which it is also possible to explore the active roles of employees in shaping and implementing the organizationally adopted management fashions in practice. Translation highlights the context-dependency of the interpretations of employees and thus enables explorations of how management fashions are adapted inside organizations.
2.3 Extending previous research

Overall, it has been well established that understanding the ebb and flow of management fashions is not trivial, because they have potential for “massive, sometimes helpful, but sometimes devastating, effects on large numbers of organizations and their employees” (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 280). However, one aspect of the “fashion lifecycle” and particularly one group of actors have been somewhat neglected in this stream of research: little is known about the role of the employees in organizations, who are influential contributors to the implementation of management ideas and visions into practices (Heusinkveld et al., 2011; McCabe, 2011). The absence of employees is notable both in articles that provide extensive lists of the various groups of actors within the management fashion literature (e.g., Fineman, 2001; Perkmann & Spicer, 2008) and in edited handbooks with whole sections devoted to these actors (Sturdy et al., 2019; Örtenblad, 2015).

The few studies on management fashions that do include the perspectives of employees (e.g., Abrahamson Löfström, 2015; Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011; Zbaracki, 1998) tend to present them as one of many groups of actors at the cost of depth of insight – and even then, the focus is mainly on other groups. This might be in part because management fashion research has largely focused on the creation and spread of ideas (Heusinkveld et al., 2011), and viewing employees as the end-users assumes that they do not have a significant role during these initial stages. As a result, while the processes of creation, spread, and intra-organizational adoption of management fashions are well-theorized and studied, their intra-organizational adaptation and implementation processes are still somewhat of a mystery (van Grinsven et al., 2020; Madsen & Stenheim, 2013; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). What happens inside the company after a new management fashion has been formally introduced by its leaders is often treated merely as a dichotomy of adoption/rejection (Røvik, 2011).

Another shortcoming of management fashion research is that its theorizing is largely based on “lifecycle” models that show static stages (Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019) and deterministic one-way processes. Bibliometric analyses, counting the number of articles (academic and/or popular) published on a fashion, display bell-shaped popularity curves – showing support to the assumption that “the sharp decline in one fashion [leads] to the sharp increase in the next fashion” (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, p. 723). However, even though the number of publications “cannot determine the degree to which ideas are ‘adopted’ by organizations,” there has been a tendency to assume “a symbiotic relationship between the pattern in the volume of discourse and trends in the adoption and rejection of ideas” in companies (Clark, 2004, p. 299).

As is with management fashion research, Scandinavian institutionalism and other perspectives of translation research have not paid extensive attention to employees as a potential key group of actors either (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016) – despite being more oriented towards the “receiving end” of ideas than management fashion research. Employees are largely overlooked as translators
of management ideas and instead treated as passive recipients of ideas translated to them by others. This is despite some studies claiming to include employees: For example, although Morris and Lancaster (2006) state that their study of the translation of lean management into the construction industry addresses translations “down to the level of application in workplace practices” (p. 214), they still only interviewed managers and consultants, thus effectively leaving employees as passive recipients of lean practices prescribed to them by others. Overall, as Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016, p. 312) put it, actors such as “frontline employees ... who may have significant influence on the translation process, have not been subject to any systematic analysis of their role.”

Translation studies have focused more on either the practices that travel and are translated or the actors who carry and translate them into organizations (Westney & Piekkari, 2020). This means that studies have traditionally stayed at the macro- and inter-organizational levels – although recently, there has been a turn away from the objects of translation towards the actors involved in translation work, including those who translate ideas inside their own companies (van Grinsven et al., 2020) as part of larger “ecologies of translation” (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017) or “translation ecosystems” that integrate the micro-level as well (Westney et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, most employees are still excluded from these studies as the focus is on the intra-organizational translators who are in decision-making positions (Gutierrez-Huert O et al., 2020; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014) such as HR managers (Boxenbaum, 2006) and middle managers (Outila et al., 2021, Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). Cassell and Lee (2017, p. 1101) point out that a characteristic of the studies in the field is that only those who have “sufficient access to power and resources to make the translations happen” are considered translators. They subsequently argue that more attention is needed to the translation work of those who are in subordinate positions. According to Børve and Kvande (2022 p. 57), “while there has been substantial research on translators such as policy makers, external experts, and social networks involved in translation processes and how they apply various strategies, we know little about internal employees as translators in the translation process.” A notable work in this regard – besides Børve and Kvande’s own article about translating workplace democracy to the US – is Linneberg et al.’s (2019) investigation of how corporate sustainability was translated by hotel employees. However, there is still a need for many more employee-focused studies at the intersection of translation research and management fashion research. These studies are needed for a theoretical understanding of the intra-organizational evolution of management fashions and the translation strategies of actors who are not in decision-making positions or considered powerful within their organization. Uncovering how average employees translate management fashions then enables the further development of management fashion lifecycles at a more nuanced level, by making employees an integral part of the translation process.

To extend the literatures on management fashion and translation and address some existing research gaps, my dissertation studies management fashions from the employee perspective. My main objective is to emphasize employees
as an important group of actors in the management fashion and translation literatures, and the employee perspective also enables a more dynamic view of the evolution of fashions. I highlight the under-researched key role of employees as the translators of management fashions, asking: *How do employees translate, adapt, and implement a management fashion that has recently been introduced into their organization?*

Moreover, to highlight an intra-organizational chain of translation (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), and in line with previous research (e.g., Andersen & Røvik, 2015), I also aim to show how managers influence employee translations through their efforts to legitimize management fashions. Managers are sometimes depicted as passive consumers of fashions, but I argue for their active role in choosing which fashions to adopt and how. I also critically analyze the role of the popular media and how it can be used for the legitimation of management fashions to organizational audiences, asking: *How do managers and the media legitimate management fashions in the eyes of employees?*
3. Methodology

3.1 An ethnographic case study

Studies on translation employing Scandinavian institutionalism tend to use qualitative approaches that are process-oriented, intensive, and rich in data (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). One such research approach is ethnography. Moore (2017, p. 165) describes ethnography as “particularly well suited to examining the nuances of day-to-day interactions in organisations, making the connection with the organisations’ embeddedness in wider social processes, and of exploring the meanings given to particular actions, events and symbols by their members.” As I embarked upon a process-oriented study of an organizational transformation, and was particularly interested in the day-to-day nuances of how employees translated the transformation, I chose to conduct an ethnography.

Ethnography means to describe a culture, and “the essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view” (Spradley, 1979, p. 3). The paradigmatic way in which ethnographic research aims to do this is through extended participant observation, meaning lengthy firsthand involvement in the setting under study (Sanday, 1979; Van Maanen, 1979). The ethnographer “becomes part of the situation being studied in order to feel what it is like for the people in that situation” (Sanday, 1979, p. 527) – or, as Van Maanen (2010, p. 242) elegantly puts it, undertaking ethnographic research entails that the researcher “actually goes out beyond the ivory towers of employment and comfort to live with and live like those who are studied.”

Ethnography is usually portrayed by its practitioners as something more than merely a data collection method. According to Moore (2011, p. 324), ethnography in the sphere of management studies “tends to refer to a research process in which the researcher’s own experiences, as observer and/or participant in the organization, form the core of the methodology.” Watson (2011) argues that it is useful to define ethnography not as a research method but as a writing style of social science. The wide range of actual research methods associated with the ethnographic tradition, besides observation, are for example interviewing, document analysis, and statistics collection. Van Maanen (1988, p. 73) highlights the role of the researcher and the interpretive nature of ethnography, elaborating that “ethnographic writing of any kind is a complex matter, dependent on an uncountable number of strategic choices and active constructions (e.g., what details to include or omit; how to summarize and present data; what voice to
select; what quotations to use).” Importantly, Van Maanen (2011) describes ethnography as focusing more on how and why than on how much or how many, which is in line with my research questions.

I combined the ethnographic approach with the case study as a research strategy. A case study examines a phenomenon in its naturalistic context, and with the help of a variety of data sources and data collection methods, its purpose is to confront theory with the empirical world (Piekkari et al., 2009). The strength of a case study is in providing a contextual explanation (Welch et al., 2011) of the object of study – the case – and it “generalizes to theory not to a population” (Welch & Piekkari, 2017, p. 716). Overall, my research approach can perhaps most accurately be described as an ethnographic case study (see e.g., Moore, 2011, and Small, 2009, for use of the term). I acknowledge that this is a contested term, as ethnographic research most commonly has a constructivist orientation whereas case study research often carries a positivistic connotation in organization studies (Mir, 2011). Thus, ethnographers are generally weary of the case study label. However, I side with Mir (2011, p. 320) in viewing that “case study analysis and ethnography can coexist, if there is a sufficient and conscious attempt to balance the richness of ethnography with the focus of the case study,” and this is what I have tried to do in this dissertation.

3.1.1 Epistemological stance

Epistemologically, my research is within the area of interpretivism and social constructivism, which are characterized by a subjective search for meaning, the understanding of subjective experience, and an emphasis on contextual “thick description” (Geertz, 1973; Welch et al., 2011). Social constructivism also underpins the Scandinavian institutionalist perspective on translation (O’Mahoney, 2016), making it a suitable perspective for my study epistemologically.

In line with other social constructivists, I also reject “the key ontological and epistemological tenets of positivism and post-positivism by arguing that social reality is not populated by objects but created by subjects through their experiences and relationships” (Neesham, 2017, p. 27). That is to say, rather than pursuing objective truths that are “out there” waiting to be discovered, I view knowledge production in the domain of organizational studies as concerned with establishing subjective and socially constructed “truths” in their specific contexts. According to Van Maanen (2011, p. 223), “there are many truths to be found that can help shape and order organizational life. But there is no requirement that such truths be universal or even consistent with one another.” I do not claim that my analysis offers the only possible explanation of the case; rather, I accept that other researchers may arrive at alternative explanations of my case as well.² What the interpretivists and social constructivists are concerned instead of objectivity or a “neutral” position is the validity and plausibility of their explanations, which I will also discuss later in this chapter.

² Full disclosure: I agree with Gummesson (2003) that all research is more or less interpretive.
3.2 Case company: OP Financial Group

OP Financial Group is the largest financial services group in Finland. As of December 2021, it consisted of 121 customer-owned independent cooperative banks and the group’s central cooperative along with its subsidiaries. The history of OP dates back to 1902, when the “Central Lending Fund of the Cooperative Credit Societies” was established. Its purpose was to provide cheap loans to the cooperative credit societies founded in many villages, which in turn loaned funds to local farmers in order to advance the farming conditions of the rural areas in Finland – at the time a poor, underdeveloped, and not yet independent nation. Cooperatives were often the only source of funding for local farmers, who could not get a loan from the savings and loan banks, which provided loans based on the value of property. OP’s history is therefore closely intertwined with the history of rural Finland, the nation’s rise to prosperity, and the Finnish “everyman.” (OP Financial Group, n.d.)

In 1930, at the height of their popularity, there were more than 1,400 cooperative credit societies (Lähteenmäki, 2019), but it took until the banking reform of 1970 that they became cooperative banks. By then, the number of cooperatives had decreased to 445, largely because of mergers, but their market share in loans to private customers had grown to approximately 20%. During the Finnish banking crisis of the early 1990s, OP fared reasonably well and was even able to buy parts of its competitors, which further strengthened its position. After the crisis, a noteworthy achievement was OP’s introduction of online banking as the first bank in Europe in 1996.

Today, OP employs about 13,000 people, making it the third largest private-sector employer in Finland. It holds a 40% market share in both mortgage and corporate loans and a 33% market share in non-life insurance, serving 3.1 million private customers – well over half of the Finnish population (OP Financial Group, 2022). Its heritage as the preferred bank of the rural population is reflected in the more than 300 branch offices around the country, which is triple the amount of its main competitor, Nordea Bank (Lähteenmäki, 2019). Indeed, OP is still present in many small towns that no longer have a grocery store or a post office (Schrey et al., 2020), although the number of cooperative banks is steadily declining due to mergers. A recent study argued that out of all companies operating in Finland, OP is the most significant for the Finnish economy (Ali-Yrkkö et al., 2021).

OP’s business is divided into three segments: Retail banking (for private and SME customers), Corporate banking (for corporate and institutional customers), and Insurance. OP’s cooperative banks are local deposit banks engaging in retail banking; they provide banking services to households, SMEs, agricultural and forestry customers, and public-sector entities. The central cooperative controls the group’s centralized services, develops its business, and acts as the strategic owner institution of the group. OP aims to be “the leading and most appealing financial services group in Finland” for its customers, employees, and business partners. (OP Financial Group, 2022.)
3.2.1 OP’s “diversified services company” strategy

The previous CEO of OP was appointed in 2007. His time at the helm of the group was largely characterized by a post-financial crisis macroeconomic and political environment: low interest rates, slow growth, and tightened regulation. Banks could no longer rely on their traditional earning models based on net interest income, but instead they needed to come up with new ways to stay profitable.

By 2013, the CEO had begun rebuilding OP’s mission and role within the Finnish society as more than a financial institution. The group made its first move in the healthcare sector in the beginning of 2013 by establishing an orthopaedic hospital operating under OP’s insurance segment (Press release, 2012). A few years later, business was expanded into a network of five private hospitals around Finland offering a more comprehensive set of health services, including occupational healthcare. The CEO explained:

We are a Finnish player and as a cooperative company, our aim is not to maximise profits. The decision to expand the health and wellbeing business fits our basic mission, as our focus is on promoting the prosperity and wellbeing of our customers. On the basis of excellent feedback from the customers and the experiences we have gained, we are now ready for go forward on a wider front. We believe that the health and wellbeing services we provide will develop into a significant new operating area alongside our traditional business areas, that is, banking, non-life insurance and wealth management. (Press release, 2014.)

Over the next few years, this vision crystallized: In order to survive the technological disruption of the financial industry, traditional banks like OP would have to find ways to compete both against small and agile fintech companies (e.g., internet-based consumer loan providers) as well as against tech giants like Apple who were looking to expand into banking. The new official long-term strategy was unveiled on June 2016, when OP announced that it aimed to “gradually change from a plain financial services provider to a diversified services company of the digital era” and invest up to 2 billion euros in digitalization over the next five years (Press release, 2016a).

In line with its new purpose and strategic direction, OP announced that it was planning to open medical centers in all Finnish regions to supplement its hospital network (Press release, 2016b). It also entered the mobility services business by introducing long-term electric car leasing based on a monthly fee, and soon expanded its portfolio with pay-per-minute short-term car sharing and a “flexible” rental car service (Press release, 2016c, 2017a, 2017b).

3.2.2 The case: OP Agile

Timo Ritakallio started as the new CEO of OP in March 2018. On his first day as the new leader, he sent an email to all then-12,000 employees of OP asking them to report on what is well in the group and what needs to be improved. Based on
the responses, he concluded that he would need to remove silos, clarify structures and responsibilities, and increase efficiency. (Lähteenmäki, 2018.) He recounted to me in an interview in 2020:

We had too much hierarchy and bureaucracy in the organization, and decision-making was slow, and issues were often delegated upwards to be decided just to be on the safe side. This created slowness and rigidity. And some people also said they had lately lost the meaning of their job, when in 2016 we had launched this strategy – a company that has operated in the financial sector for over a hundred years – that we would become this diversified company and we would start doing everything else. Hospitals and medical centers and rental cars and all sorts of things. ... And the people who were processing housing loans and sold home insurance and handled the everyday banking stuff here, they had this feeling of: “Doesn’t this matter at all anymore?” Because the talk of the town was only all these new things. I’m exaggerating a little bit, but these are roughly the issues that were brought forward in the responses. (Timo Ritakallio)

An inspiration for Ritakallio was also his own doctoral dissertation, in which he argued that Nordea Bank – OP’s main competitor in Finland – had performed well in the 2000s because of its composure during turbulent times (Ritakallio, 2016). He explained that the core elements of Nordea’s strategy were patiently shaped year after year, which over time resulted in a significant transformation and growth of the company while still maintaining internal consistency and fit between its strategic elements. Accordingly, when Ritakallio was appointed as the new leader of OP, it was anticipated that the bank would define its core tasks more carefully and venture less into unknown business sectors (Lassila, 2017), contrary to what the previous CEO had envisioned for the group.

The prediction turned out to be quite accurate. By June, the new leader had outlined the ways in which he wanted to renew the organization: sharpening its strategic focus and simplifying the organizational structure. A radical change in direction was thus crafted only two years after the grand unveiling of the previous one. Ritakallio set out to discontinue those activities of OP that were not related to its core businesses of banking and insurance. The aim was to help employees rediscover the meaning in their jobs and to rein in the costs of development that had ballooned under the previous leader. Essentially, while Ritakallio largely shared his predecessor’s view about increased competition and digitalization, his solution was arguably the exact opposite (Raeste, 2018). Instead of branching out to new business frontiers to find new ways to remain profitable in the rapidly digitalizing world, Ritakallio’s OP would redirect its focus on banking and insurance. In response to new agile competitors, the bank would transform itself into an agile organization as well. (Eskola, 2019; Press release, 2018a, 2018b).

OP hired consultancy firms Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey & Co. to assist with the agile transformation’s planning phase. OP used them to learn from other companies they had helped in similar agile transformation efforts. With the help of these consultancies, OP’s top management also made a visit to ING’s headquarters in late 2018 to see how agile was implemented there and to get inspiration, ideas, and lessons learned from them. During this visit, OP’s
management was able to see and feel what the agile ways of working were like and hear from several leaders and employees what were the biggest benefits gained and problems encountered during the transformation process. This visit strengthened a collective feeling among top management that changing the culture towards more agile would make sense and bring value to OP.

According to the senior executives of OP that I interviewed for my study, agile had been practiced at OP since at least 2011. The Finnish mobile giant Nokia had to lay off employees in its Oulu unit in Northern Finland and OP was thus provided with an opportunity to hire experienced software engineers who had been using agile methods in their work. OP subsequently established a development unit for mobile banking in Oulu (Press release, 2011), pioneering agile inside the company:

We’ve actually had agile in product development for a long time, already since 2011 when we started mobile development and electronic sales development in Oulu. We already had agile methods in use at the team level back then, so it wasn’t a new thing per se. (Executive 1)

In January 2019, OP’s central cooperative officially kicked off one of the most ambitious change programs in its history: “OP Agile”, a structural and cultural reorganization into a more agile company where employees were to work in self-managed teams and where hierarchy and the number of decision-making levels would be reduced. The aim of the strategic change was “to increase the agility and productivity of operations, as well as to improve customer experience through a better employee experience” (Press release, 2018c). The transformation began from the largest of the three business segments, Retail Banking, and was introduced to the other two segments as well as to the firm’s internal group services and group support functions a year later in January 2020 (Press release, 2019a, 2019b).

Organization-wide adoption of a management fashion is sometimes a result of scaling up positive experiences of an experiment somewhere within the organization. For example, before ING adopted agile throughout most of its headquarters, it had already adopted it in its Dutch IT unit (Barton et al., 2018). The agile ways of working had originally entered OP through software development in small teams within the IT department, which is the typical way of how agile is introduced to companies (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018; Rigby et al., 2016b). The new structure of OP was based on the structure of ING, which adopted agile already in 2015 (Birkinshaw, 2018). A pioneer of agile in retail banking, ING was inspired by companies of various sizes and fields of business, such as Spotify, Google, Netflix, and Zappos (Barton et al., 2018; Mahadevan, 2017). The widespread popularity of the Spotify model outside software development shows how companies often imitate and refer to others that are widely regarded as successful and translate the ideas and practices of these “exemplary” organizations into their own contexts (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). However, OP’s Timo Ritakallio stressed that “We wanted to build our own model, one that suits us” (Eskola, 2019, p. 16).
The inter-organizational translation of agile into OP by its executive management was crystallized as a cultural and structural framework designed to lower managerial hierarchy and increase team autonomy and self-management. The aim was to enable employees to become faster, more reactive to change, and more efficient while at the same time improving employee experience. The OP Agile framework combined the meeting structure of sprints, dailies, and retrospectives from the Scrum agile framework (see Sutherland, 2014) with the knowledge-sharing groups such as tribes, chapters, and guilds from the “Spotify model” (see Kniberg & Ivarsson, 2012). Emphasis was on giving teams the freedom to decide how to organize around their work: OP would gradually move “to an agile, self-managed operating model, which will give freedom and responsibility to teams, speed up decision-making, and guide the work according to customer needs” (Press release, 2018c). However, some executives also expressed concern over the OP Agile model becoming too complicated if teams were allowed to add extra features to the framework and wanted experimentation to happen within predetermined boundaries.

3.2.3 Research participants

During fieldwork, I closely followed two different teams inside OP’s headquarters, comparing and contrasting them. I selected the teams based on the logic of extreme cases, in other words, I tried to choose teams that were as different as possible. This helped me to draw out the employee translations of agile in different contexts. Table 2 presents a comparison of the two teams I observed in my study.

Table 2. Comparison of the two OP teams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expert team</th>
<th>Operations team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of employees</td>
<td>12–16 employees + leader</td>
<td>13–17 employees + leader + agile coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35–50 years old</td>
<td>25–30 or 55+ years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>60–70 % female</td>
<td>95–100 % female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Typically, graduated from a university</td>
<td>University students and recent graduates, or vocational education in the 1980s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>10–20 years with OP, some had held leadership positions in the past</td>
<td>A few years or up to 40 years with OP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main tasks of the team</td>
<td>Complex and often ambiguous:</td>
<td>Straightforward and often repetitive:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sales consulting for cooperative banks</td>
<td>• Correcting erroneous transactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Product and service pricing</td>
<td>• Correcting service fee charges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data analytics for sales</td>
<td>• Processing pension payment returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organizing and facilitating internal events</td>
<td>• Retrieving archival identifier codes of payments and transactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first of the two OP teams was an expert team which essentially worked as a team of internal consultants in their own areas of expertise. Their work could be described as complex and ambiguous. Their work also generally required much collaboration and advance scheduling, but it was nevertheless relatively easy to plan their work. Most of the expert team employees were around 35 to
50 years old, had a university degree and a tenure of 10–20 years in OP, and some had also held management positions in the past.

The second team, in contrast, was an operations team, which handled the bank’s back-office work with a customer service orientation. Their work was simpler and more repetitive, but their daily workload was more dependent on the bank’s external customers and thus more difficult to predict and plan far in advance. The operations team employees were generally either more than 55 years old and already had decades-long careers at OP in similar customer service and back-office positions, or approximately 25–30 years old and had joined OP more recently. The more senior employees had attended vocational school before joining OP, and the more junior employees had recently acquired or were pursuing university degrees – some were studying at the time of my observations and thus worked fewer hours. Both teams had a team leader, but the operations team also had a dedicated agile coach, who was assigned to help the team in adjusting to the agile ways of working.

### 3.3 Data collection

The main data sources for this study were non-participant observations, interviews with employees and senior executives, as well as hundreds of company documents and media texts (see Table 3 below). The purpose of collecting data from multiple sources was to understand the lived experiences of the research participants in a holistic and pluralistic way as OP’s agile transformation was unfolding – to produce “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of their realities and “capture action when it happens” (Abrahamson Löfström, 2015, p. 303) instead of retrospective accounts. I set out to conduct conventional (on-site) ethnographic fieldwork, but had to adjust my research design at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – like so many others. Consequently, there is an emerging debate in qualitative research – and in ethnography in particular – about the increased use of digital technologies to replace the “being there” and “being then” requirements for researchers (Eggeling, 2022; Howlett, 2022; Postill, 2017), which I hope to participate in through my research experiences as well.

I conducted a total of 140 days of ethnographic observations in the two teams. Of the 140 days, 80 days were on-site observations at OP’s offices and 60 days were “remote observations” when I participated in virtual team meetings via Microsoft Teams due to the pandemic. This “hybrid” form of ethnography is different from video ethnography, which is concerned with analyzing recorded video data (e.g., Smets et al., 2014); virtual ethnography, which considers the internet as the research field (e.g., Hine, 2017); and purely remote ethnography, which studies cultures from a distance (e.g., Postill, 2017).

I posit that utilizing both in-person observations and videoconferencing tools not only provided a more authentic description of modern organizational life (Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020), but it also reflected the lived experiences of the

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3 For example, Lupton (2021) set up a crowdsourced Google Docs document, in which researchers listed more than 30 innovative ways of conducting fieldwork during a pandemic.
employees. The employees were forced into remote work for much of the duration of this study, and so was I as the ethnographer, in order to "live with and live like those who are studied" (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 242). An added benefit of the remote observations was that they also enabled a more unobtrusive researcher presence. I documented the observational fieldnotes in a diary consisting of two main components for each day: the first component depicted the events of the day and the second was devoted to my personal reflections after the end of the day.

I also conducted 66 interviews with the employees of the two teams and seven with executives and senior managers, lasting 25 and 55 minutes on average, respectively (see Table 3). I interviewed members of the expert team three times (in fieldwork rounds 1, 2, and 4), members of the operations team twice (in rounds 1 and 3), and senior executives once (in round 3). I conducted some interviews in-person and others via videoconferencing, but I did not find that this affected the quality of the interviews as I had already observed and interviewed the employees in person prior to interviewing them remotely. I recorded all interviews and transcribed them in Finnish – the native language of me and the interviewees – in order to better preserve the original meanings and nuances of the interview situations (Outila et al., 2019). I also analyzed the interviews in Finnish and only translated relevant quotations into English.

The repeated employee interviews were (un)structured according to what Spradley (1979, p. 58) refers to as ethnographic interviews, or “a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants.” In addition to explicitly one-on-one conversations, I constantly engaged in chatting and casual conversations, which the research participants likely did not realize were data collection efforts on my part (and many of these conversations were indeed only friendly chats, not data collection).

The executive interviews were semi-structured, with the interview protocol focusing on the adoption of agile, as I especially wanted to understand the managerial translation – their side of the events between the new CEO’s appointment and the kick-off of the new agile organization. In my view, the managerial translation forms the basis for employee translations, so it was important to know what the employees “were working with” when they tried to implement the managerial vision of an agile organization in practice.

Executives are powerful individuals, trained communicators, and represent their company in the interview situation, so they may try to exert power over the interview situation (Ma et al., 2021; Welch et al., 2002). For example, Watson (2011, p. 211) is critical of the knowledge that can be gained by interviewing executives, because when they are interviewed in their managerial roles, they represent their employer and thus it is their job to “put organizational issues in a good light.” However, this was not a major issue for me as I was not trying to find the “objective truth” of what had happened, but rather explore how the executives framed and legitimized their actions.

Below, I detail my access and entry and the research design based on four rounds of data collection.
Table 3. The types and amounts of data collected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of data</th>
<th>Amount of data</th>
<th>Purpose for data collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee observations</td>
<td>140 days in total:</td>
<td>Authentic “thick descriptions” (Geertz (1973) of modern organizational life through immersion into the realities of employees in order to “live with and live like those who are studied” (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 242).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 53 days on-site (11/2019–03/2020)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 30 days remotely (05/2020–06/2020)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 27 days on-site (10/2020–11/2020)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 30 days remotely (01/2021–03/2021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>73 interviews in total:</td>
<td>Employee interviews: Getting to know them as individuals, understanding backgrounds and daily work experiences, providing a forum for expressing opinions and interpretations of organizational change. Executive interviews: Understanding the managerial translation and legitimation, including the whys, hows, goals, and lessons learned of the change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 66 employee interviews (avg. 25 min)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 7 executive interviews (avg. 55 min)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media texts</td>
<td>100+ newspaper and magazine articles, of which 36 selected for further analysis</td>
<td>Analyzing the “discursive legitimation” (Vaara et al., 2006) of the OP Agile transformation by the popular media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal surveys</td>
<td>12 quarterly “Pulse” surveys sent to all of OP’s employees, 2019–2021</td>
<td>Tracking overall employee experience (eNPS) and understanding the overall employee sentiment and issues (free-form answers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal documents</td>
<td>70+ documents, including:</td>
<td>Information about the company strategy, organizational structure, key figures, agile role descriptions, leadership principles, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Business reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Presentations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Training materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press releases and intranet news articles</td>
<td>200+ news articles and 40 press releases</td>
<td>Constructing the “OP Agile” timeline and keeping track of the progress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.1 Access and entry

High-quality access to the fieldwork setting is crucial to the success of any qualitative research (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). Further, understanding management fashions at the micro- and intra-organizational levels typically requires in-depth interviews and observational fieldwork methods, which are time-consuming and require prolonged access to companies (Madsen & Stenheim, 2013). Watson (2011, p. 204) maintains that there are often “enormous difficulties of gaining the very high grade of research access that is needed to prepare an ethnography,” which is why I was unusually lucky in terms of access negotiations.

On June 14, 2019, my supervisor called me with an interesting proposal: She had discussed with OP’s Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO) about the idea of someone conducting research about OP Agile, which had recently begun. As organizational (culture) changes are usually lengthy processes rather than one-off events, they had determined that ideally, the researcher should be able to follow the change as it unfolds and thus conduct longitudinal research, possibly of ethnographic nature. Having some background and interest in banking, I was happy to accept this task.

After a meeting with OP on August 23, it became clear in that meeting that my access would be effectively unrestricted by the company, as the CHRO herself was quite enthusiastic about me doing research related to their employee experience. Gaining this primary access (the initial permission from an organization
to do field research there; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) is normally one of the most difficult parts of the qualitative research process, and all the more so in ethnography (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016; Watson, 2011) or when doing research on management fashions (Madsen & Stenheim, 2013), so I was off to a promising start.

The next step in gaining access was an October meeting with the management team of the Retail Banking segment, in which my permission to become an insider in the organization was formally cemented. I received a company laptop, company email address, and access to OP’s intranet, and a senior HR leader in retail banking was named as my contact person in the company.

Three weeks went by. Then, emailing began about the practicalities related to my fieldwork, such as my access badge, identification badge, laptop, username, remote work permission, and the like. I received them on November 6, and on the same day I also had a meeting with the agile coaches of the two tribes where I was to conduct my observations. The purpose of the meeting was to get a sense of the current state of the change process and learn more about agile and Scrum. We agreed that it would be best for me to start by attending the next tribe demo in a few weeks.

On November 19 I attended a tribe-level demonstration meeting with the purpose of finding myself a team that I could join. I briefly presented myself in the beginning and then followed the ten actual demo presentations. There was one person in the demo who was clearly the leader of her own team, and who everyone seemed to know and hold in high regard. She was also the only one to give two presentations, and the second one was about how the employees of the tribe were coping with the organizational change, so I went to talk to her after the demo ended. She was very excited about me wanting to join her team to do research, and we went upstairs where she introduced the other team members to me. We agreed that I would start the next day.

Twenty-two weeks after I first learned of the opportunity to conduct research at OP, I was finally in.

### 3.3.2 Fieldwork timeline

After gaining the primary access, I began the observations and interviews of employees. I collected data over 17 months in four data collection rounds of two to three months each between November 2019 and March 2021. During the first and second rounds, I observed both the expert team and the operations team, but the third round of observations was devoted only to the operations team and the fourth round only for the expert team. In total, I observed the expert team for 82 days and the operations team for 75 days (on 17 days I was able to remotely observe both, which brings the total number of days to 140). The overall timeline of my fieldwork is presented in Figure 2.
Methodology

Round 1: Familiarization (November 2019 – March 2020)

The first round of observations and interviews was from November 20, 2019, to March 3, 2020. I spent 26 workdays with the expert team at OP’s Helsinki headquarters and then 27 workdays with the operations team, first at an office building next to the headquarters where half of the team was located and then at OP’s Tampere office where the rest were working. Besides observations and informal interaction, I interviewed all 13 members of both teams, which resulted in a total of 53 days of observations and 26 recorded interviews – alongside two discussions which were not recorded. One was with the team leader of another expert team and one was with the new agile coach of the operations team.

The main purpose of the first round was establishing myself in the teams and gaining secondary access (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016) – which meant building trust, familiarizing myself with the employees and their personal histories, and sharing my own background with them. I also set out to produce a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) – to gain an understanding of the work they did and record as closely to as possible the ways in which they currently translated the agile ways of working into their daily practices, including their views regarding OP Agile.

Round 2: Remote working (May 2020 – June 2020)

Before my second round of fieldwork began, there was an important chain of events, vastly consequential both in terms of my research design and methodology as well as in terms of the worklife of the participants in my study: the spread of COVID-19, its declaration as a global pandemic, and the ensuing complete lockdown of the Finnish society in mid-March. OP used the Microsoft Teams platform, so it became the medium through which I conducted my fieldwork – sitting at the kitchen table at home, staring at my laptop screen, and listening to people conversing through my headphones.

The key to why I was able to conduct these remote observations in the first place was perhaps that I had already met the members of the two teams in-person and gained secondary access during my round one of fieldwork. I joined the expert team on May 4 but soon realized that I could in fact remotely observe both teams every day, as their daily meetings were at different times and the
other meetings fell mostly on different days. From May 18 to June 18, I did just that.

The upside was that when I was able to observe both teams simultaneously and therefore compare and contrast them on a daily basis, their differences became more explicit to me. The two main downsides were that I could not see the team members unless they had their cameras on, which mostly was not the case, and that I could not observe anything else than the team meetings, because all informal interaction would also happen over Microsoft Teams, via team members calling each other – and obviously not inviting me to the call. This latter problem was the most concrete in the four days when the expert team cancelled their daily meeting because they had conflicting events or were busy with deadlines, and I was thus only able to observe the operations team. In addition, on one day (May 26) the remote access to the OP network was not working at all so I could not observe anything.

During the second round, I spent 26 days with the expert team and 21 days with the operations team, amounting to a total of 30 days of observations. As part of my remote observations, I started saving selected chat messages that were posted in the group chats of the operations team. In addition, I interviewed all 12 members of the expert team through Microsoft Teams – all had their cameras on, and I always had my camera on as well to facilitate more personal interaction. As COVID seemed to calm down towards the summer, I was able to end the second round of observations by participating in an in-person meeting of the expert team on June 15, where members were ecstatic over seeing each other face-to-face again.

Rounds 3 and 4: Uncovering experiences (October 2020 – March 2021)

By the beginning of my third round of observations in October, the number of COVID cases had remained sufficiently low and I could once again observe the operations team in person. I learned that the team members were divided into smaller groups and spread to different locations inside the headquarters, with two members colocating near some other team that was not enthusiastic about me going there due to the pandemic, so I did not see these two members face-to-face at all. From October 7 to November 26, I spent 27 days with the operations team in Helsinki and Tampere. I also interviewed all team members as well as the agile coach and the team leader. During the third round, I directed my inquiries towards uncovering the experiences of employees related to the new agile organization and ways of working.

In December, it became clear that 2021 would see everyone go back to remote mode again. My fourth round of observations, which I planned to spend with the expert team, was again conducted remotely. I joined the team on January 11 and spent 30 days observing their three-times-a-week online meetings. I again interviewed all team members (for the third time), aiming now to uncover their experiences after two years of agile working, around one quarter of which had

4 Curiously, the two halves of the team had still not met each other in person, only virtually. In my view, this made them better equipped to adjust to teamwork during social distancing, but it also made it more difficult for them to even begin to adapt agile to their work.
been remote agile work. The fourth round, and simultaneously the entire fieldwork period, concluded on March 19, 2021.

3.3.3 Exiting from the field

The exit process from the field can be difficult, even emotional, and it might alter the researcher’s identity (Michailova et al., 2014). It was not, I think, much easier to exit after the research design based on multiple rounds of observations than exiting after a lengthy and continuous observation period, despite me having already “pseudo-exited” a number of times. I found myself repeatedly having guilty conscience regarding the fact that I had not updated my research participants on the progress of my research, and I often wondered how they were doing. In a way, I have still not yet exited completely – and will not do so in the near future (or ever? See Coffey, 1999) as it seems I am continuing research and collaboration activities with OP beyond this dissertation. For example, the Chief HR Officer of OP is the co-author of Essay 1, and the development of this essay into an academic publication is a lengthy process, so I will continue to interact with her – the “internal elite sponsor” of my dissertation inside OP – in the following months and possibly years.

According to Michailova et al. (2014, p. 139), exiting may create a new beginning rather than a closure for research, and “theorizing may occur through rather than after exiting since exiting enables the researcher to maintain a dual state of connect and disconnect with the phenomenon under study.” I feel this dual state accurately portrayed my situation during the writing of this dissertation in 2022 and beyond. Besides the continuing development of Essay 1, another example of this is my use of the OP Agile case as teaching material in classes relating to people management, employee experience, and the agile ways of working.

3.4 Data analysis

One of the difficulties of ethnographic research is “the need to identify with and at the same time to remain distant from the process being studied” (Sanday, 1979, p. 527), because “fieldwork of the immersive sort is by and large definitional of the trade” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 219). Undertaking fieldwork in four rounds made it possible for me to alternate between periods of deep immersion and critical distance to the phenomenon under study, which helped in overcoming the threat of “going native.” I began analyzing my data already in the middle of data collection, and this shaped the topics of my later probes and interview questions. I started to engage with the translation literature during the first round of data collection and reflection, when it became evident that employees were adapting agile into their own work contexts; this added a first layer of theory to my analysis. Shortly thereafter, I applied the management fashion lens in my study after some consideration of “What is this a case of?” as well as discussions with colleagues (see section 3.4.3 below). I also periodically presented my initial findings to OP’s HR and top management teams, receiving valuable feedback and additional insights into their views. The theorizing process could be
best described as “abductive” due to multiple redirections (see Table 4 below) and the continuous interplay between data and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). I utilized the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012), and also engaged in critical discourse analysis of the media texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, Vaara & Tienari, 2008).

### 3.4.1 Thematic analysis

During data analysis, I re-read the fieldwork diary entries and interview transcripts several times to start making sense of them. I used company materials such as press releases and intranet news articles to gather data from multiple sources and allow for different interpretations of the information whenever it was suitable. Then, focusing on one form of data at a time, I performed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” and “a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). It can be used to identify patterns within data in relation to research “participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). As such, it was a suitable data analysis method for my research purposes. Thematic analysis consists of six phases, which are: Familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To start thematically analyzing my data, I once again re-examined it (Phase 1) and then drafted some initial codes (Phase 2). For example, when analyzing the observational fieldnotes and interview transcripts for Essays 2 and 3, I highlighted all instances of employees talking about what agile means to them, how they feel about it, what kinds of experiences they have had regarding it, and why they thought the organization was adopting it. Similarly, when analyzing the interviews with managers for Essay 1, I highlighted all passages where they argued in favor of the organizational change and where they discussed their views of what agile is and how they envisioned it should be implemented at OP. I also did this for the media texts and press releases. Based on the insights that emerged from the data and from discussions with my coauthors, I began to develop broader themes such as “legitimation strategies,” “translations of agile,” and “issues with remote agile” in order to make sense of what had observed in the field (Phase 3).

After that, I reflected on some initial findings, such as “managers legitimate agile through storytelling,” “expert team employees translate agile differently from operations team employees,” and “remote agile does not work in large teams.” I then looked carefully for both supporting and contradicting evidence for these initial draft findings within the themes (Phase 4), skeptical of my claims and asking hermeneutic questions such as “Have I understood the issue correctly?” and “How might I be wrong?” (Mees-Buss et al., 2022) as my fieldwork progressed and I became more knowledgeable of the case. An example of
this was when I first interpreted that the operations team was resisting the implementation of agile – after further analysis I reached another conclusion which was that the team did their best to try to implement agile at first but then simply became indifferent towards it as the implementation was not successful. After reviewing the themes and potential findings in this way (Phase 5), I set out to produce the written reports in the form of the three essays of the dissertation, including selecting the most powerful interview quotes and media text extracts that supported my analysis and argumentation (Phase 6).

I also asked the research participants to validate my findings. The reactions of employees were almost always positive and encouraging – for example, one expert team employee described that reading Essay 3 brought tears to her eyes because it so accurately captured the problems of remote work she had encountered. Whenever the participants had some issues with my findings, I critically re-examined them to see whether some other interpretation would be possible, which added a layer of plausibility to my explanations. This was especially the case when presenting my findings to OP’s HR team, who did not always agree with the more critical views that I took towards agile. Nevertheless, the company was welcoming and appreciative of the outsider’s perspective and the information that I contributed, and in fact, OP implemented some adjustments to their HR and agile processes based on my findings. I did not claim to possess objective truths, but rather I was able to “sell” my subjective theoretical understanding of the empirical situations to the people who were part of them. This helped me in feeling more confident about making the “conceptual leaps” (Klag & Langley, 2013) from data to theory – and back to data again.

3.4.2 Critical discourse analysis

As one of the objectives of this dissertation was also to explore how managers and the media discursively legitimized the OP Agile transformation in the eyes of employees, I also collected newspaper and magazine articles related to OP. I manually searched the most prominent Finnish news outlets, such as the leading daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* and the leading weekly business magazine *Talouselämä*, for all articles related to OP or its new CEO Timo Ritakallio between the launch of the previous strategy in June 2016 and the quieting down of the reporting on OP’s strategic turnaround around July 2021. This search resulted in well over a hundred articles and news stories, which I scanned for relevance, identifying the texts that had at least some mention of OP’s strategic change. I excluded, for example, texts that solely focused on OP’s quarterly earnings reporting or on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OP’s business. In the end, I selected 36 media texts for further analysis. Further, I browsed through 11 years of press releases as supplementary data, beginning with the establishment of OP’s mobile development unit in April 2011 and continuing until the completion of the sale of OP’s hospital business in July 2021. These events can be seen as symbolizing the beginning and the end of OP’s strategy under its previous CEO.

To further analyze the selected media texts beyond thematic analysis, I performed critical discourse analysis when drafting Essay 1. According to Wodak
and Meyer (2009), it is a research approach concerned with language as a social practice, and critical discourse analysis research emphasizes “the importance of studying texts as concrete instances of discourse use and of analyzing the microlevel linguistic elements therein” (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). I paid particular attention to the role of the media “in the complex production, transmission, and consumption processes that create senses of legitimacy/illegitimacy around specific organizational phenomena” (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 806). Importantly, I did not take the data at face value, but also performed a critical reading “between the lines” to explore the underlying meanings and assumptions of the media texts. I searched for instances where the media talked about agile and self-managed organizations in a “matter-of-fact” tone, meaning that subjective opinions were presented by media commentators as objective facts. For example, one article stated as a fact that traditional organizations are rigid and slow to react, whereas self-management enables flexibility and fast decision-making. Similarly, after the previous CEO of OP retired, the construction of a new headquarters building during his time was retroactively explained by media commentators as an evident waste of OP’s money for a pompous monument for the retiring CEO – this was despite the fact that construction of the new headquarters was initiated seven years before he retired. In addition, there was a clear logic articulated behind the need for a new headquarters, and my research indicates that no-one in the new agile organization thinks the new building is anything but a great place to work.

Overall, my purpose was to “understand the micro-level discursive strategies used in legitimating contemporary organizational phenomena” (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 789) – here, a strategic change and the adoption of a management fashion. Following on the footsteps of Vaara and Tienari (2004) and Vaara et al. (2006), I was able to uncover the overall discursive strategy of the media – namely, that it approached OP’s change by “making it personal” in almost every article by contrasting OP’s old and new strategies through its old and new CEO. I categorized the media texts into those that mentioned both CEOs by name and those that did not and found that 29 of the 36 articles (80 %) did this. After this finding, I further focused my analysis of media texts to those that proved the richest in terms of this personification of OP’s strategic change.

3.4.3 Redirections

The abductive research approach allows for redirections of the study, which help in achieving a match between theory and data and in discovering previously unknown dimensions of research problems (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). I list the three redirections of my research in Table 4 below.

I initially set out to study the agile ways of working themselves and how agile could best be applied to the banking context. However, when I was asking my research participants what they thought agile is, I received all kinds of answers – or to put it differently, I did not really get answers – which puzzled me. Then there was an important event (in February 2019) that later became the first redirection of my abductive research process; it enabled me to move from the agile realm into the management fashion realm. As I was presenting my research for
colleagues, I received a memorable piece of advice: “Don’t become Mr. Agile!” The implication was that agile, a management fashion, would soon give way to something else, and if I positioned myself as an expert of agile, my research would have little relevance in the future. After the first round of observations concluded in March, I spent some time reflecting on this piece of advice, essentially asking myself: “What is this study a case of?” I eventually decided that I should heed the advice. This took me to theorizing agile as a management fashion and subsequently finding out that the employee perspective is missing from the fashion literature.

Table 4. The three redirections of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Initial idea</th>
<th>Trigger</th>
<th>Revised idea</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical redirection</td>
<td>Agile as an emerging management concept</td>
<td>Advice: “Don’t become Mr. Agile!”</td>
<td>Agile as a management fashion</td>
<td>Essay 2: “Employees as translators of a management fashion”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual redirection</td>
<td>How agile can be applied in banking</td>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>How agile can be applied in remote work</td>
<td>Essay 3: “Remote agile: Problems, solutions, and pitfalls to avoid”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological redirection</td>
<td>On-site observations</td>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>Combining remote and in-person observations</td>
<td>Essay: “Organizational hybrid ethnography” (not included in the dissertation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COVID-19 became the second redirection of my dissertation – only this time it was a methodological and contextual redirection instead of a theoretical one: my second round of observations transitioned from physical to online, and I was mostly observing the remote, rather than the agile, ways of working. Later, as I was analyzing my fieldnotes, I realized I would be able to combine remote work and agile into a special case of “remote agile” in which the central ideas of agile such as team colocation, high engagement, and efficient knowledge sharing became problematic and needed to be resolved somehow. This resulted in the writing of Essay 3 of my dissertation.

In addition, as I had to adjust my research design due to remote work, I developed a novel approach to ethnographic fieldwork. My research participants alternated between on-site and remote teamwork with the ebb and flow of the pandemic waves and accompanying restrictions, so I was also alternating between in-person observations on-site and remote observations via live videoconferencing. I call this “organizational hybrid ethnography.” Compared to purely remote or virtual observations, I argue that the researcher is in a better position to establish trust with participants in person which makes subsequent remote or virtual observations easier (cf. Hall et al., 2021). Compared to purely on-site observations, I argue that the researcher gets a more authentic experience of the participants’ work lives and is best capturing work in modern organizational settings (Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020), since hybrid work arrangements are becoming more common in the workplace.
3.5 Quality criteria

In determining the quality of qualitative research, Welch and Piekkari (2017) point out that the researcher should be open about their methodological choices and argue for their suitability for the research setting. Similarly, Mahadevan and Moore (2023) list the three criteria of “excellent” ethnography: *positionality*, *plausibility*, and *intersubjectivity* – honesty about the researcher’s subjectivity and unique experiences, whether the researcher’s account is believable or not, and how well the researcher is able to convey “tales of the field” to the reader. The researcher is thus regarded as an instrument and “part of the method” in ethnography, and different researchers will unavoidably produce different findings of the same study. This means that reproducibility (i.e., replicability) is not a key concern for ethnographic research (Welch & Piekkari, 2017).

Welch and Piekkari (2017) list procedures that enhance the validity and plausibility of research and use an interpretive ethnographic study (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011) – which this dissertation also is – as an example. Among the procedures are prolonged engagement in the field, use of multiple sources of data, explicitly discussing the identity of the author, follow-ups with research participants, taking field notes and transcribing interviews, allowing the voices of the research participants to be heard, and grounding the analysis in the context. I employed all of the above procedures in order to enhance the plausibility of my study as detailed in this chapter. One of the procedures, explicitly discussing the identity of the author, means that the researcher is *reflexive* about their positionality in the field. In ethnographic research, “the ethnographer’s own feelings, experiences and perspectives become part of the data and of the analytical process” (Moore, 2017, p. 162). Thus, in connection to this highlighted role of the researcher in ethnographic research and the subjective nature of the approach (Moore, 2011; Van Maanen, 1988), it is crucial to be reflexive about one’s philosophy, assumptions, and previous experiences.

One important issue regarding reflexivity is to state what my own background and familiarity is with the Finnish retail banking industry in general and with OP in particular. Before I began my doctoral studies in 2017, I worked for another Finnish retail bank for more than four years and for OP for seven months. I view this as an advantage, because in addition to speaking the language – both in terms of the native and the professional – prior work experience assisted me “to make sense of my observations and the participants’ narratives” to preserve the authenticity of their perspectives (Caprar, 2011, p. 612). Therefore, I view my identity and personal history as a source of understanding and interpretive insight (Welch & Piekkari, 2017).

During my dissertation research, I had the role of a project ethnographer, invited by the Chief HR Officer of the case company OP to document the organizational transformation from an outsider’s perspective. The CHRO, as an “internal elite sponsor” for my research, was of crucial importance (Welch et al., 2002) for my access and overall ability to conduct the study. She also has a doctoral degree and thus was familiar with the nature and procedures of fieldwork – later, she became the second author of Essay 1. As a member of OP’s top management team, she was closely involved with the agile transformation as well as...
one of the very few managers commenting on it in the media. Although her views might be somewhat biased towards showing the company in a positive light, this uniquely reflexive insider’s perspective is nevertheless invaluable for the purposes of my study, as it enriches the quality of insights in the form of “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; see e.g., Hatch et al., 2015, for a similar argument). It is important to also note that despite high-quality and unrestricted access, I was not employed by OP at any time during this research project nor was I paid by the bank to do research there.

My familiarity with the case context and company helped me in achieving what is called interpretive rigor, for example, through being able to relate questions such as “What is really going on here?” to my own experiences some years ago and concluding that in many ways, little had changed. By interpretive rigor, I refer to the questioning of my findings and thinking about better explanations, as opposed to procedural rigor which is more concerned with showing a systematic data structuring process (Mees-Buss et al., 2022). One example of this interpretive rigor was how I initially determined that the managerial translation of agile was well-suited for the expert team, but later I established that the experts had cherry-picked only its useful practices, thus creating their own translation of agile which they were able to benefit from in their work.

I was also reflexive about my own role as a sympathetic listener and skeptical observer during fieldwork (Moore, 2011; Van Maanen, 1988). The sympathy that I had towards my research participants showed for example in the interview situations, which many interviewees called “therapy sessions” because they could open up to me about their work and other issues. Some employees shared very personal and emotional things with me – in a couple of interview situations during the pandemic-mandated social distancing periods, the interviewee was even crying. Becker (1967) rejected the idea that it would be possible to do research without personal sympathies, and I agree. He further claimed that “the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on” (Becker, 1967, p. 239). As a result of sympathizing with employees and essentially being “on their side,” my skepticism showed the most when initially interpreting the managerial translation of agile and trying to determine whether or not it was disadvantageous for employees. However, through “a process of constant questioning of both theory and evidence, of both [my] own subjective understanding and that of those [I] research” (Mees-Buss et al., 2022, p. 414), I was able to balance my sympathy and skepticism and establish plausibility for my findings.

Finally, I am also aware that in writing Essay 3, I myself became a “fashion setter” in the way academics and academic journals participate in the fashion-setting process through their research, publications, and teaching (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Bort & Kieser, 2019; Tienari, 2009). However, the goal of Essay 3 is not to promote agile as better or worse than other management fashions or organizational phenomena – and certainly not as a panacea. Rather, we aim for a balanced evaluation of the pros and cons of agile in remote work and focus on providing practical tools for companies who wish to adapt the agile ways of working in a remote or hybrid context.
4. Summaries of the essays

4.1 Contributions of the essays

Each of the three essays contributes in a distinct way to the overall research objective of the dissertation, which is to shed light on how employees translate a management fashion that has been introduced into their organization by its top managers. Essay 1 serves as a precursor for the other two essays by focusing on the managerial translation and legitimation of the agile fashion by OP’s managers and the popular media. In other words, its aim is to show how management fashions can be made legitimate in the eyes of employees. When management fashions travel within organizations, they get translated multiple times at different levels of hierarchy and through different logics (Andersen & Røvik, 2015; Linneberg et al., 2019). The managerial translation of a management fashion into an organization forms the basis for employee translations inside the organization, which is why understanding the managerial perspective is helpful in trying to understand the employee perspective.

Essay 2 then presents the employee translations of agile. Its main interest is to find out how employees, as the end users of management fashions adapt them in their daily work. Management fashion theorizing is based on lifecycle stages (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019) and bell-shaped popularity curves where one fashion is always replaced by the next (Abrahamson, 1996; Huczynski, 1993). In contrast, because I specifically focus on employees as the translators of management fashions, it enables me to investigate the different intra-organizational translations of fashions, which in turn leads me to uncover a more complex and nuanced view of them. This includes outlining a dynamic model of the evolution of fashions and extending the existing literature by proposing an intra-organizational feedback loop for them.

Finally, Essay 3 focuses on the continued translation of agile during the COVID-19 pandemic – an external shock which forced the adaptation of agile into a remote work setting. The essay, which is written for a practitioner audience, aims to find out how to make agile work best remotely through exploring what the main drawbacks to using agile in remote work are and what could be done to mitigate these drawbacks. Based on the remote work translations of OP’s employees, Essay 3 identifies five problems and presents solutions to implementing agile in a remote setting and discusses the situations and types of teams in which the different aspects of remote agile work and do not work.
4.2 Essay 1

Reunamäki, Riku, & Länsisalmi, Hannakaisa

*How managers and the media discursively legitimize management fashions*

Among the most influential “fashion setters” creating and spreading fashions are management consultants and gurus (Collins, 2019; McCabe, 2011; O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016; Wright, 2019) as well as business magazines and best-selling books (Barros & Rüling, 2019; Giroux, 2006; Røvik, 2002). However, the adopting actors on the demand side of fashions – especially the top managers of organizations – are less researched within management fashion studies and often portrayed merely as passive recipients of ideas sold to them by the suppliers of fashions (Bort & Kieser, 2019; Heusinkveld et al., 2011; van Veen et al., 2011). At times, managers have even been presented as “gullible consumer[s] of concepts” (van Veen et al., 2011, p. 159) or as “dupes of influential [idea] carriers” such as gurus and consultants (Morris & Lancaster, 2006, p 207), which underplays the role of top managers in fashion adoption.

One critical issue for managers is to establish and maintain the legitimacy, the acceptance by the environment, of their organization (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, if managers are considered “gullible dupes,” this suggests that the legitimacy of management fashions – and thus by extension the legitimacy of the organizations that adopt them – is largely in the hands of external consultants. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999, p. 734) voice a “cynical conclusion that thousands of gullible senior executives can be duped by cunning management-knowledge entrepreneurs.” The point of departure for Essay 1 was that we had observed this not to be the case in our case company. On the contrary, we had observed the active roles of senior executives and the media in connection with the adoption and legitimation of a management fashion.

We undertook a case study of how agile was legitimized in OP by its senior executives. Led by the new CEO, the adoption of agile was a radical change in strategy only two years after the grand unveiling of the previous one under the former CEO. Thus, the transformation called for “discursive legitimation” (Vaara et al., 2006; see also Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) in order to maintain that agile was not just another flavor-of-the-month managerial fad. As OP’s strategic change received widespread attention in the Finnish press, we also explored how the media can participate in the legitimation of management fashions – and at times, make coherent legitimation of the desired change more difficult. Accordingly, we set out to answer the following research questions: *How do senior executives legitimize the adoption of management fashions? What is the role of the media in legitimizing management fashions?*

Our primary sources of data for Essay 1 were the transcripts of seven interviews with senior executives and 36 selected newspaper and magazine articles in the Finnish press connected with OP’s old or new strategy. Comparing and contrasting the interviews and media texts provided us with interesting insights into two distinct change narratives that were somewhat complementary but largely approached the change from different perspectives, and they enabled us to form a more multivocal account of the legitimation of agile. To analyze the
collected data, we engaged in critical discourse analysis (CDA) – a research approach emphasizing “the importance of studying texts as concrete instances of discourse use and of analyzing the microlevel linguistic elements therein” (Vaara & Tienari, 2008), with a particular focus on examining unequal power relations (Wodak & Mayer, 2009) and on their discursive reproduction (van Dijk, 1993). Besides exploring the senior leaders’ discursive legitimation of the decision to adopt agile at OP, we also paid attention to the role of the media “in the complex production, transmission, and consumption processes that create senses of legitimacy/illegitimacy around specific organizational phenomena” (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 806).

We applied Vaara et al.’s (2006) framework of normalization (referring to normal behavior), authorization (referring to an authority), rationalization (referring to utility or function), moralization (referring to specific values), and narrativization (legitimation through the telling of stories) to make sense of the discursive legitimation strategies connected with the organizational change at OP. Our findings show that the senior leaders at OP legitimized agile mainly through a combination of narrativization (or mythopoesis) and rationalization, referring to the benefits and positive outcomes of agile and telling humorous anecdotes of “the old organization” as a sort of bureaucratic nightmare – hierarchical, slow, and unpleasant. In contrast, “the new organization” was rationalized as able to better empower employees through self-managed teams and create more value for customers by focusing on OP’s core competencies. It was also portrayed as a logical next step after successful small experiments with agile in parts of the firm.

The dominant angle for how the media legitimized OP’s agile transformation was to pit the new CEO against the former CEO in every turn, mostly siding with the new CEO and quickly turning against the former CEO along with his strategy. The media by and large opined that OP had ventured too far from its core businesses of banking and insurance, but rather than focusing on the old and new organizations, the media narrative was personified and dramatized as a battle between the new CEO and his predecessor.

OP’s new CEO Timo Ritakallio chose to legitimate the adoption of agile solely through rationalization. He refrained from engaging in the narrativization strategy of his fellow senior executives and refused to participate in the media’s dramatization and personification of the change. The CEO change, the strategic turnaround, and the implementation of the agile management fashion received exceptionally widespread publicity, but Ritakallio navigated the media attention so that by and large, coverage remained positive. The findings of Essay 1 are summarized in Table 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Legitimation strategies</th>
<th>Legitimating actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Narrativization:</td>
<td>Establishing a narrative portraying “the new organization” and its agile culture as superior to “the old organization” and its hierarchal culture, e.g., through humorous anecdotes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationalization:</td>
<td>Referring to the benefits and positive outcomes of agile and portraying it as the logical next step after smaller experiments within the firm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Narrativization:</td>
<td>Publicizing, dramatizing, and personifying the organizational change as “the old CEO vs. the new CEO.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Normalization:</td>
<td>Implying OP would be better off by going back to sticking to its knitting than exploring new business areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Rationalization:</td>
<td>Rationalizing the new organization as able to bring more efficiency and value for customers as well as more meaningful work for employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All actors</td>
<td>Authorization:</td>
<td>Presenting the change initiative as having come from employees, suggesting an “inverted” authoritative power relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moralization:</td>
<td>Depicting managers as fulfilling their “moral responsibility” by listening to employees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A point of departure for our study was an observation that was incompatible with the management fashion literature, where managers have sometimes been presented as “gullible dupes” – passive consumers of flavor-of-the-month fads at the mercy of influential fashion setters such as consultants (Clark et al., 2015; Huczynski, 1993; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; van Veen et al., 2011). Our study supports some more recent management fashion research which contends that rather than passively consuming whatever fads consultancies and gurus sell to them, managers are active participants in the selection, adoption, and implementation of fashions (Ansari et al., 2014; Bort & Kieser, 2019; Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011; Groß et al., 2015; Heusinkveld et al., 2011).

Further, we extend this literature further by showing how managers can influence the legitimation process of the adoption. According to Wilhelm and Bort (2013, p. 429), “Managers are not only held responsible for what happens with popular concepts after their adoption, but also have to account for the consumption of concepts to a wide audience of stakeholders. Managerial accounts therefore provide a promising vantage point from which to explore the local problems and interests that underlie the consumption of popular concepts within organizations.” Positioning our study at the intersection of management fashion and discursive legitimation, we contribute to the management fashion literature by illuminating the legitimation logics and processes of senior managers when adopting a management fashion.

We also contribute to the literature on discursive legitimation strategies developed by Van Leeuwen and colleagues (e.g., Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), which Vaara et al. (2006, p. 794) applied to the media context, arguing that the popular press has “a great deal of power to decide what issues to raise, which perspectives to take, whom to give voice to, which voices to marginalize, and what to leave unsaid.” We contend that the media dramatized and personified the change as “the old CEO vs. the new CEO,” which complemented but also complicated the top management’s strategies of legitimation. Finally, we reflect on how OP’s newly appointed CEO navigated the media
landscape to further legitimate the adoption for both external and internal audiences. We contribute to management fashion studies by analyzing the roles of top management, particularly the CEO, and the popular media in discursively legitimizing management fashions. In the OP case, the media decided to present a particular organizational change process as a dramatic battle between two CEOs, where the new leader was focused on “weeding out the stolons of his predecessor.” Thus, the media legitimized OP Agile through narrativization and rationalization, but the narrative was personified and dramatized as a battle between the old and new CEO, and the rationale was geared towards normalization – OP refocusing on its core businesses.

In addition, the authorization for the change was described by both the managers and the press to have come from OP’s employees who were tired of the extensive bureaucracy and a lack of direction for the company, and therefore, the moralization was implicitly portrayed as the “moral duty” of the senior management towards employees in implementing the agile change to empower them. Accordingly, we present alternative views to the discursive legitimation strategies outlined by Vaara et al. (2006) by arguing that employees can also be portrayed as authoritative actors, and managers can be depicted as fulfilling their moral (normative) responsibility by listening to their concerns. We contend that in the OP case, the question of whether or not employees in reality were an authority and wielded decision-making power is irrelevant, because the media acted to legitimate organizational change through referring to authorization and moralization when it reproduced these claims. By showing these strategies, we contribute to a more nuanced view of the discursive legitimation strategies, which enables us to extend Vaara et al’s (2006) framework.

4.3 Essay 2

Reunamäki, Riku

“Let the smarter and better-paid people decide!”

Employees as translators of a management fashion

A solid body of research has accumulated around the creation and spread of management fashions (e.g., Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Bodrožić & Adler, 2018; Clark, 2004; Malmi, 1999) as well as around the actors involved (e.g., Bort & Kieser, 2019; Collins, 2019; Giroux, 2006; McCabe, 2011; O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016; Røvik, 2002). Overall, it has been well established that understanding the ebb and flow of management fashions is not trivial, because they have potential for “massive, sometimes helpful, but sometimes devastating, effects on large numbers of organizations and their employees” (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 280).

However, the voices of these employees, who are often the end-users of new ideas, have rarely been heard in the management fashion literature (Heunisinkveld et al., 2011; McCabe, 2011). As a result, while the processes of creation, spread, and inter-organizational adoption of management fashions are well-
Theorized and studied (Clark, 2004; Newell et al., 2001), their *intra-organizational adaptation and implementation* processes are still somewhat of a mystery (van Grinsven et al., 2020; Madsen & Stenheim, 2013; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). The few studies on management fashions that do include the perspectives of employees either tend to present them as one of many groups of actors at the cost of depth of insight (Abrahamson Löfström, 2015; Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011; Zbaracki, 1998) or discuss the various outcomes at aggregate levels such as “staff” (Andersen & Røvik, 2015; Børve & Kvande, 2022; Linneberg et al., 2019), which still underplays the dynamism of the adaptation processes. What happens inside a company after a new management fashion has been introduced by leaders is often treated merely as a dichotomy of adoption/rejection (Røvik, 2011), although implementation is ultimately dependent on the actions of employees “who may reject, re-label, twist, turn or otherwise reshape the fashions they confront” (McCabe, 2011, p. 185). Thus, understanding the perspectives of employees adjusting to management fashions adds an essential part to our understanding of how globally spreading ideas evolve and are adapted, implemented, institutionalized, and rejected.

Therefore, in Essay 2, I explore how the agile management fashion, which was adopted in OP by its top management, was further adapted and then implemented by employees in two different teams. I use the notion of translation, which examines how ideas change as they are spread and adopted globally (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska & Sévon, 1996), to study how the teams translated the agile management fashion to their own work contexts. Management fashion theorizing is largely based on models of static stages (Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019) and deterministic one-way processes, where “the sharp decline in one fashion [leads] to the sharp increase in the next fashion” (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, p. 723), but the translation perspective enables a more dynamic model of their circulation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Through showing the changes that fashions undergo as they are adapted in various ways, translation recognizes the possibility of a fashion evolving – or “mutating” and regaining popularity as a slightly different “variant” (Røvik, 2011).

I engaged in ethnographic observations and interviews in the two teams over 17 months, producing 140 days of fieldwork diary and 66 employee interviews. As secondary data, I also had access to employee surveys, company documents, and internal news articles. To analyze the collected data, I performed thematic analysis, which is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” and “a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). It can be used to identify patterns within data in relation to research “participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297).

My findings show that expert team translated the agile management fashion *pragmatically* to make use of it in their work, thereby being able to develop their work practices in accordance with the agile principles set by the top management. The agile principles and practices were seen as compatible with the
characteristics of expert work. The experts welcomed agile as one potential solution to the paradoxes of their work, praising the “permission” given to them by agile to not know everything up front and redirect their efforts when the situation changed or new information emerged. In contrast, the operations team translated the agile management fashion skeptically, adopting the principles only rhetorically (if at all) and without engaging with them in any meaningful way to develop their work practices. The employees viewed agile as incompatible with their routine work, did not learn (or want to learn) how to “be agile,” and consequently abandoned the concept except for some of its rhetoric. The findings of Essay 2 are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Findings of Essay 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expert team</th>
<th>Operations team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of work</td>
<td>Complex and often ambiguous</td>
<td>Straightforward and often repetitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall sentiment</td>
<td>Change preferred over stability, as changes might mean new development opportunities</td>
<td>Stability preferred over change, as changes might mean layoffs or other turns for the worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to agile</td>
<td>Welcoming agile as a potential solution to the paradoxes of expert work</td>
<td>Evaluation based on the number of tasks performed per day, so how agile would help this was not clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of translation</td>
<td>Pragmatic translation:</td>
<td>Skeptical translation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Translating agile in such a way that it became useful</td>
<td>• Translating agile as incompatible and subsequently feeling it was an additional burden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Making up own “agile rules” and modifying them as needed</td>
<td>• Agile was a “work game” that was played on top of actual duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrative quote</td>
<td>“This is systematic working, rebranded”</td>
<td>“Let the smarter and better-paid people decide”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contributions of my study can be summarized as follows: I specifically focus on employees as the translators of management fashions, which enables me to investigate their different intra-organizational translations, leading me to uncover a more dynamic model of the evolution of a fashion and to extend the existing literature by proposing a feedback loop for management fashions.

First, I suggest that at the intra-organizational level, the degree to which a management fashion succeeds depends on the employees and the type of work they do. I also also enrich the translation literature by concentrating on employees, calling for a more prominent consideration of employees as active translators of ideas into their own contexts rather than as passive recipients of ideas translated to them. Second, my micro-level focus on employees enables me to propose two different types of employee translations of a management fashion inside the same organization — existing employee-focused research (e.g., Andersen & Rovik, 2015; Børve & Kvande, 2022; Linneberg et al., 2019) tend to lump the processes and outcomes together under broader categories, leaving the intra-organizational variations and the dynamism of the translation process(es) unaddressed.

Third, acknowledging this dynamism allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of management fashions, for example through simultaneous or competing translations and chains of translation (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996;
Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Far from being a mechanical process of replication in a different setting, translation entails interpretive sensemaking and reframing of the received knowledge within one’s own context (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). I found that agile was translated differently by different teams, which led to the manifestation of the agile idea in different forms than what the “original” intention of the top management was. The chains of translation at the intra-organizational level, from the top management and agile coaches to the teams and individual employees, resulted in this “mutation” (Røvik, 2011) where agile was simultaneously understood in multiple different ways.

Fourth, I show that when this “mutated” fashion makes its way back to the top management, it triggers further editing of the managerial translation (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). This then produces a kind of continuous feedback loop, where the managerial translation forms the basis for employee translations, which inform subsequent managerial re-translations. The feedback loop can be divided between the managerial translation into the organization (“vision”) and the employee translations inside the organization (“reality”). Managers subsequently take further action in order to bridge the gaps between their intentions and how employees consume fashions, using the feedback received from employees for modifying their own translation and bringing the “vision” closer to the “reality.” Thus, fashions may continue to exist in some form rather than become abandoned, but they can also be diluted over time, reduced to mere rhetorics, or blended in with or segued into another fashion. This reflects the key role employees play in the adaptation of management fashions into specific organizational contexts.

**4.4 Essay 3**

Reunamäki, Riku, & Fey, Carl F. (2023)

*Remote agile: Problems, solutions, and pitfalls to avoid*  
*B*usiness *H*orizons, 66(4), 505–516

Agile management has become increasingly popular in recent years as companies are trying to become more responsive to the dynamic and fast-paced business environments they are facing. By embracing agile, organizations aim for faster and less hierarchical decision-making, increased team autonomy and flexibility, and more innovative solutions in times of volatility and uncertainty. Agile employs multidisciplinary teams that break projects into bite-sized chunks, develop solutions together through tight feedback loops, and adapt to changes along the way (Rigby et al., 2018). Essentially, it delegates more decision-making power to small teams and provides employees with more autonomy over how, when, and where they work – including remotely.

Remote work was possible in some organizations already before COVID-19, but the pandemic forced most businesses to rapidly adopt it at greater scale. It is likely that more and more organizations will support employees wanting to continue working remotely at least part of the time post-pandemic (Foss, 2021). Thus, remote work seems set to be an important part of the future of work, and
understanding how agile can be adapted to remote work is of special importance given agile’s growing popularity. However, while many aspects of remote work have been studied in the past two decades (e.g., Makarius & Larson, 2017; Raghuram et al., 2019), and some articles have lately provided lessons for improving remote work during COVID-19 (e.g., Howard-Grenville, 2020; Nyberg et al., 2021), studies and best practice reports specifically investigating how to use agile in a remote setting – the focus of Essay 3 – are still rare.

To help address this gap in knowledge and provide practical tools for managers who may struggle with remote agile, we elaborate in Essay 3 on the problems that employees in the two OP teams we observed faced when adapting agile to a remote setting. We present the five problems of remote agile that the teams encountered, solutions to each problem, and some pitfalls to avoid in Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Pitfall to avoid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fewer organic interaction opportunities in remote agile</td>
<td>Create smaller sub-teams within the existing teams</td>
<td>Sub-teams run the risk of creating informal hierarchies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement is lower in a remote agile setting</td>
<td>Set the stage to promote engagement in digitally mediated agile meetings</td>
<td>Team members might prioritize other meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote agile causes meeting overload</td>
<td>Proactively protect non-meeting time within the organization</td>
<td>Lack of respect for calendar bookings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders may take more control and not provide enough support in remote agile</td>
<td>Be truly present and build opportunities to interact with employees</td>
<td>More micro-managing and less delegation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less interaction within the organization impedes knowledge sharing in remote agile</td>
<td>Adopt software solutions and new roles that promote information sharing</td>
<td>Additional burden and varying activeness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first problem we identified was fewer organic interactions when working remotely. The idea of agile is partly based on small teams that are physically colocated and therefore able to discuss, brainstorm, and give feedback to each other. However, videoconferencing greatly restricted the teams’ interaction compared to in-person interaction – it simply could not substitute for colocation. Crucially, the problems were exacerbated by the teams having more than a handful of members. To solve the problem, the teams self-organized into sub-teams of 2–4 members to better facilitate agile.

The second problem was lower engagement. It was much easier to multitask or completely drift off during online team meetings unless it was your turn to speak or a colleague was discussing a topic that particularly interested you. It was also easier to be a passive participant and not contribute much even when truly focusing on the meeting. The two teams tackled lower engagement in several ways, such as having cameras on during team meetings, starting all meetings with some small talk, and voting on major issues to engage everyone in decision-making.

Third, we saw that remote agile caused meeting overload. Agile is ultimately based on frequent social interaction and collaboration, which is why a combination of remote work and agile resulted in even more meetings than “traditional” remote work or “traditional” agile work. To fight this, the teams found it useful
to block time in their own calendars for individual work, and to have only some team members participate in the department meetings and later summarize the relevant information to the rest of the team.

The fourth problem was that team leadership was more difficult remotely, and consequentially, leaders may take more control and provide less support than what agile leadership entails. Reaching out to employees might prove more difficult when working remotely, and it might be difficult for employees to reach out to leaders as well. As a solution, team leaders made themselves more available for their employees, made an effort to reach out to them more frequently, and were active in helping set reasonable employee workloads.

Finally, the fifth problem we identified was that when people worked remotely, it was more difficult for them to maintain and expand their knowledge sharing networks, even in an agile organization. Remote work runs the risk of teams focusing on their existing networks and becoming more “siloed” and inward-looking, as everyday interactions with colleagues more often stay within the team than extend beyond team boundaries. To help share knowledge more efficiently, the company encouraged the use of various online tools for agile. These tools are important not only for teams and individuals but also for the organization to see transparently the things teams were achieving or struggling to make progress on and to do (strategic) planning with more data.

Although the problems arose specifically in the context of doing remote agile, our solutions are also applicable to remote work and hybrid work in general. The pandemic will eventually end, but the popularity of remote and hybrid work will have a lasting effect on how work is organized in the future, which is why it is important that firms know how to adapt agile in these settings.
5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The main purpose of my dissertation is to explore how management fashions, once they have been formally adopted by an organization, are further translated as they are made sense of and implemented by employees. I set out to study this through my primary research question: *How do employees translate a management fashion that has recently been introduced into their organization?*

My dissertation presents multiple theoretical contributions to the management fashion and translation literatures. Overall, I highlight employees as an important but somewhat neglected group of actors to the management fashion literature. Understanding the role of employees helps in developing a more nuanced view of the “fashion lifecycle” – how and to what degree management fashions are adapted, consumed, and rejected inside the companies that decide to adopt them. I also contribute to the translation literature by focusing on employees as active, rather than passive, translators of management fashions adopted in their organization. Through focusing on employees as translators, I show that management fashions are translated multiple times within organizations (see also Andersen & Røvik, 2015) and are subject to intra-organizational chains of translation and feedback loops. Thus, adding employees as an important group to both literatures subsequently enables me to argue for a dynamic model of the circulation and translation of management fashions instead of static lifecycle stages and deterministic one-way processes. By a dynamic model, I mean a more complex and nuanced understanding of how fashions change and are changed when they are adapted in different parts of the organization – evolving and “mutating” (Røvik, 2011) and then making their way back to the top management, triggering further changes. In other words, the dynamic model argues that the initial managerial translation forms the basis for employee translations, which inform subsequent managerial re-translations, and so on. The employee perspective enables this examination of how management fashions can take on various forms even within one company – which has not previously been the focus of management fashion research (see Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011, for an exception). I show that although in principle a company has adopted a single concept, in practice it has to adjust to several manifestations of it at the employee level.
In addition, I also investigated how management fashions are adopted by managers and made legitimate in the eyes of employees through a complementary research question: *How do managers and the media legitimate management fashions in the eyes of employees?* Through answering this research question, I join previous research which argues that managers are not passive consumers of fashions either (e.g., Groß et al., 2015; van Veen et al., 2011), and I explore how they and the media can discursively legitimize the adoption of a management fashion. The managerial translation of management fashion into an organization forms the basis for employee translations inside the organization (Andersen & Røvik, 2015; Linneberg et al., 2019), and thus it is important to understand the managerial perspective when exploring the employee perspectives. Below, I elaborate on each of the contributions.

**5.1.1 Employees as key actors in management fashion and translation**

The main interest of my dissertation research lies in uncovering how employees, as the end users of management fashions such as agile, adapt them in their daily work. While some management fashion studies do talk about employees (e.g., Abrahamson Löfström, 2015; Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011; Zbaracki, 1998), their focus tends to be elsewhere. For example, Zbaracki’s (1998) account of Total Quality Management mostly focuses on how the managerial rhetoric develops through stages of variation, selection, and retention, although these stages are influenced by a variety of organizational members besides the top managers, including employees. In contrast, I add a focus on employees to the management fashion literature, showing how they are an essential yet overlooked group of actors in determining the fates of management fashion. I suggest that at the intra- organizational level, the degree to which a fashion is implemented, modified, or rejected inside an organization depends on the employees and the type of work they do.

Further, as Piazza and Abrahamson (2020, p. 275) state in their review of research on management fashions to date: “the reasons why individual organizations decide to abandon management fashions have been theorized, but seldom researched... The retention and abandonment of management practices has received much more attention at an inter-organizational level of analysis.” To address this shortcoming in the literature, I join other scholars (e.g., McCabe, 2011; McCabe & Russell, 2017; Outila et al., 2021) in aiming to shed light on the implementation of a management fashion at a nuanced micro-level inside organizations – through focusing on employees.

Morris and Lancaster (2006, p. 210) state that “it has been argued that the translation process needs to be studied at different levels, but particularly at the company level, where active translation occurs.” In line with this, I also enrich the translation literature by concentrating on employees, a somewhat neglected group of actors in translation studies as well (Børve & Kvande, 2022; Cassell & Lee, 2017; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). The focus in translation studies has more often been on the actors in decision-making positions (Gutierrez-Huerta & O et al., 2020; Outila et al., 2021), who carry and translate new ideas into organizations (Boxenbaum, 2006; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014; Westney & Piekkari,
In line with the recent turn in translation studies to include those who translate ideas *inside* their own companies (van Grinsven et al., 2020), I show how employees translate management fashions intra-organizationally after they have been formally adopted in companies. In so doing, I contend that in contrast to previous studies which often portray employees as passive recipients of new ideas *translated to* them, employees are active *translators of* ideas into their own contexts. This helps to acknowledge that management fashions are translated multiple times within organizations (see also Andersen & Røvik, 2015) and are subject to intra-organizational chains of translation and feedback loops. The employee perspective enables this examination of how management fashions can take on various forms even within a single organization. Previous management fashions research has not focused on multiple simultaneous translations, with the exception of Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud’s (2011) study of four different “plots” of knowledge management in a multinational company, in which they showed different ways of producing and consuming policies and practices. Somewhat similarly, I show that although a company has adopted a single concept in principle, in practice it has to adjust to several manifestations of it at the employee level.

The two OP teams I studied translated agile in very different ways. The expert team employees, whose work was ambiguous, collaborative, and creative, were happy to be involved in an “editing process” of the fashion (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) according to their own needs. They mainly engaged in what Røvik’s (2016, p. 298) “translation rules” consider *alteration* – “the creation of a unique version [of agile] in the recipient organization.” They did this by freely experimenting with the different elements of agile and often adjusting them according to their own needs, describing agile as a set of loose guidelines from which they could cherry-pick the ones that best suited their work. For example, the frequency of the daily team meetings varied between two and five per week, and the team either used an hourglass to limit the speaking time of each individual to one minute or let meetings run significantly over the allotted time. The team also created smaller sub-teams who would meet more often, and team members routinely moved tasks from one two-week sprint to another if they were busy. Importantly, I argue that the professional backgrounds of the expert team employees played a role in their translation approach. Having held management positions inside OP before the large organizational change, they bought into the top management’s vision where the competitive environment is in constant flux and agile is the solution, which influenced their attitudes towards the new way of working. This is somewhat in line with Børve and Kvande’s (2022) finding that knowledge and experience of both the source context as well as the receiving context are key for successful translation – the expert team employees also understood the managerial perspective because of their employment histories.

The operations team, who performed more routine and straightforward tasks, first tried to follow what Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) describe as the “chain mode of imitation,” where an idea is imitated, then the imitation is imitated, and so
on. OP’s management had more or less imitated the Dutch ING, and as conscientious employees who were used to taking orders and following guidelines, the operations team initially attempted to faithfully reproduce the agile principles set by the company but soon realized that this was not feasible. In Røvik’s (2016, p. 297) terms, the operations team began with the copying approach but soon moved on to omission – “the toning down or subtraction of certain aspects” of agile. They subsequently came to view agile as incompatible with their work and as a result, instead of adapting it, they essentially abandoned everything except for the daily team meeting – which they dutifully held every morning.

Through focusing on two different teams of employees as translators, I show that although a company adopts a single concept in principle, in practice it has to adjust to several manifestations of it at the employee level. The employee perspective thus enables an examination of how management fashions can take on various forms even within one organization. This has not been explicitly discussed in the translation literature, even in the studies that focus on employee translations (e.g., Andersen & Røvik, 2015; Børve & Kvande, 2022). The closest example of different employee translations is Linneberg et al.’s (2019) study of frontline employees in Danish hotels, but they compare and contrast employee translations between hotels rather than within hotels. In my study, agile was simultaneously both implemented successfully in a modified form and essentially rejected as incompatible within the same company, depending on how the employees translated it. This conveys the key influence of employees in the implementation of management fashions and supports my argument that whether the top management’s vision is ultimately realized or not is up to the employees.

Based on the two teams I observed, I propose two different types of employee translations.5 Importantly, the translations in my study are simultaneous, not consecutive, which has been the case in previous studies that have acknowledged the multiplicity of intra-organizational translations (e.g., Andersen & Røvik, 2015, showed a top-down funnelling process through different levels of hierarchy – top management, intermediate level, and work floor – and compared it to the game “whisper down the lane”). In contrast, the translations in my study happened at the same time and thus were not affected by each other.

First, the expert team translated the agile management fashion pragmatically to make use of it in their work, thereby being able to develop their work practices somewhat in accordance with the agile principles set by the top management. They retained the core of agile but did not follow any kind of specific guidelines, effectively demonstrating the “pragmatic ambiguity” (Giroux, 2006) or “interpretive viability” (Benders & van Veen, 2001) of agile. Members of the expert team generally viewed organizational changes as opportunities to reinvigorate their jobs and careers. In the spirit of Erdogmus (2007, p. 4), who speculated

5 In addition, it was evident that other teams – which I did not observe – translated agile in yet different ways depending e.g., on contextual factors such as the nature of their work. For example, the Insurance segment had sales teams, which the Retail Banking segment did not have, and it was clear that they had developed their own approach to agile. One of my fieldwork diary entries reads: “The CEO of OP Life Insurance joins us for lunch. Tells us that at Insurance, agile works in a very different way. Different logic, different problems. ‘If you want the right answers, contact me!’”
whether agile had become a buzzword because of “its lingo’s all-too-often-diluted overuse,” a question might thus be raised of whether the experts believed in agile or whether it was only a fun, upbeat way of describing things they did at work. This was the most visible in instances when the expert team employees sarcastically labeled everything as agile – for example, going to lunch, sending an email, or spilling coffee over their laptop.

Second, the operations team engaged in the skeptical translation of the agile management fashion, adopting the principles only rhetorically (if at all) and without engaging with them in any meaningful way to develop their work practices. This resembles the “ceremonial adoption” of a practice, in which employees formally adopt a fashion to appear legitimate but do not believe in its real value (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Kostova and Roth (2002, p. 220) defined ceremonial adoption as “a relatively high level of implementation accompanied by a low level of internalization.” In contrast, by skeptical translation I mean that employees translate the practice as incompatible and subsequently do not adopt or implement it at all – and voice this non-adoptions without a concern for their legitimacy in the eyes of management. As such, skeptical translation is closer to employee resistance, but is not exactly that either, as employees do not particularly resist the fashion – it simply does not resonate with them. In my study, the key to the different translations was the nature of the work the employees at OP performed. The non-routine and complex expert work was ideally suited for a pragmatic translation of agile, as tasks were project-based and their goals and practices allowed for creativity, interpretation, and ambiguity. The routine and repetitive operations work, however, was ill-suited for agile, as it consisted of simple and well-defined tasks and the goal was to complete as many of them per day as possible according to predefined guidelines. This resulted in a skeptical translation.

Both types of translation distinguish between the (managerial) rhetoric and (employee) reality of fashions (Legge, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998). They show the importance of employee acceptance and indifference in their adoption, decline, and rejection (McCabe, 2011; see also Lawler & Mohrman, 1985). The two types I identified somewhat resemble the three translation principles of lean management that Andersen and Røvik (2015) determined: the practical, the pragmatic, and the skeptical. According to Andersen and Røvik (2015, p. 5), the practical principle stresses lean as “a priority-setting tool that forces the organisation to rank activities according to their importance,” the pragmatic principle considers it “a toolbox to pick from,” and the skeptical principle requires lean to be “evidence-based and compatible with professional values.” While Andersen and Røvik’s pragmatic and practical principles seem similar to what I have labeled pragmatic translation, we differ in that I consider the skeptical translation approach to management fashions not as a requirement for more evidence, but more as a general belief in the faddishness of new managerial ideas and operating modes. Another difference is that while Andersen and Røvik’s practical principle recommends “one single structure for monitoring,” the purpose of OP Agile was to allow for some intra-organizational variance from early on instead of
forcing all employees to work in the same way – translating the agile fashion was a dynamic process rather than a rigid template.

In general, identifying different translation principles and types of translation among employees helps in developing our understanding of how new management fashions travel through organizations, how employees react to them, and what their different manifestations and outcomes are. Most importantly, the different types of translation enable us to view the intra-organizational travels of management fashions as something more than simple and straightforward adoption-rejection dichotomies: dynamic and complex processes where fashions can mean very different things to different employees and teams.

5.1.2 A dynamic model of the travel of management fashions

Management fashion theorizing is largely based on models of static stages (Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019) and deterministic one-way processes, where “the sharp decline in one fashion [leads] to the sharp increase in the next fashion” (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, p. 723). These waves of popularity are depicted with successive bell-shaped popularity curves (Abrahamson, 1996; Huczynski, 1993). Past research has thus focused extensively on the macro-level trajectories of management fashions (e.g., Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson & Piazza, 2020; Barley & Kunda, 1992) as well as their relatively straightforward adoption in organizations and the final outcomes of implementing them – often a failure (e.g., Birkinshaw, 2014; Lawler & Mohrman, 1985; McCabe & Russell, 2017; Zbaracki, 1998). Instead, my research presents a more dynamic view of the agile management fashion in my case company. The translation approach that I took allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of fashions, for example through simultaneous or competing translations, chains of translation (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), and “translation ecosystems” (Westney et al., 2022). Through showing the changes that fashions undergo as they are adapted in various ways, translation recognizes the possibility of a fashion evolving – or “mutating” and regaining popularity as a slightly different “variant” (Røvik, 2011).

When a mutated fashion makes its way back to the top management, it triggers further editing of the managerial translation (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). This then produces a kind of continuous feedback loop, which I outline below in Figure 3, where the managerial translation forms the basis for employee translations, which inform subsequent managerial re-translations. This feedback loop is therefore divided between the managerial translation into the organization (“vision”) and the employee translations inside the organization (“reality”).

Accordingly, OP’s management adjusted their views and worked with employees in trying to make agile work for all inside the company – thus effectively trying to bring the managerial vision and employee realities closer together. One early example of this was that the management understood agile could not be implemented the same way in different parts of the organization. The operations team was thus not required to work in two-week sprint cycles after it became clear that this way of working would not bring any benefits for them. Similarly,
feedback from the expert team regarding the online agile sprint planning tools was taken into account and adjusted by the management. In another example, OP initially stressed that agile would enhance the employee experience of the organization (Press release, 2018c), but after some confusion within the organization as to what the top management actually meant by the term, the company decided to abandon employee experience and instead focus on employee competency and wellbeing, which were thought to be clearer goals. These examples show how managerial “visions” which employees translate into “realities” are reintroduced to top managers in mutated forms through feedback loops. Managers subsequently take further action in order to bridge the gaps between their intentions and how employees consume fashions.

The feedback loop bears some resemblance to the global-local spiral outlined by Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) which depicted the “travels of ideas” and their translations. I argue that through this cyclical intra-organizational process, a fashion may continue to exist in some form rather than become abandoned – but it can also be diluted over time, reduced to mere rhetorics, or blended in with or segued into and combined with another fashion that gains popularity. At OP, agile was diluted as it was translated and re-translated to fit the different parts of the organization, and in some places such as in the operations team, it was reduced to mainly rhetorics without the realities of employees changing much (see also Zbaracki, 1998). By outlining the characteristics of a fashion feedback loop and providing insights into the intra-organizational travels of management fashions, I add to our theoretical understanding of how the translation of management fashions occurs inside organizations.

Figure 3. A dynamic model of management fashions.
Røvik (2011, p. 645) advocated for taking the analysis of management fashions “beyond the adoption-rejection dichotomy” to explore the idea-handling processes in organizations in more detail. Employing the translation lens, I showed how agile was translated differently by different teams, which allowed agile to maintain its traction inside the company – albeit in different form(s) than what the “original” intention of the top management was. The feedback loops and “chains of translation” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) at the intra-organizational level, from the top management and agile coaches to the teams and individual employees, resulted in this “mutation” where agile was simultaneously understood in multiple different ways. The expert team considered agile a project management framework from which to cherry-pick the most useful practices, whereas the operations team chiefly experienced an increased burden – a pressure for decision-making coupled with an excessive number of meetings.

5.1.3 Managers as actively selecting management fashions to adopt

In the management fashion literature, managers have sometimes been presented as “gullible dupes,” passive consumers of flavor-of-the-month fads at the mercy of influential fashion setters such as consultants (Clark et al., 2015; Huczynski, 1993; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; van Veen et al., 2011). This understanding, largely based on Abrahamson’s (1991, 1996) influential model which places emphasis on the active role of fashion setters at the expense of fashion followers (Clark et al., 2015), underplays the role of top managers in fashion adoption. In contrast, I show that the executive management of OP had established an underlying rationale for adopting agile even before involving consultancies. I found that the managers at OP legitimized agile through narrativization and rationalization, referring to the benefits and positive outcomes of agile in the current business environment and delegitimizing “the old organization” through narratives that portrayed it in a questionable light. The new CEO engaged only in the rationalization of the new agile OP as bringing more efficiency and value for customers as well as more participation opportunities and meaningful work for employees.

My findings support the more recent management fashion research which contends that rather than passively consuming whatever fads consultancies and gurus sell to them, managers are active participants in the selection, adoption, and implementation of fashions (Ansari et al., 2014; Bort & Kieser, 2019; Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011; Groß et al., 2015; Heusinkveld et al., 2011). The findings also complement those of Wilhelm and Bort (2013), who identified four managerial discourse categories to account for the consumption of fashions, all of which drew on the managerial norm of rationality.

Moreover, there was an important linguistic element to the translation of agile by OP’s management – they translated some of the agile terminology into Finnish. Sahlin and Wedlin (2008, p. 225) state: “As reforms and experiences are accounted for and narrated, they tend to be framed and presented in familiar and commonly accepted terms so that they will make sense to a reader or listener.” However, only terms describing the organization and organizing were translated, whereas terms describing employee roles were left untranslated.
Thus, OP’s management carefully navigated between the *domestication* and *foreignization* of agile. According to Westney and Piekkari (2020, p. 78), “domestication makes the foreign comprehensible and acceptable to the receiver through the use of familiar terminology and examples, while foreignization, through the use of foreign terms and exemplars, signals the new and unfamiliar.” By translating words such as agile (*ketterä*) and tribe (*heimo*) into Finnish, OP engaged in the domestication of the agile idea, but by leaving titles such as Agile Master and Product Owner untranslated, OP simultaneously performed the foreignization of agile by somewhat signaling that the work employees do is at the forefront of global thinking about new ways of organizing.

### 5.1.4 The media legitimizing management fashions

Finally, I contribute to the literature on discursive legitimation strategies developed by Van Leeuwen and colleagues (e.g., Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), which Vaara et al. (2006, p. 794) applied to the media context, arguing that the popular press has “a great deal of power to decide what issues to raise, which perspectives to take, whom to give voice to, which voices to marginalize, and what to leave unsaid.” In their study about how the media legitimized a global industrial restructuring, Vaara et al. (2006) distinguished five legitimation strategies: normalization (referring to normal behavior), authorization (referring to an authority), rationalization (referring to utility or function), moralization (referring to specific values), and narrativization (legitimation through the telling of stories). They conclude by calling for a more detailed examination into these issues: “Each type of legitimation strategy deserves more focused attention” (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 806).

As one critical task of managers is to maintain the legitimacy of their organization (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), the adoption of management fashions often entails discursive legitimation of the motives behind their adoption. According to Wilhelm and Bort (2013, p. 429), “Managers are not only held responsible for what happens with popular concepts after their adoption, but also have to account for the consumption of concepts to a wide audience of stakeholders.” This, to some extent, can be done through the media: Managers can use the popular media for “driving the organization’s agenda and communicating the necessity of change to customers, stakeholders, and the firm’s own personnel” (Ylä-Anttila, 2022, p. 187).

In the OP case, I found that the media decided to present a particular organizational change process as a dramatic battle between two CEOs, where the new leader was focused on “weeding out the stolons of his predecessor.” Thus, the media legitimized OP Agile mainly through narrativization and rationalization, but the narrative was *personified* and *dramatized* as a battle between the old and new CEO, and the rationale was geared towards normalization – OP refocusing on its core businesses. This helped to legitimize the new organization under the new CEO. By showing this, I propose a more nuanced view of the discursive legitimation strategy of narrativization, suggesting that the media can engage in the personification of an organizational change in order to portray
that it involves more drama than what has actually happened. This personification is identified by Vaara et al. (2006) as journalists giving key managers celebrity status, but more importantly in the OP case, the press seemed to focus more on the delegitimation of the organization under the previous CEO than on the legitimation of the adoption of the agile fashion. The dramatized narrative was driven by the media, and therefore, the new CEO needed to be careful not to get side-tracked in his own media appearances.

In addition, the authorization for the change was described in the press to have come from OP’s employees, who were tired of the extensive bureaucracy and a lack of direction for the company, and therefore, the moralization was implicitly portrayed as the “moral duty” of the senior management towards employees in implementing the agile change to empower them. Accordingly, I present alternative views to the discursive legitimation strategies outlined by Vaara et al. (2006) by arguing that employees can also be portrayed as authoritative actors in the press, and managers can be depicted as fulfilling their moral (normative) responsibility by listening to their concerns. The question of whether or not this is an accurate representation of “reality” is irrelevant, because the media acts to legitimate organizational change through referring to authorization and moralization when it reproduces these claims. This depiction of “inverted” authoritative power, as well as converging interests between organizations and their employees, can be linked to broader discourses about (rational and) normative ideologies (e.g., Abrahamson, 1997; Barley & Kunda, 1992), unitarist human resource management (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017), and the use of ideology as legitimation (Seeck et al., 2020). Particularly relevant to the case are the ideological underpinnings of the self-management fashion, which McCann et al. (2021, p. 133) claimed are deeply rooted in a market-driven rhetoric despite drawing influence from “a tech zeitgeist and a faux counterculture of self-development.” In the OP case, narrativization and rationalization were used more extensively because the popular media benefits from the narrativization of news stories, and senior executives are expected to be rational decision-makers – and storytelling is also a form of employer branding.

5.2 Methodological contributions

My fieldwork was largely characterized by COVID-19. While a global pandemic is hardly anything anybody would wish for, it nevertheless had a silver lining: it forced me to come up with an innovative research design and adapt my research methods to the peculiar situation. The third research question of this dissertation is therefore: How to conduct qualitative organizational research and study employees’ lived experiences in the era of disruptions such as COVID-19?

I discuss the methodological contribution of my dissertation from two perspectives. First, in contrast to the paradigm of extended stay in the field, I argue that my research design of alternating between immersion and distance produced better insights. Second, in contrast to the requirement of physical on-site presence, I argue that simulating the experiences of research participants is more important.
5.2.1 Periods of deep immersion and critical distance

Before discussing some of the divergent trends in the practice of ethnography, the consistency with which extended participant observation has remained central can be underscored. Most ethnographers, regardless of their theoretical persuasion, would agree on this point. Extended participant observation means that at least a year is devoted to the task. (Sanday, 1979, p. 527.)

In essence, ethnographers believe that separating the facts from the fictions, the extraordinary from the common, and the general from the specific is best accomplished by lengthy, continuous, firsthand involvement in the organizational setting under study. (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 539.)

The ethnographic paradigm has long been the extended stay in the field. In contrast, I undertook fieldwork in four rounds of two to three months each. While this resulted in 140 days of observations over the course of 17 months, a “true” ethnographer could perhaps argue that this was neither extended enough nor continuous enough to adhere to the ethnographic tradition.

However, I argue that a methodological benefit of the type of research design I employed is the ability to alternate between periods of deep immersion and critical distance to the phenomenon under study. This is particularly helpful when taking the abductive research approach which rests on a continuous interplay between data and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) – in other words, between immersion and distancing (see also Günel et al., 2020; Halme et al., 2016). Besides, as Watson (2011, p. 207) put it in Pragmatist instead of absolute terms, “the observation has to occur over a period of time which is sufficient for the researcher to appreciate the range of norms, practices, and values, official and unofficial alike, which characterize that research setting” (Watson, 2011, p. 207). He also proposed (p. 205) that it would be useful to “replace the question ‘what is ethnography?’ with the question ‘how might we most helpfully use the concept of ethnography to enable us to do more worthwhile research in the organization and management studies field?’” As my professional background and familiarity with the research context assisted me in more rapidly making sense of my observations while preserving the authenticity of the participants’ perspectives (Caprar, 2011), I contend that my research design of periodic immersion and distancing produced a more worthwhile study than what an extended and continuous stay in the field would have done.

5.2.2 Organizational hybrid ethnography

Another methodological implication of my dissertation, which contributes to a current debate in ethnographic research, concerns what can constitute the “field” in fieldwork (Eggeling, 2022; Howlett, 2022) and whether serious ethnography requires “being there” and “being then” (Langley & Klag, 2019; Postill, 2017). As the COVID-19 pandemic forced my research participants into remote work, I was also confined to my home and laptop and had to develop an alternative to “being there” at the office with them. This led me to extend my research field into Microsoft Teams, where I could continue “being there” – only the
“there” was now a virtual space instead of a physical space, meaning that I shifted from offline colocation to online copresence (Beaulieu, 2010; Howlett, 2022).

What was more important than the issue of whether I was observing my research participants on-site or online, however, was that I was experiencing work largely under similar circumstances as them. For example, I experienced being able to meet people only through videoconferencing, I sometimes communicated merely through emojis in a chat, and occasionally I had to work at the kitchen table – all of which were situations that the participants in my research were at times forced into as well. I also witnessed firsthand the blending together of work and free time: For example, I organized meetings while on a winter vacation in Lapland, I embraced the idea of one employee being on an exercise bike during team meetings, and I kept my camera on or off according to what the other meeting participants were doing, which dictated whether I could multitask or not. I also experienced the joy of the whole expert team finally meeting in-person in the summer of 2020 after several long months of isolation, and the health concerns of the operations team members because they were not able to work remotely in the fall of 2020.

I therefore argue that the issues of whether the researcher is “there” (and then) are kind of beside the point and can be solved by simply focusing all effort on the main concern of ethnography – which I think is, by whatever means necessary, to try to “live with and live like those who are studied” (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 242). To do this, I propose an approach I call “organizational hybrid ethnography” as a way of researching hybrid work (see also Alcadipani & Cunliffe, 2023; Przybylski, 2020). At its core, this entails on-site observations when research participants are on-site and remote observations when participants are working remotely. Compared to purely remote or virtual observations, I argue that the researcher is in a better position to establish trust with participants in person which makes subsequent remote or virtual observations easier (cf. Hall et al., 2021). Compared to purely on-site observations, I argue that the researcher gets a more authentic experience of the participants’ work lives and is best capturing work in modern organizational settings (Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020), since hybrid work arrangements are becoming more common in the workplace. I contend that this way, organizational ethnography can maintain its relevance even as organizations and work itself are transforming.

As researchers, however, we will never experience our research participants’ daily lives exactly as they do, and any ethnographic insight will therefore always be an incomplete interpretation of “reality”. I realized that it is all the more so when observing remotely, with limitations such as poor online connections, inability to see anything except what is presented in through the camera lens, and difficulties in conveying emotions through the laptop screen. Still, and while it is true that when work moves home, the circumstances become rather personalized depending on the living arrangements and family situations of each individual employee – and no-one is likely to have the exact same experience, least of all the researcher – I was nevertheless able to reach this same level of personalization as the employees I observed.
Westney and Van Maanen (2011, pp. 604–605) – whose calls for more organizational ethnography at the employee level I also answer – state: “we need more ethnographic work that delves into the work and life of the managed, as opposed to the managers.” I claim that hybrid is increasingly what the work and life of the managed in the “new normal” is. Organizational hybrid ethnography is therefore vital for more fruitful organizational research at the employee level. After all, “we cannot really learn a lot about what ‘actually happens’ or about ‘how things work’ in organizations without doing the intensive type of close-observational or participative research that is central to ethnographic endeavour” (Watson, 2011, p. 204).

5.3 Managerial implications

The managerial implications of my research can be divided into three topics. The first concerns the successful adoption and adaptation of management fashions, the second relates to how managers can “own” the adoption of a fashion, and the third attends to how agile can best be implemented in a remote work setting.

5.3.1 Successfully adopting management fashions

The different translations of agile in the two OP teams suggest that there should be considerable freedom allowed by managers for team and employee adaptations when adopting a management fashion. Although fashions are often presented as panaceas that are applicable across all industries, organizations, and functions, my study proposes that a one-size-fits-all approach may result in some parts of the organization rejecting the adopted fashion. This was evident in the way the operations team at OP first felt obliged to implement agile “by the book” but subsequently engaged with it only on a rhetorical level. Conversely, the expert team did not attempt to implement all practices of agile but instead translated the agile principles into their own context, which enabled them to apply agile in their work.

Instead of a uniform approach throughout the company, managers should therefore consider the fit between the fashion and the type of work. For example, agile is a useful way of approaching collaborative and complex work tasks but has less value when implemented in routine and straightforward tasks. If, when a new management fashion is being implemented, managers listen to employee feedback and adjust the implementation accordingly, this can lead to a positive feedback loop where the managerial vision and the employee reality are moving towards each other.

In addition, management should provide enough dedicated time for employees to learn the new ways of working instead of trying to rush through a change program while at the same time demanding that ”normal” employee responsibilities are fulfilled. Trying to become agile on top of their existing work resulted in some employees at OP feeling that agile is nothing more than an additional
burden for them. Relatedly, managers should also specifically point out to employees how the new management model is beneficial for the company, so that employees understand the managerial view for why the change is needed.

5.3.2 “Owning” the fashion adoption internally and externally

When embarking on a demanding cultural and strategic change journey, it is crucial that right from the beginning, the top management shares a common, solid story highlighting the “why” of the change. This is important in creating commitment and focus inside the company, and it also helps in establishing a clear rationale for the change. Despite possible distractions to that storyline created by the media, top management should stay true to the original narrative – this leads to credibility and consistency when combating possible claims of the change being just another “flavor-of-the-month fad.” Ultimately, it shows that the top management does not shy away from “owning” the change they have initiated.

It is impossible to manage the media, but the decision by OP to be very transparent about the desired change towards the media from the beginning paid off. However, to maintain a consistent story of the change, OP had to decide that only the CEO and the CHRO would comment on it in the media. Meanwhile, it took some time for the top management to align the various opinions on how the new agile organization would work – and the conversations were sometimes heated. Reading about the change in the news underlined to the employees the fact that OP’s management was truly serious about the change it wanted to see in the culture. As the story created wider interest, OP’s employees started feeling proud of being a part of the transformation outsiders looked up to.

When using consultants in change efforts, it is wise to utilize them as sources of ideas, experiences, and management fashions. Yet the rationale and goals of the change as well as the implementation of the desired change always need to be fitted to the particulars of the business environment, strategy, history, challenges, and cultural heritage of the company itself. Rather than allowing consultancies to take charge and implement a one-size-fits-all approach, managers should listen to their advice but reserve time to adapt the offered solutions to the specific context the company operates in.

5.3.3 Adapting agile to remote and hybrid work

Two ongoing trends in the workplace that are expected to continue in the foreseeable future are the use of agile ways of working and the increase of remote and hybrid work. Therefore, agile needs to be adapted to the remote and hybrid setting. The experiences at OP provide some concrete help.

First, agile emphasizes small teams and colocation, but there are fewer organic interaction opportunities in remote agile and agile meetings are more difficult to mediate through videoconferencing tools. Thus, teams with more than a handful of people should be organized into sub-teams of a couple of members to better facilitate agile work even when not colocated. Second, agile is based on extensive interaction and collaboration, but when everyone is working from
home, collaboration requires much purposeful effort such as keeping a line of communication open with your closest colleague throughout the day and always having cameras on in online team meetings. Third, although agile is a form of self-management, it also requires much effort from team leaders. In remote agile, leaders should make themselves easily available for their employees, reach out to them frequently, actively help set reasonable employee workloads, and try to make sure that employees do not take on too many tasks and responsibilities. All in all, overcoming the limitations of agile in a remote setting is possible, but it requires a conscious effort from the organization.

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Like all studies, I also acknowledge that this dissertation is not without certain limitations. In the following, I will discuss them and suggest avenues for future research which emerge from these limitations.

One limitation of my study is that while the notion of translation is connected to the global travels of ideas (e.g., Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), I did not make the international translation(s) a key aspect. The international business domain is well-suited for studying how ideas travel globally and are translated locally, but the management fashion perspective is somewhat missing from international business studies, and my dissertation also leaves this research gap un-addressed. Future research could therefore draw out more the international business aspect, for example, by exploring what are some management fashions in the field of international business or how a management fashion is translated by employees within the multinational corporation. It would also be fascinating to try to follow how a fashion develops, spreads, and is translated in several companies around the world, for example through a comparative case study or tracing the origins and international “travels” of a fashion.

The management fashion in my study was agile, which is premised on self-management and giving employees autonomy and decision-making power (e.g., (Rigby et al., 2016b). This may have encouraged employees to adapt it more than if some other, more top-down-oriented or rule-based fashion had been chosen. Thus, future research should investigate employee translations of other fashions to determine the extent to which employees tend to adapt them and whether some fashions are more “adaptable” than others.

The methodological approach of this dissertation is that of an ethnographic case study, and the strength of case studies is that they can provide contextual explanations (Welch et al., 2011). A limitation of this study is that although my case company OP is a cooperative, consisting of the headquarters and more than a hundred independent cooperative banks around Finland, I did not fully explore how this contextual peculiarity affected the adoption of agile inside OP. While there was some talk within the headquarters about how to expand agile into the independent cooperative banks, these banks and their employees were not within the scope of this study. Future research could therefore investigate how a management fashion is adopted in a company that does not have absolute decision-making power over its subsidiaries, and contrast this with adoption
and translation in companies with more typical headquarters–subsidiary relationships (e.g., a multinational corporation). At OP, the approach – in a nutshell – was to adopt agile first in the headquarters, demonstrate how it benefits the company, and only then try to “coax” the banks into adopting it as well.

Ethnographies often produce a massive amount of data in the form of field notes, interviews, and other collected material – it is easy to “drown” in the data. The result of this is that sometimes ethnographers might get lost in the details of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) and are at risk of missing the bigger picture. I have tried my best to combat this through the constant interplay between theory and data. To do this, I alternated between periods of deep immersion in the field and critical distance from it through four “rounds” of fieldwork. On the other hand, this research design, although spanning 17 months, consisted of “only” 140 days of observations – far short of the “at least a year” which is traditionally considered the ethnographic standard (e.g., Sanday, 1979, p. 527). Further, my fieldwork period ended while OP’s agile transformation was still ongoing. It would be interesting to see future research that followed the adoption and evolution of a management fashion for a longer time period, for example, until it “mutates” into a distinct “variant” or is merged with a new fashion.

Although I interviewed employees throughout the fieldwork period and was thus able to capture their real-time sentiments at multiple points in time, the interviews with executive managers were in part retrospective. I conducted the interviews with managers in late 2020 and inquired about events from 2018 and 2019, with some of the answers going back to events as far as 2011. In addition, interviewing business “elites” such as executive managers is considered challenging, as they are trained in impression management and public relations (Ma et al., 2021) as well as act as company representatives (Watson, 2011; Welch et al., 2002). Thus, the narratives of the executives about how agile was adopted at OP are inevitably somewhat polished versions of what actually happened, which was to a certain extent evidenced by some answers being similar to those given in the media interviews of the executives. Nevertheless, the interviews also produced a wealth of new information. I was mostly interested in how OP’s top management legitimized the adoption of agile, so the “PR talk” was useful data instead of a major limitation for me, but future research into the translations and legitimation strategies of top managers could nevertheless strive for real-time observations and interviews of managers. This way, studies might be able to form a more comprehensive picture of both the adoption process as well as its subsequent legitimation and compare them to each other.

Finally, one avenue for future research is that more organizational ethnographies about employees are needed in management and organization research (Editors, 2011). Westney and Van Maanen (2011, pp. 604–605) state: “We need more ethnographic work that delves into the work and life of the managed, as opposed to the managers.” I have contributed one way of doing this – organizational hybrid ethnography. I would be happy to see the methodology put into use in future research. My study design was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, my alternating between on-site and remote observations was on a monthly basis and due to social distancing measures dictated by the
Finnish government. It would be interesting to see ethnographic research about hybrid work in “the new normal,” where teams – and the researcher – voluntarily alternate between working from home and at the office on a weekly basis or even inside one day.

5.5 Conclusion

In this dissertation, I contribute to the literature on management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996) and the translation of ideas (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). More specifically, I contribute to a better understanding of the intra-organizational translation processes of management fashions, highlighting employees as a key group of actors in the management fashion and translation literatures. I argue that understanding the role of employees helps in developing a more dynamic and nuanced view of the fashion lifecycle which is premised on static stages (e.g., Abrahamson & Piazza, 2019). My study shows that management fashions are translated multiple times within organizations (Andersen & Røvik, 2015) and can take on different forms (Corbett-Etchevers & Mounoud, 2011), evolving and mutating (Røvik, 2011) as they form intra-organizational chains of translation (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) and feedback loops.

In addition, I propose that managers are actively seeking for, rather than passively consuming, new management fashions, and that the adoption of fashions often entails discursive legitimation (Vaara et al., 2006) of the motives behind their adoption (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Wilhelm & Bort, 2013). My study finds that managers use the popular media as a platform for legitimation, but the media also participates in the narrativization of managerial action and organizational change according to its own logics of personification and dramatization.

I also contribute methodologically by arguing that to maintain its relevance, organizational ethnography would benefit from moving past the debate on what constitutes a “field” and focusing on trying to relate to those who are studied – by whatever means necessary (Van Maanen, 2010; Watson, 2011). This entails “patchworking” (Günel et al., 2020) by alternating between periods of deep immersion and critical distance, as well as balancing between physical colocation and virtual copresence (Beaulieu, 2010) as work itself becomes more hybrid (Alcadipani & Cunliffe, 2023).

A sizeable body of research on management fashions has accumulated since Abrahamson’s (1991, 1996) seminal articles. The supply of new management fashions is practically endless. They travel globally but are inevitably translated into local contexts – and subsequently re-translated again and again within those contexts, such as inside the organizations that adopt them. Many are short-lived fads, while others are able to generate a more lasting impact through establishing what is seen as fashionable, and some may even become institutionalized and taken for granted. The main argument I put forward is that the fates of management fashions are ultimately decided by the employees who translate them into practices. My grand hope is that this dissertation serves to promote a wider interest in employees in the sphere of management studies and a rethinking of ethnographic research in organizations.
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Managers are tasked with navigating a constantly changing business environment, so they are often on the lookout for new ideas that they could adopt. Many of these ideas can be labeled management fashions – relatively transitory collective beliefs that a certain management idea is at the forefront of management progress. Their creation and spread is well theorized and studied, but the key role of employees in implementing them has not been properly acknowledged. As a result, the adaptation and implementation processes of management fashions are still not well understood.

This dissertation presents an ethnographic case study of an organizational implementation of the “agile” management fashion from the employee perspective. It develops a dynamic model of management fashions and demonstrates how their translation is more complex than what the prevailing theory implies. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that employees are an essential, yet somewhat neglected, group of actors in determining the fates of management fashions such as agile.