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Published online: 13 May 2023.

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Neo-androgynous management: managing the English further education in an era of neoliberalism?

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ABSTRACT

The study draws on mixed methods research with further education middle managers across England in order to explore whether there are gendered differences in management. There remain debates about whether there are gender differences in management or leadership. The study adds to this debate with results that reveal that women and men are behaviourally flexible, employing a repertoire of knowledge, competencies and skills, which are not necessarily gendered, in order to manage change in an increasing neoliberal further education working environment. We therefore propose a novel theoretical contribution of neo-androgynous management, which suggests 'undoing gender' in management in an education sector that has seen increase in women's employment.

Introduction

Although there have been numerous studies on gender in management, few have explored management within the further education context (see Whitehead 2001). The further education sector in England was historically formed to facilitate infrastructural growth through targeted regional skills development. Overtime the sector has become more wide ranging delivering both vocational/technical, academic and higher education courses in an array of settings including colleges, adult community learning as well as offender learning (Corbett 2022). The diversity of curriculum requires the further education sector to employ a workforce with technical competencies in occupations from finance and engineering to construction and service industries (e.g. hospitality, beauty therapy, etc). The sector, particularly in England, has experienced a number of neoliberal reforms (Whitehead 2001; Corbett 2017), and importantly has seen an increase of women employed throughout the workforce (Whitehead 2001; Education and Training Foundation 2019; McTavish and Miller 2009). The limited research into an education sector that enjoys diversity of curriculum, student population and workforce is a missed opportunity for learning. It is for this reason we wished to investigate an aspect of this diversity, specifically, gender and management roles.

Gender and management studies have historically been subject to stereotypical gender categorisations (see Broadbridge and Simpson 2011) with scholars arguing that women managers are more humanistic and relationship-orientated, and men managers more goal-orientated, aggressive, direct

This article was originally published with errors, which have now been corrected in the online version. Please see Correction (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2023.2217577)

and/or ambitious (Elsesser and Lever 2011). We revisit this debate, drawing on the seminal theories of Kanter's (1977) critical mass theory and Bem's (1981) gender schema theory to contextualise the debate within a sector that has seen a feminisation of the workforce, that is an increase in women's employment in the sector contributing to a critical mass of women, to explore whether a gender schema of management exists within a contemporary work environment.

The study involved mixed research methods consisting of quantitative data from responses to a national online survey of further education middle managers and qualitative data from an open-ended question in a survey with further education human resource managers across England to explore perspectives of management and the impact of neoliberalism. The findings showed that women and men managers employ a repertoire of managerial skills (e.g. financial management, managing human resources, planning, etc.), which are not necessarily gendered, but rather there is an 'undoing' of gender (see Butler 2004) to navigate neoliberal reforms within the sector (see Whitehead 2001).

Billing (2011) argues scholars should seek to understand where and how gender is important or not important in specific work context. Thus, the study contributes to our understandings of gender by questioning the binary logics of masculine and feminine management (see Billing 2011). The contribution of this study is threefold: providing evidence that management is not necessarily gendered (see Kelan 2010); locating the research in an under-researched area of further education, focussing on middle managers, and where there has been an increase in women's employment; and a proposition of neo-androgynous management as a theoretical development since the research suggests an 'undoing' of gender (see Kelan 2010). In other words, binary logics of gender (see Billing 2011) may no longer be relevant within a contemporary working environment such as the education sector where there has been a feminisation of the workforce.

The first section of the paper revisits the debate of feminine and masculine management outlining critical mass theory and gender schema theory as a theoretical framing for the debate as to whether sex-type or gender differences of women and men in management and leadership exist. The second section of the paper outlines the context of the further education sector and neoliberal reforms that has taken place in the sector over the past few decades with a discussion of management in further education. The third section outlines the research methods and section four provides the results of the study. The final section is a discussion of the results. We conclude by arguing that the binary categorisation of feminine and masculine management may no longer be relevant, particularly in the further education sector, and an there is an 'undoing' of gender.

Feminine and masculine management?

Kanter (1977) found that an organisation could have a uniform, skewed, titled and balanced representation of socially and culturally different people, arguing that organisations are mostly skewed with 'dominants' and 'tokens'. According to Kanter (1977) women are 'tokens' in organisations as they are perceived to be 'different' and excluded from the dominant group (men) if they do not conform or perceived to be disloyal. Kanter (1977) argued that women's relative 'newness' in the labour market and workplace required adjustment from men in the organisation, but as women become a more 'fixed' presence and increased in number in the workplace, men would learn to accommodate women in the organisation. Kanter (1977) argued that a critical mass of women in the workplace and organisation would address 'skewness' and the perception of women as 'different'. However, Kanter (1977) argued that as the proportion of a social group shifts so do social experiences. Thus, there is a potential for a counter-culture with a critical mass challenging the culture of dominants (Kanter 1977). We therefore, after forty-five years of Kanter's (1977) published work, seek to explore if there has been a counter-culture given that women are now a fixed presence and critical mass within the further education sector. In other words, given that women are now 'dominant' in the further education sector, are gender differences or 'doing gender' in management still relevant?

Much of the research on gender differences or 'women's difference' has drawn upon gender schema theory. According to Bem (1981) through socialisation children acquire sex-specific self-concepts, skills and attributes of what it is to be masculine and feminine, which is a gender schema of attributing masculinity and femininity to men and women, respectively. Although gender as a biological category has become a contentious issue in contemporary debates, most scholars would argue that through socialisation, gender is socially constructed and children learn sex-related associations (Bem 1981; Walby 1989; Johnson 2021). In other words, children are taught dichtomous cognitive schema between expectant behaviours of men and women in society (Bem 1981), or 'girling the girl' and 'doing gender' (Butler 2004). The manifestations of gender schema is stereotyping and gender bias in society and organisations (Agars 2004). Thus, the social construction of gender with societal values assigned to biological sex categories of men and women (Walby 1989), which is translated into gender roles in the workplace (Rhode 2003) with qualities attributed to masculinity or femininity (Powell 2018; Nentwich and Kelan 2014). In organisations masculine behaviours such as being assertive, competitive, directing, task-orientated and achievement focused are valued, while femininity is associated with communal behaviours such as having concern for others, being helpful, kind, sympathetic, having interpersonal sensitivity, and being nurturant and gentle, which is less valued in the workplace (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). Schein (1975) found that successful managers are preceived to possess those characteristics and attitudes more commonly ascribed to men in general than to women. Similarly, Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that the masculine construct of successful managers is perceived to possess mainly agentic behaviours such as competitive, ambitious, achievement focused and task-orientated. A meta analysis of 69 studies found that across countries and organisations the stereotype of leaders and managers being masculine was prevalent for all cultures (Koenig et al. 2011). Women as leaders and managers are perceived as incongruous because of women's perceived stereotypical feminine characteristics, that is communal behaviours, do not fit the masculine paradigm of leadership (Koenig et al. 2011) and there is a 'doing of gender' at work (Nentwich and Kelan 2010). According to Eagly and Karau (2002) prejudice arises when communal qualities are associated with women and are considered inconsistent with agentic qualities believed to be required to succeed as a manager. The adage of 'think manager, think male' (Schein and Davidson 1993; Billing 2011).

Much of extant research, often focussing on leadership than management per se or using the terms interchangeably, suggest that there are differences between men and women in managerial and leadership style due to gender organisational schema being socially constructed and 'doing gender' at work (see Statham 1987; Nentwich and Kelan 2010). However, there are some studies which suggest that there may be no differences in the traits and styles of women and men managers (see Ferrario 1991; Rosener 1991; Davidson and Burke 1994; Young 2004; Van Engen and Willemsen 2004). Thompson (2000), for example, found no difference in women and men's leadership effectiveness in an educational management setting. Pounder and Coleman (2002) similarly argue that there are no differences in the traits, competencies and styles of women and men leaders and managers. They argue, based on a review of scholarly research, that gender stereotyping is central to the rejection of the gender determining leadership style debate because stereotyping explains how the perception of a particular leaders' performance can differ from actual performance of that leader (Pounder and Coleman 2002). Valentine and Godkin (2000) also argue that women face socially prompted stereotypes about masculinity and femininity that undermine their credibility as managers and leaders. Thus, suggesting that this not necessarily how men and women manage, but how they are stigmatised. This is particularly relevant given the performance evaluations associated with neoliberal performative measures in the education sector (see Whitehead 2001; Deem and Lucas 2007; Deem and Brehony 2007; Morley 2005).

However, the debate is often on binary gender differences, often ignoring intersections of identities and androgyny. Bem's (1977) seminal conceptualisation of androgyny included conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity that are distinct constructs, but she argued that such distinctions could be become blurred. According to Sargent (1981) the androgynous man

communicates empathetically, has the ability to be aware of and express feelings, supports and nurtures colleagues, and examines attitudes that values people; whereas, the androgynous woman communicates with self-expression and confidence, makes a visible impact, takes action, problem solves and is assertive. Although masculinity and femininity were originally thought of as traits, the constructs are now considered broad categories of capabilities and competencies where androgynous individuals are more likely to think of themselves in terms of, and develop abilities in, the characteristics of gender identities (Srivastava and Nair 2011). Thus, the conceptualisation of androgyny tends towards the adoption of masculine behaviours by women and the adoption of feminine behaviours by men – a pervasive binary conceptualisation of gender differences or 'doing gender' in management. Much of the research on androgyny and managerial or leadership behaviours conceptualised gender in a binary or dichotomous manner attempting to demonstrate that managers were more effective when men and women performed feminine and masculine behaviours, respectively (see Due Billing and Alvesson 2000). As Billing (2011) argues these binary logics ignore the workplace context, lines of work and culture wherein gender is unstable and constituted by discourse with gender being a fluid, variable, shifting over space and time. Koenig et al. (2011) and Lueptow, Garovich-Ssabo, and Lueptow (2001) observed that stereotypical gender-type behaviours associated with men and women managers were constant, i.e. men were seen as more agentic and women as communal, but over time managers were beginning to incorporate both masculine and feminine behaviours making them androgynous. In other words, 'doing gender'.

Androgynous management behaviours have been associated with more effective management (Srivastava and Nair 2011; Kark, Waismel-Manor, and Shamir 2012). Earlier research tended to argue that if women adopted masculine behaviours, and men feminine behaviours they could be more effective managers or leaders (see Sargent 1979), while more contemporary research argued critically of the gender labelling of masculinity and femininity and the unfortunate consequences for women in management and leadership positions being evaluated through a lens of masculinity (see Due Billing and Alvesson 2000). Nevertheless, the debate continues, and as Berkery, Morley, and Tiernan (2013) showed men continue to favour more agentic managerial behaviours while women were evaluated more favourably by both men and women when exhibiting androgynous behaviours. Kark, Waismel-Manor, and Shamir (2012) study also showed that both men and women managers are rated higher on a masculine than feminine measures, and that men were more likely to be rated as androgynous. A recent study with a larger sampling by Powell, Butterfield, and Jiang (2021) showed that more effective managers exhibit a decreasing emphasis on masculinity and increasing emphasis of femininity over time. In other words, a good or more effective manager was regarded as being more androgynous or having more of a balance of masculine and feminine behaviours (Powell, Butterfield, and Jiang 2021). In other words, the pervasiveness of 'doing gender' (Nentwich and Kelan 2010, 2010) with binary logics of masculinity and femininity.

A number of observations can be made about the aforementioned studies within the debate of masculine and feminine gender differences and 'doing gender' in management and leadership. First, much of the gender schema and sex-specific studies incorporated binary, unidimensional paradigms of masculinity and femininity, often using Bem Sex-Role Inventory (see Powell and Butterfield 2015), and thereby ignoring behavioural flexibility and fluidity of gender in management. Second, much of the research on gender differences in management and leadership, although spanning four decades (Powell and Butterfield 2015) tend to be concentrated in mid-1980s to mid-2000s. Much has changed in global context and contemporary workplace, particularly in the further education sector where there has been an increase in the employment of women, technological developments, labour regulation such as equality and diversity policies, and demands for more humanistic or people-orientated approaches in the workplace such as quality of working life (see Kark, Waismel-Manor, and Shamir 2012), which has perhaps now been accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. employees wishing for more of a work–life balance and flexible working). Therefore, it may be questionable whether gender schema and stereotype sex-specific constructs are still relevant with the fixed presence and critical mass of women now the workplace, and the 'doing' and 'undoing' of

gender (see Kelan 2010). Third, much of the research tends to examine leadership effectiveness in terms of transformational and transactional dimensions. Thus, this study examines middle management to explore whether gender differences in management are still relevant within contemporary working environment. We locate the research within the further education sector as it has seen an increase in the employment of women through-out its workforce, a sizeable workforce, and it is a sector that has undergone a number of neoliberal reforms over the decades with some scholars arguing that these reforms have impacted upon women (McTavish and Miller 2009).

Further education context

The further education sector delivers qualification-based education and training to 738,000 students aged 16–18 years old and 1.4 million adults aged over 19 (Association of Colleges 2020). There are 814,800 apprentices and 504,500 adults on community courses as well as students with special educational needs or disabilities who access education from the sector (Corbett 2021). Furthermore, the sector has a sizeable workforce of 111,000 full-time equivalent staff (Association of Colleges 2020). The sector, as part of the public sector, has a undergone a number of neoliberal reforms with regulatory frameworks and key performance indicators, which scholars argue have resulted in increased managerialism (Corbett 2021; Donovan 2019; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2018; McTavish and Miller 2009; Whitehead 2001).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all the public sector reforms within the further education sector in England, however we highlight important reforms and discuss the implications. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act introduced a number of neoliberal reforms to the sector (Simmons 2009). Although the legislation provided for autonomy from local government, as freestanding public bodies, further education corporations or sixth form college corporations; the further education sector became subject to a number of national performance frameworks in order to improve educational provision and make it 'fit for purpose' (Corbett 2017). By the late 1990s the then Labour government brought in the requirement for further regulation of the sector, which was aimed to drive professional standards (Lucas 2013). In 1999 professional standards for teachers and managers were introduced by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO), which was replaced by the Lifelong Learning United Kingdom (LLUK) in 2006, and subsequently rewrote the standards for teachers in the sector. In 2012 and again in 2014 there were further regulations to improve professional standards in the sector (Education and Training Foundation 2014; SET 2015). For example, the 2014 Professional Standards for Further Education Teachers and Trainers by the Education and Training Foundation provided a significant impact as the core expectations that are now embedded into the common inspection framework for inspecting further education providers as undertaken by Ofsted (Education and Training Foundation 2014). In 2016, the Enterprise Act intoduced apprenticeships, with a levy for employers, into the further education sector. The result was a nexus between business, government and the further education sector, with oversight by Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical, an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Education (Foster and Powell 2019).

A number of studies that have reviewed public sector reforms in the sector (Avis 2005; Bathmaker and Avis 2013; Lucas 2013; Lucas, Nasta, and Rogers 2012; Simmons and Thompson 2008) suggest that the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, referred to as post-incorporation, aimed to improve the sector's performance through neoliberal reforms. The result was increasing performativity and targets, which is monitored within a performance framework such as quality assurance audits by Ofsted. As Whitehead (2001) argues the shift in further education management practice is evidenced by the increasing deployment of control systems designed to maximise output under rigid conditions of measurement and evaluation. Orr (2020) provides a critical analysis of the neoliberal reforms initiated by successive governments. These reforms, which span over 30 years, required the workforce to be increasingly effective in delivering quality education, according to performance frameworks, and within a financially austere environment (Orr 2020). Lucas (2013), and Simmons and

Thompson ([2008](#)) argue that this resulted in aggressive and performance-orientated management styles, which negatively impacted on working cultures. Page ([2017](#)) argues that neoliberalism in the further education sector resulted in cuts to staffing; contractual employment changes; the monitoring, surveillance and evaluation of teachers; and managerialism. Donovan ([2019](#)) argues that reforms and constant change, instability and forced competition for the market share of students has been corrosive to relationships among staff within the sector. Boocock ([2015](#), [2017](#)) also argued that managerialism has promoted agent self-interest with an emphasis on performativity and management focused on the achievement of strategic objectives. It required managers to be resilient and draw from a broad repertoire of skills to deliver education, meeting performance targets, within financial constraints. Corbett ([2021](#)), researching the further education competency framework for further education managers in England, showed the challenge for managers is to have the required skills, knowledge, responsibilities and traits that span 33 competencies, which in terms of meeting evaluative frameworks is an onerous challenge.

In addition to the neoliberal reforms of the sector, the workforce changed. The sector has seen the feminisation of the workforce (Avis [2005](#); Whitehead [2001](#); Thompson and Wolstencroft [2015](#)). McTavish and Miller ([2009](#)) observed that neoliberal reforms within the further education sector had created a culture of managerialism and performativity. They argue that 'Managerialism has seen the rise in work intensification and job demands as well as a preference for organisational values such as competitiveness and individualism compliant with performance regimes' (McTavish and Miller [2009](#), 351). Furthermore, McTavish and Miller ([2009](#)) and Avis ([2005](#)) argue that managerialism and resulted in a culture of masculinity negatively impacting upon women's careers within the sector. Blackmore and Sachs ([2003](#)) in their study of the Australian further education sector similarly found that although neoliberal reforms provided career opportunities for women to be promoted to middle management positions, individual women were positioned within highly masculinist neo-corporate bureaucratic cultures that co-opted their commitment to education to be incorporated into neoliberal work identities. Thus, similarly to research within the higher education sector which demonstrated that from the 1980s the implementation neoliberal public sector reforms in the higher education sector resulted in a more competitive system, centralised coordination, strong institutional management and quality assessments (Capano [2011](#)), which scholars have argued reinforced a culture of masculinity (Stivers [2002](#); Benschop and Brouns [2003](#); Deem [2003](#), [2009](#); Deem and Brehony [2007](#)). Although there has been much research in the higher education sector and the impact of neoliberalism on the careers of women academics, there is relatively less research within the further education sector. We address this deficit with this study and outline our research methods in the next section.

Research method

The study draws on data collected as part of a wider empirical research involving a mixed methods approach to investigate the skills, knowledge and competencies of further education middle managers. The first survey collected quantitative data from an online survey, which allowed for relatively larger sampling of further education middle managers across England and broad range of responses ($n = 164$). The online survey involved randomised sampling with the survey disseminated via social media and random selection of further education institutions to disseminate the survey via their internal email system. The data was collected from 2017 to 2018. The survey was anonymised and complied with ethical standards of the authors' institution. The second survey involved purposeful sampling of human resource (HR) managers who have knowledge of what is needed to be a successful manager in the further education sector. These HR managers were asked to respond to an open-ended question, that is: 'What do you believe makes a person successful as a further education middle manager?' The qualitative data was analysed using a frequency analysis in Microsoft Excel, and to ensure triangulation, NVivo 12 was also used to identify the most frequently occurring word and text.

The quantitative data from the first survey was derived from the online survey using Jisc software. The precise population size of further education middle managers in England at the time of the study (2017–2018) meant that the population size had to be estimated utilising the Education and Training Foundation (Education and Training Foundation 2019) workforce reports. These estimations suggest that in England there were approximately 1260 further education middle managers. The calculation is based on 280 providers (at the time of data collection) with each provider having an average of 4.5FTE further education middle managers per provider. The response rate for the survey was 164, which gives an overall confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 7% for the quantitative data. The first section of the survey included demographic questions, specifically gender including non-binary categories, age and ethnicity. The demographic data of the survey confirms a representative sample in comparison with published workforce data reports (Education and Training Foundation 2019).

The second section of the survey incorporated 33 questions on managers' skills, knowledge, responsibilities and competencies, which is based on the Corbett (2017, 2021) studies, the Frearson (2002) report, which was a national study of further education institutions in England with 1316 responses from further education staff, and Dierdorff, Rubin, and Morgeson (2009) research on managerial competencies. The first 12 questions were about managerial responsibilities such as 'Managing human resource to support service provision', 'Managing finance', 'Planning to achieve a vision', etc.; the next section of the survey included nine questions on further education middle managers' knowledge such as 'Knowledge of employment law and appropriate practice', 'Knowledge of resource management', 'Knowledge of change management', etc.; and the final section of the first survey included 12 questions with regard to skills and traits such as achievement-orientated, being approachable, critical thinking, etc. Further education middle managers were asked to respond to the questions in terms of the extent to which they regarded the responsibility, knowledge, skills and traits as important to their role. This was measured according to a five-point Likert scale with 1 being of high importance and 5 being of low importance. All questions required forced choice responses.

The quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 28. The analysis involved comparison of means between men and women's responses. An independent T-test was conducted, which is an acceptable statistical analysis to compare differences between two groups (Berkman and Reise 2011), and in this case the differences between men's and women's responses since the study sought to explore gender differences in management. The independent variable was gender. Given that the majority of responses for the question on gender were women self-identifying women and men self-identifying as men, the independent variables were therefore 'women' and 'men'. The dependent variables included responsibilities, knowledge, skills and traits.

This study attempts to capture changes experienced within the further education sector in England, which is a result of new policies and initiatives that are outside of the research participants' control. The level of control and regulation within the further education sector means educational institutions, and in turn their staff, are bound by objective rules, parameters and social structures within which they operate. The way in which the participants respond to the further education environment is the result of their individual perceptions; it cannot be ignored that the framework in which a manager will operate is influenced by the macro environment. By extension, the data collected will be the result of the current factors that are affecting the further education sector. The surveys return statistical data, but this data is produced from questions which seek to establish participant's interpretation of their role in the current environment and the social structures that exist. Our study has sought to mitigate the potential limitation in two ways. First, by conducting the study at a national level which removes localised issues and instead identifies self-reported themes in further education middle manager roles across the sector. Second, through the use of a two-stage

Table I. Survey Population and Workforce Data Comparison.

Gender	ETF 2019 data	Survey data
Men	39%	37%
Women	61%	63%

data collection model that first surveys further education middle managers and then separately surveys HR managers, thus providing opportunity to triangulate results and provide greater data reliability.

Results

The descriptive data for the online survey, by gender and in comparison to the published demographic data of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF 2019) workforce report is presented in Table I. The descriptive data by gender demonstrates a representative sample of the workforce in the FE sector.

Table II presents the results for comparison of means and an independent T-test for men's and women's responses. Firstly, the results reveal that there are some statistical differences between women's and men's responses. These include competencies of managing a team; building and maintaining a working relationship; planning resource requirements; developing a vision; planning to achieve a vision; and managing and developing self and own performance. In terms of knowledge, there were also differences between men's and women's responses. These included knowledge of motivation and practices, strategy, change management, and reflective practice. For skills there were differences between women's and men's responses for planning and organisation, literacy and numeracy, strategic thinking, critical thinking, resilience, conscientiousness, positivity, reflectiveness, achievement and being approachable. Thus, the results indicate that women further education middle managers tended to regard these competencies as more important than men managers.

Twenty-six HR managers responded to the open-ended question of whom 76.5% were women managers. The majority of managers, women, were of the opinion that in order to be a successful further education middle manager required the ability to accept and manage change. The most frequently occurring words or text in response to the open-ended question was 'ability' (24 occurrences) and 'change' (11 occurrences). A NVivo Word-Cloud, demonstrating frequency and intensity of words used by managers as a response to the open-ended question is presented in Figure 1.

The responses to the open-ended question, there was a consensus shared by HR managers that in order to be a successful manager, a further education middle manager required to be considerate of how they supported and managed others. Overall, there were seventeen references made to this within the free text responses, quotes included: '... understanding the sector and adapting to the change and needs within education in relation to people management'; '... the ability to motivate staff to navigate through the constant change ...'. The theme of change was present in the context of managing teams and being adaptable as an individual manager. The latter often being coupled with resilience, quotes illustrating this include; '... ability to adapt to change ...'; and '... resilience and the ability to cope with a fast moving, very dynamic and changeable environment ...'. There were fourteen free text responses to resilience and coping with change as a manager.

The qualitative data resulting from the second survey (administered to HR managers) reveals a consistency in opinion that in order to succeed in the further education sector as a manager, a further education middle manager has to have to ability to manage change and teams, and be effective and resilient. Attributes which also featured in the first survey (administered to further education middle managers) supporting data reliability of this study.

Table II. Independent T -Test.

	Gender	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Managing HR	Men	61	1.90	1.076	.138
	Women	103	1.75	1.082	.107
Managing team	Men	61	1.36	.837	.107
	Women	103	1.12	.491	.048
Work relations	Men	61	1.44	.847	.108
	Women	103	1.17	.487	.048
Service	Men	61	1.38	.860	.110
	Women	103	1.16	.556	.055
Quality service	Men	61	1.43	.865	.111
	Women	103	1.19	.658	.065
Planning	Men	61	1.90	.870	.111
	Women	103	1.57	.749	.074
Managing finance	Men	61	2.48	1.074	.138
	Women	103	2.22	1.038	.102
Managing physical	Men	61	2.26	.874	.112
	Women	103	2.06	1.027	.101
Developing vision	Men	61	2.28	1.227	.157
	Women	103	1.76	.955	.094
Planning achieve vision	Men	61	2.16	1.172	.150
	Women	103	1.57	.892	.088
Change improvement	Men	61	1.52	.808	.104
	Women	103	1.29	.536	.053
Managing own perform	Men	61	1.80	.963	.123
	Women	103	1.50	.803	.079
Employment law	Men	61	2.62	1.098	.141
	Women	103	2.46	1.046	.103
Motivation	Men	61	2.36	1.141	.146
	Women	103	1.91	.919	.091
Quality assurance	Men	61	1.56	.992	.127
	Women	103	1.40	.647	.064
Resource management	Men	61	2.21	1.051	.135
	Women	103	1.99	.846	.083
Health and safety	Men	61	2.15	1.030	.132
	Women	103	1.95	.974	.096
Accountancy	Men	61	3.03	1.080	.138
	Women	103	3.06	1.110	.109
Strategy	Men	61	2.39	1.144	.147
	Women	103	1.92	.926	.091
Change management	Men	61	2.16	1.083	.139
	Women	103	1.74	.885	.087
Reflective practice	Men	61	1.97	1.032	.132
	Women	103	1.44	.667	.066
Rationality	Men	61	1.39	.802	.103
	Women	103	1.23	.447	.044
Planning and organisation	Men	61	1.39	.802	.103
	Women	103	1.07	.253	.025
Literacy and numeracy	Men	61	1.85	.872	.112
	Women	103	1.48	.639	.063
Strategic thinking	Men	61	1.95	1.056	.135
	Women	103	1.50	.684	.067
Critical thinking	Men	61	1.85	.910	.116
	Women	103	1.41	.617	.061
Resilient	Men	61	1.28	.733	.094
	Women	103	1.07	.253	.025
Charismatic	Men	61	2.11	.950	.122
	Women	103	1.85	.797	.079
Conscientious	Men	61	1.52	.829	.106
	Women	103	1.20	.428	.042
Positivity	Men	61	1.59	.938	.120
	Women	103	1.13	.334	.033
Reflective	Men	61	1.70	.901	.115
	Women	103	1.22	.463	.046

(*Continued*)

Table II. (Continued).

	Gender	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Achievement	Men	61	1.66	.947	.121
	Women	103	1.38	.659	.065
Approachable	Men	61	1.44	.866	.111
	Women	103	1.08	.269	.027

Figure 1. Word-Cloud of Competencies of Successful Manager.

Discussion

Extant research has focused on gender differences in management and leadership, how women navigate organisational barriers, their career trajectories, and the perception of women as being incongruent to management and leadership roles because stereotypical gender categorisations or 'doing gender' (see Schein 1975; Eagly and Karau 2002; Elsesser and Lever 2011; Nentwich and Kelan 2014). Avis (2005) and Thompson and Wolstencroft (2015) have argued that the increased feminisation of the further education sector have resulted in better management practices and attribute this to women managers. They argue that women managers have ameliorated masculine managerial practices and agentic behaviours such as target setting (Avis 2005; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2015). McTavish and Miller (2009) similarly argue that the increased employment of women managers have to some extent broken down barriers women face in the further education sector, and argue further that masculinised organisational culture is to some extent being eroded by the

increased feminisation of the sector. However, they caution that women managers could become assimilated in a masculine organisational culture with the pressure of agentic performance evaluations in the education sector (McTavish and Miller 2009). Similarly, Blackmore and Sachs (2003) in the Australian further education context argue that women have become co-opted by neoliberal reforms, adhering to masculinist neo-corporate bureaucratic cultures, and advancing neoliberal performativity.

The intention of this study was not to determine the effectiveness of women and men further education middle managers, nor compare which binary gender categorisation was more effective, but rather sought to understand whether gender differences or 'doing gender' in management are still relevant in a contemporary working environment, particularly one that has seen the increase in women being employed throughout the workforce where there is now a critical mass of women in the workplace. The responses have shown some differences between men and women further education middle managers with women managers regarding some competencies, knowledge and skills as more important than their male counterparts. Some of these would be stereotypically considered feminine, associated humanistic and relationship-orientation (Elsesser and Lever 2011) or communal behaviours (Eagly and Karau 2002), such as managing a team, building and maintaining working a relationship, motivation, positivity, and being approachable and reflective. While other competencies, knowledge and skills would be considered as stereotypically masculine or agentic (Eagly and Karau 2002) such as planning resource requirements, developing and planning to achieve a vision, performance management, strategic and change management, planning and organising, numeracy, critical thinking, resilience, and being conscientiousness, and achievement-orientated. The results suggest that although there were differences, there was no clear delineation of stereotypical masculine and feminine competencies, knowledge or skills, or that there were binary logic of 'doing gender' (see Billing 2011; Kelan 2010). In other words, the study showed that women further education middle managers regarded stereotypical masculine and feminine competencies, knowledge and skills important in undertaking their role. The results suggest that women and men further education middle managers employ a repertoire of competencies, knowledge and skills that are not necessarily feminine or masculine, to navigate a sector that experiences constant neoliberal reforms. In other words, we argue that the findings suggest that there is 'undoing gender', at least within the context of management within the further education sector in England where women are a critical mass. Furthermore, the critical mass and feminisation of the sector, where 61% of learners are female (UK Government 2022) with most accessing educational programmes related to health and care, and less accessing trade and technical subjects such as engineering (Education and Training Foundation 2020) shows that learners are studying subjects associated with stereotypical feminine professions, and likewise more women are reflected in the teaching staff for these subjects. Thus, although the results of this study suggests that there may an 'undoing gender' by middle managers in terms of competencies, knowledge or skills and managerial behaviours; we question whether there is an 'undoing gender' in the sector in terms of provision to learners and the future careers of learners.

Nevertheless, to address the debate on gendered differences or 'doing gender' in management, we agree with Woodhill and Samuels (2021) and Billing (2011) that the stereotypical gender categorisations and binary logics of masculine and feminine behaviours may be an anachronism. In the case of the further education sector, with an increased feminisation of the sector, it is perhaps more appropriate to state that managers mobilise a repertoire of behaviours, knowledge, skills and competencies. There is evidence to suggest behavioural flexibility or gender fluidity with a mix of knowledge, skills, competencies and behaviours, which are not necessarily gendered. Thus, there is an 'undoing' of gender by managers to navigate a sector that experiences neoliberal reforms. We argue, as does Woodhill and Samuels (2021), that this behavioural flexibility is situationally appropriate behaviours

employed by women and men managers to navigate the workplace. Although scholars (see Avis 2005; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2015) argued that the feminisation of the further education sector would result in more humanistic or people-orientated behaviours given the critical mass of women (Kanter 1977); our study suggests that there has been a shift from stereotypical masculine and feminine categorisations and binary logics of the way men and women manage within resource constraints and performativity of a neoliberal environment. This shift could be considered a counter-culture (Kanter 1977). Thus, compared to previous studies, we argue that there is 'undoing' of gender in management and that stereotypical categorisations of feminine and masculine management or binary logics may no longer be relevant in a contemporary work environment – at least in the case of the further education sector where women are the majority of employees and managers. According to Woodhill and Samuels (2021) empirical research into the benefits of androgyny has been inconclusive and there has been no theoretical developments.

We therefore propose neo-androgyny as a form of theory building towards new understandings of 'undoing gender' in a contemporary workplace (see Benschop 2021; Nentwich and Kelan 2014). Neo-androgyny is 'undoing gender' in androgyny, and would involve thinking of behavioural flexibility with a mix of innate, acquired and learned behaviours moving away from historical ideas and stereotypical assumptions of sex and gender to contemporary thought of dimorphic gendered behaviours (Woodhill and Samuels 2021). In other words, neo-androgyny does not involve 'doing gender' when men adopt feminine managerial behaviours and women masculine managerial behaviours, and stigmatised according to gendered evaluations in the organisation, but rather neo-androgyny involves 'undoing gender'. Thus, thinking of behavioural repertoire by any sex, that is neo-androgyny as behavioural flexibility in support of situationally appropriate behaviours by both sexes (Woodhill and Samuels 2021). Neo-androgyny represents a contemporary approach to behaviour instead of attempting to fit traits or binary logics as undifferentiated categorisations of masculinity and femininity (Woodhill and Samuels 2021).

There are limitations to the study, which we suggest could serve as a research agenda. First, given the sample size, future research could include larger sampling of the education sector as well as other sectors where there has been a feminisation of the workforce and a critical mass of women throughout organisational hierarchies. Secondly, the research was restricted to England, given the different governance and funding models in the UK, future research could be extended to other devolved administrations in the UK (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), and internationally, to allow for comparative studies and external validity of neo-androgynous managerial behaviours. We suggest in-depth qualitative research (for example interviews with managers) to further explore neo-androgynous behaviours and the circumstances under which there is gender flexibility and 'undoing gender' in management. Finally, we suggest further research into the 'doing' and 'undoing' of gender, and research into the intersections of identities within the further education sector.

Conclusion

The study suggests that debates about stereotypical gender differences and binary logics in management may be questionable since the research found women and men managers drew on a repertoire of knowledge, skills and competencies, which are not necessarily gendered, in order to manage within a sector experiencing constant neoliberal reforms. We have found evidence to suggest that managers considered certain skills, knowledge and competencies important to their role, which could not be categorised into binary gender logics or stereotypical masculine/agentic and feminine/communal behaviours. We found that managers were 'undoing gender' in that women and men managers considered a repertoire of skills, knowledge and competencies important in undertaking their roles and responsibilities, particularly in a sector that have experienced decades of neoliberal reforms. We

therefore argue that middle managers in the further education sector in England have more of a neo-androgynous approach to managing with behavioural flexibility. We argue that neo-androgyny is 'undoing gender' in that binary logics of gender may no longer be relevant in a contemporary workplace. We add a theoretical development with evidence of neo-androgyny and call for future research to explore the circumstances under which there is 'undoing gender' and gender flexibility of managerial behaviours and competencies that men and women managers draw up to be effective.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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