

‘They Expect me to be Caring’: The Challenges of Claiming an Androgynous Leadership Approach

Abstract

Purpose Our research explores the experience of performing androgynous leadership approaches by New Zealand women leaders within the context of everyday conflict situations.

Design/methodology/approach The research question ‘How do women leaders experience gender in conflict situations?’ was explored through the facilitation of four focus groups with 19 senior female leaders in New Zealand. Post-structural discourse analysis was employed to explore how participants negotiated positions of power within their environments and in accordance with competing gendered discourses.

Findings Participants described taking a flexible, balanced, androgynous leadership approach to managing conflict situations. While the expectations to be, *empathetic*, *sympathetic*, *gentle*, *nurturing* and *caring* resonated with the participants preferred approach, they remained firm that if conflict persisted, they would *cross the line* and adopt stereotypically masculine behaviours to resolve the situation. However, participants describe that when perceived to be *crossing the line* from feminine to masculine approaches, they experienced significant backlash. This demonstrates the tensions between the approaches women leaders would like to take in managing conflict, and the experiences of doing so within a prescriptively gendered organisational context.

Originality This research contributes to a gap which exists in understanding how gender is experienced from the viewpoint of the woman leader. We present a nuanced view of gendered leadership as a contested ground, rather than a series of strategic choices. Despite an increase in the acceptance of women into leadership positions, we seemingly remain bound by what is considered a ‘feminine’ leader.

Keywords: Androgynous leadership, gendered leadership, backlash, conflict management

Introduction

Although the impact of gender stereotypes on perceptions of female leaders is well documented (Rudman and Glick, 2001; Parks-Stamm, Heilman and Hearn, 2008; Collins et al, 2014, Cundiff and Vescio, 2018), less is known about the ways in which senior female leaders *experience* gender during conflict management. As an example of a defining part of the everyday experience (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), conflict situations provide a fruitful context under which women's experiences of gender can be explored. In this research we contribute to this conversation by asking: '*How do women leaders experience gender in conflict situations?*'.

Using the dyad of concern for self and concern for others (Rahmin, 2002), Davis, Capobianco and Kraus (2010) found that men and women respond to conflict situations differently, with women more likely than men to display a range of behaviours. Moreover, women leaders displaying the same behaviours as their male counterparts are perceived less positively (Thoroughgood, Hunter and Sawyer., 2011), and even as hostile (Rudman and Glick, 2001), including when managing workplace conflict (Atwater, Carey and Waldman, 2001; Sinclair and Kunda, 2000). Indeed, behavioural dexterity seems necessary for women leaders who, to avoid being perceived as ineffective, must display sensitivity; and to be perceived as *effective*, must display *both* sensitivity and strength (Johnson *et al*, 2008).

This continued focus on gender-based differences in leadership approach (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008) suggests that gender stereotypes and roles prevail in understanding of managing workplace conflict. Such research often finds alignments between men, masculinity and task orientation to conflict management and between women, femininity and relational orientation

to conflict management (Bark, Escartin, Schuh and van Dick, 2016; Eagly and Carli, 2003; Johansson, 2016). Others show that conflict management style is closely aligned with gender role orientation, organisational status (Brahnam *et al.*, 2005; Mwantu *et al.*, 2018; Said, 2017; Dildar and Amjad, 2017), and personality (Kościelniak, Piotrowski and Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2018). These findings suggest it is not yet clear whether traditional sex-role leadership stereotypes are becoming less influential.

Indeed, androgynous leaders (Bem, Martyna and Watson 1976) can draw on a myriad of behaviours enabling the integration of a high concern for self and others and assertiveness and cooperation in their approaches to conflict management (Brewer, Mitchell and Weber, 2002). The most favourable conflict resolution outcomes appear related to a staged approach of ‘strongly asserting ones needs ... followed by collaborative overtures to find an integrative way of meeting the needs of both’ (Thomas, Thomas and Schaubhut, 2008, p. 161). Thus, the ability to draw on both task and behavioural orientation, emphasising both relationality and decisiveness, seems to reinforce an androgynous advantage in conflict management.

Some suggest that women are particularly suited to adopting a range of non-gendered responses in high tension situations (Ryan *et al.* 2011; Gartzia *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, it is perceived that women leaders ‘have particular skills that come to the fore in times of organisational crisis’ (Ryan *et al.*, 2011, p.472), and that women leaders may therefore be advantaged in conflict management (Brahnam *et al.* 2005). Yet, this association between woman leaders and organisational crisis has been constituted as a ‘glass cliff’ (Bruckmüller and Branscombe, 2010; Rink, Ryan and Stoker, 2012; Kulich *et al.*, 2021), whereby women leaders are more likely to be drawn into crisis situations, which are also at high risk of failure.

The gendering of conflict management is underpinned by descriptive, prescriptive, performative and androgynous discourses of leadership, as reviewed in the next two sections.

This review is followed by an outline of the methodology, a presentation of the findings, the discussion and finally concluding comments are provided.

Prescribing, Describing and Performing Gendered Leadership

Eagly (1987) and Eagly and Karau (2002) trace contemporary stereotypically gendered social roles and division of labour in public and private domains to traditional sex-based roles. That is, men's apparent physical strength became aligned with being the family provider, participating in conflict, and assuming authoritative, high-status power positions inside and outside of the home. In contrast, women's reproductive capacity became aligned with nurturing and caring roles both within the domestic sphere and in occupational categories in the public domain (Eagly *et al.*, 2004).

These gendered social roles and stereotypes have manifest in descriptive and prescriptive norms (Eagly and Karau, 2002) regarding the attributes and behaviours expected of men and women. Descriptive norms refer to how women and men generally behave whereas prescriptive norms frame the traits and behaviours women and men *should* exhibit (Sheppard and Aquino, 2013). Prescriptive gender stereotypes thus suggest that women should exhibit communal qualities such as being dependant, kind, co-operative, helpful, sympathetic, gentle, and nurturing, and that men should exhibit agentic qualities such as being competitive, combative, independent, self-interested, and self-promoting (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Park, 1997).

Aligned to these prescriptive and descriptive understandings of gender, differences in leadership approach have been widely documented (Barkat *et al.*, 2016; Syed and Murray, 2008; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen, 2003; Eagly and Johnson, 1990). Collectively, these studies suggest that women are more likely to adopt a democratic, collaborative,

interpersonal, and transformational leadership style, framed by terms such as ‘compassionate’, ‘caring’ and ‘ethical’ (Elliot and Stead, 2018; Shaked, Glanz, and Gross, 2018). In contrast, men are more likely to adopt a masculine task-orientated, autocratic, and transactional leadership style with a focus on supervision and performance, and a moral stance informed by process and social justice. Indeed, Shaked *et al.* (2018) found that women typically see relationships and leadership as being intertwined, whereas men typically see these as separate and incompatible.

Within the agency-communion paradigm, leadership has been associated with masculine traits giving rise to male advantage (Eagly and Sczesny, 2019), as captured by the catch-phrase ‘think manager, think male’ (Schein, *et al.*, 1996). While gendered leadership distinctions still endure (Garcia-Solarte, Garcia-Perez de Lema, and Madrid-Guijarro, 2018), a shift in constituting leadership based on masculine agentic traits can be discerned. Eagly and Carli (2003), for example, point to the combination of flatter, less hierarchical and flexible organisations and a stronger focus on innovation and learning, resulting in a greater need for leaders to engage in interpersonal interactions, powersharing, and collaboration. This alignment of leadership to communal traits, they suggest might lend itself to a ‘female advantage’ (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Paustian-Underdahl, Slattery Walker and Woehr, 2014).

Despite an assumed female advantage, women often experience the entrenched agentic-communal binary as a ‘double-bind’ (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Women leaders are not expected to display agentic behaviours as women, or communal behaviours as leaders (Zheng, Kark and Meister, 2018). Thus “highly communal women are criticised for being deficient leaders” and women leaders demonstrating agentic behaviours are criticized for breaking prescriptive gender norms (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016, p. 388). Moreover, women leaders in male-dominated industries are perceived to be less effective (Paustian-

Underdahl *et al.*, 2014) due to their apparent lack of networking, self-confidence and power orientation (Esser *et al.*, 2018).

For Butler (1990, 1993, 2010), this tension between expectations and demonstrated approaches can be viewed through the lens of gender performativity gender performativity. For Butler, to be performative, acts must be iterative and citational. Following this understanding, gender is always a ‘doing’; a performing of gender through ‘stylized repetition of acts through time’ (Lander, 2001, p. 57) and within highly regulated contexts (Jenkins and Finneman, 2018). Repeating acts and rituals ‘produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (Butler, 1993, p. 33) and ‘facilitate constitution of gendered bodies’ (Gond *et al.*, 2016, p. 446). For Butler (1993), performativity arises from both the repeated and iterative acts and rituals, alongside the anticipation of what is expected from a given position in society, which reinforces, or provide a citation, for this performance. Citational pre-existing meanings inform intentions to act and presuppose anticipated outcomes of acting. Because of iteration and citation, performativity is viewed as ‘a calculated and scripted human performance’ (Lander, 2001, p. 57) that can either uphold or challenge pre-existing normative regulatory meanings of gender and what it means to be female or male. For Butler, acts that are not repeated, or are not citational, result in misfires of performativity, and subsequent societal backlash.

Such backlash has little to do with competence or skill but stems from the enforcing of feminine gendered norms (Rudman and Glick, 2001). Moreover, backlash can be conceptualised as a misfire or failed performativity. As performativity is constrained by the reinforcement of repeated acts, it is contingent on the other parties to the act. If individuals contest the boundaries expected by others, they may lose their standing as ‘valid social subjects’ (Fine, 2016, p.72). This process is impacted by whether the individual is deemed to have the authority to perform a claimed identity; a credibility that DeRue and Ashford (2010)

suggests manifests through a dialogical granting and claiming leadership, reinforcing who is judged to be credible as a leader.

Androgynous Leadership and Shifting Gendered Norms

Discussions about androgynous persons and androgynous leadership have run alongside the debates about gendered sex roles, stereotypes and performativity (Bem, Martyna and Watson 1976; Korabik, 1990; McPheron and Smith, 1981; Park, 1997). As a principle, androgyny questions the assumption that traits are sex-based, and instead proposes that it is because of socialisation that men and women reliably display sex-appropriate behaviour (Park, 1997). Bem et al. (1976) argue that androgynous persons possess both masculine and feminine traits and qualities, and therefore are assertive, ambitious, dominant, and forceful, as well as affectionate, caring, nurturing, sensitive and concerned for others. Possessing both agentic and communal qualities suggests androgynous leaders can balance concerns for task and people (Korabik, 1990; McPheron and Smith, 1981; Mustafa and Nazir, 2018; Way and Maques, 2013). Androgynous leaders are thus framed as being more effective and flexible because they have a broad range of skills to draw on and can assess situations and choose the most appropriate responses (Korabik, 1990; Oplatka, 2010; Way and Maques, 2013).

To be successful, androgynous performative acts are contingent on the context and dependant on ‘the subordinate’s willingness to accept the androgynous leader’ (Park, 1997, p. 168). Indeed, a growing preference for androgynous leaders can be discerned (Duehr and Bono, 2006; Kim and Shin, 2016; Oplatka, 2010; Way and Maques, 2013). In this regard, Way and Maques (2013) found subordinates expressing a desire for male leaders to become more communal and female leaders to become more agentic. At the same time, there is a noticeable shift in the qualities associated with women but not necessarily for men (Duehr and Bono, 2016; Griffiths, Roberts and Price, 2019; Haines, Deaux and Lofaro, 2016). Accordingly,

women are being perceived as ‘less passive and submissive and more confident, ambitious, analytical, and assertive’ (Duehr and Bono, 2016, p. 837), and are being associated with problem-solving, innovation, vision and accountability (Griffiths *et al*, 2019). Moreover, subordinates view women who display both agentic and communal behaviours as transformational leaders (Saint-Michel, 2018). In contrast, men who demonstrate these two sets of behaviours are not viewed as transformational (Saint-Michel, 2018). Thus, women leaders displaying concern for both people and task appear to be more readily accepted compared to their male counterparts who do the same, therefore suggesting a female androgynous leadership advantage (Korabik, 1990). Conceivably, senior women leaders might be in a citational position to credibly display androgynous behaviours while managing conflict.

It is in this context characterised by a discursive expansion of descriptive characteristics associated with women, the maintenance of prescriptive masculine norms associated with men, and a citation for ideal leaders possessing agentic and communal qualities, that we explore senior women leaders’ experiences of gender during conflict management. In the next section, we present the method we used to do so.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Positioning and Methodology

This research, with the aim of investigating women leaders’ experiences of gender during conflict management situations, is informed and shaped by the epistemological, theoretical and methodological positions of subjectivism, post-structuralism, and discourse analysis (Crotty, 1998). Subjectivism holds that phenomena are only to be understood through the interpretation of experiences and perceptions (Given, 2008). Aligned, poststructuralism contends that ‘an individual comes to be seen/read as a subject’ through the process of subjectification (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021, p. 692). Poststructuralism thus rejects essentialist notions of an authentic self

(Varga-Dobai, 2012; Wendt and Boylan, 2008), and instead proposes that the subject, identity, sense of self, and our relationship with others and the environment is produced through language and ‘a complex and contradictory system of discursive practices’ (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021, p. 692). Because multiple and contradictory discourses are systematically and simultaneously at play (Isaac, Behar-Horenstein and Koro-Ljungberg, 2009), ‘[s]ubjectification is always occurring’ and a ‘fragmented and even contradictory’ ‘subject is always becoming’ (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021, p. 692).

The multiple and contradictory discursive, cultural and performative practices of leadership and of gender, we suggest, shape and constrain women leaders’ experiences of managing conflict. Gender binary and the essentialising of masculine and feminine practices to men, women and leadership, while dominate discussions in leadership (Isaac, Horenstein and Koro-Ljungberg, 2009), is, from a post structural perspective, just one set of discourses at play. Thus, binary subjects are created through, but do not exist outside of, ‘discursive practices’ (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021, p. 692). Women leaders’ individual agency to navigate, take-up or reject gendered discourses in their approaches to managing conflict, are not only shaped and constrained by discursive and cultural practices, but also by the power relations between subjects in their work environments (Isaac, Behar-Horenstein and Koro-Ljungberg, 2009). Power does not reside in a single person but is negotiated between subject positions and these relations of power are similarly produced through discursive practices (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021).

Sampling Criteria and Participant Characteristics

To take part in this research, participants needed to be a woman holding a senior leadership position within an executive leadership team. A key informant (Kumar, Stern and Anderson, 1993), herself a senior executive leader, helped recruit a purposive sample (Creswell and

Creswell, 2018) by emailing 34 women executive leaders from her personal network. The email invited participation and encouraged sharing the email throughout wider networks. While participant homogeneity of being an executive woman leader was sought, a maximal differentiation approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) was used to achieve heterogeneity in sectorial representation to gain variety and richness of conflict management experiences. This process generated 19 participants working across 10 sectors, with leadership experience ranging between five and 20 years (see Tables 1 and 2 below). Ethical requirements precluded presenting specific sample characteristics because of the sensitive nature of the research and the relatively small number of senior women leaders in the New Zealand context. Indeed, disguising individual experiences within a collective voice was a key consideration for selecting the focus group method.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Source: Research data

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Source: Research Data

Focus Group Method

Focus groups were chosen due to the alignment between this method and our interest in executive women leaders lived experiences of conflict management. Defined membership characteristics (Krueger and Casey, 2000) and being in a group with others who share common experiences creates a sense of security and comfort allowing members to hear and discuss other participants' experiences and opinions (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007). In turn, these groups dynamics encourage individual participants to reflect on and share personal experiences

(Bloor *et al.*, 2001) generating in-depth insights (Hurd, Dyer and Fitzpatrick, 2019; Sofaer, 2000). To prompt recollections of managing workplace conflict, a thematic focus group discussion guide was used (Stewart *et al.*, 2007; Sofaer, 2002, Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Four focus group discussions were conducted at a local hall during a half-day session attended by all 19 participants and the first author. This number is accepted as appropriate and optimal in focus group research (Guest *et al.*, 2017). The session began by welcoming participants; reviewing the research aims, the structure of the day, and the thematic discussion guide; randomly assigning participants to a focus group of between four and six members; and moving to separate break-out rooms. A facilitator was selected from within each group to enable discussions to evolve and be guided by participants, meanwhile the research-facilitator walked around to check in on the groups. The recorded discussions lasted approximately 1 – 1.5 hours, at which point all participants joined together for a final debrief discussion and a conclusion of the session.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy aimed to deconstruct women leaders' accounts of gender while managing conflict. From a post structural position, discursive and material practices produce multiple and conflicting subjectivities, truth and meaning within specific cultural environments. From this perspective, women leaders are shaped and constrained by the discourses available to them (Isaac, Behar-Horenstein and Koro-Ljungberg, 2009, p. 139), and that the subjective 'I' 'emerges ... within ... the matrix of gender relations' (Butler, 1993, p.

7). Using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we undertook multiple readings of the data, including:

1. An initial analysis of the claimed approaches to managing conflict as a whole data set
2. An analysis within each account of experience to explore how, and if, these approaches changed through the conflict experience
3. An analysis of the contextual elements that were described alongside these experiences of conflict
4. An analysis of the tensions between the intended or claimed approaches to managing conflict, and the contextual elements.

In reviewing the discourses that emerged from this process, we focused on moment of disruption of “gendered binaries ... (Baxter, 2002, 2008) ... by highlighting complex, contradictory, and fragmented gendered subject positions” and focusing on the way’s participants negotiated positions of power within their environments and in accordance with competing discourses (Przbyla, 2021, p. 697) when managing conflict. We did so by paying attention to the ‘inconsistencies’ of stories and what was ‘not told’ (Varga-Dobai, 2012, p. 9).

These multiple readings of the focus group transcripts uncovered that the women leaders expressed fractured gender performances and identities in their approach to managing conflict; encountered prescriptive gender binaries in their environments; and experienced backlash to their approach to managing conflict. Moreover, the women simultaneously experienced and negotiated approaches to managing conflict within a context that was prescriptively gendered. This analysis gives rise to ‘a more complex and potentially optimistic perspective’ (Przbyla, 2021, p. 697) of these women leader’s experiences of gender when managing conflict.

Findings

All participants had experience of managing conflict involving subordinates. These experiences ranged from managing workplace tension through to legal cases of personal grievance. Although participants initially rejected that gender had any impact on their experiences of conflict management, their subsequent discussions suggested otherwise. As presented here, elements of gender were embedded in participant approaches to conflict management, in expectations placed on participants, and in the form of backlash participants experienced when managing conflict. The participant experiences of claiming and performing androgynous leadership, encountering gendered normative expectations of their leadership, and backlash during incidences of managing conflict are discussed in the sections below.

Androgyny and a Staggered Gendered Performance to Conflict Management

Without exception, all participants initially stated that their gender had no effect on their leadership style or on their experiences of conflict management. Indeed, as their starting point, participant descriptions of personal qualities, leadership and conflict management styles resonated with insights embedded in the androgynous literature (Bem *et al.*, 1976; Korabik, 1990; McPherson and Smith, 1981; Mustafa and Nazir, 2018; Way and Maques, 2013). That is, all participants described themselves as possessing various agentic and communal qualities, including being ‘*caring*’, ‘*empathetic*’, ‘*decisive*’ and ‘*direct*’. Similarly, participants typically described their approach to leadership as a fusion of concern for people and task with a focus on ‘*coaching*’ and ‘*collaboration*’, and their conflict management style as being ‘*flexible*’ and ‘*balanced*’. These androgynous themes, of being concerned for people and organisational outcomes are captured in the following quote:

“In the beginning I thought, I can make this work, I can make this work. When I found out [his age] I thought oh what a terrible way to finish your career, and so I thought

I'm going to work really hard so we can come to a solution, and he can leave with dignity."

Participant descriptions of androgynous leadership in action revealed a chronologically staggered approach. Their preferred starting point was '*characteristically female*' by drawing on communal '*empathetic*' and caring qualities to manage conflict situations. As one participant describes:

"Identifying so what's the problem? You know the problem ... so working through with him in an empathetic way to find how you're going to manage that going forward."

Participants were equally clear that should the situation persist, they were both willing and sufficiently '*flexible*' enough to '*cross the line*' and exhibit their agentic qualities such as being '*tough*', '*decisive*' and '*more direct/clearer*' about expectations:

"I flex, but my preferred position is relatively being interested in people and being caring and approaching things that way, but when 'push- comes-to-shove' I believe I am forceful and decisive, but I prefer we all come to those positions together rather than me to strongly lead or impose in that way."

Amidst describing a staggered androgynous approach, participants articulated a perceived gender-binary when comparing their own conflict management style to their male counterparts. Participants perceived that they were more tolerant than their co-male leaders, and allowed more time to resolve conflict situations involving subordinates, as captured below:

"I probably spent a lot longer trying to coach him and get him to that point versus actually just being a lot more direct."

"I don't think the male leaders would have been as tolerant."

Participant willingness and capability to draw on a range of qualities to manage conflict reflects both the expectation that leaders become androgynous and the evidence that women are adding agentic qualities to their repertoire of leadership skills (Duehr and Bono, 2006; Kim and Shin, 2016; Way and Maques, 2013). Participant descriptions of being androgynous leaders, however, were played out within organisational contexts that seemingly adhered to a gender binary discourse, compete with gendered expectations of them, as women, as discussed next.

Encountering a Prescriptively Regulated Gendered Environment

While having a repertoire of agentic and communal approaches to draw on to manage conflict, all participants described an organisational context where both senior and junior colleagues expected them to predominantly behave in stereotypically feminine ways. Mirroring the gender binary discourse and prescriptive gendered norms (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Park, 1997; Sheppard and Aquino, 2013), participants felt regularly called upon and expected to be ‘motherly’, ‘empathetic’, ‘sympathetic’, ‘gentle’, ‘nurturing’ and ‘caring’. These gendered expectations were placed on them by people from right across their organisations. For example, in an adaptation of ‘think crisis, think female’ discourse (Ryan, *et al.*, 2011), participants described situations where senior reporting officers had ‘brought them in’ to manage long standing conflict situations that they had not been involved in, because of expectations that they would take a more ‘caring’ or mediating approach. One participant described:

“I’ve been asked to go and deal with someone else’s situation or sort something out, because ‘you’re a woman and you’re more empathetic and I think in this situation you should be able to go and deal with that’. Which is kind of a backhanded belittling. It’s kind of like ... they need a bit of TLC or touchy-touchy feely stuff.”

The comment below captures participant experiences of being called upon to be motherly by other staff members affected by, but not directly involved in the conflict situation:

“How often people expected that I would be nurturing both of this difficult staff member and of anyone else who was getting impacted by it. So, I was expected to be the caring mother of the siblings.”

Similarly, participant’s experiences capture the expectation to be sympathetic and motherly by those at the centre of conflict and during the actual process of managing conflict:

“Sometimes you can almost see they’re wanting me to be a bit more motherly or a bit more sympathetic, and I’m like I get what you’re going through that’s cool, this is the result I need, crack on.”

While the expectations to be, *empathetic*, *sympathetic*, *gentle*, *nurturing* and *caring* resonated with the participants preferred approach, they remained firm that if conflict persisted, they would *cross the line* and adopt stereotypically masculine behaviours to resolve the situation. Yet, as we see in the next section, within their social contexts that upheld gendered expectations of women, this crossing the line was met with significant backlash.

Backlash to Crossing the Line: The Androgynous Leadership Misfire

Alongside recognising an expectation to be motherly and feminine, all participants understood *crossing the line* by moving from a communal approach to drawing on their agentic qualities attracted subordinate backlash. At times, subordinate backlash was expressed as nuanced enactments of belittling behaviour, such as rude or snide comments. Typically, the participants tried to ignore these seemingly benign behaviours to avoid escalating the situation:

“you’d be talking and then there’d be that comment under the breath after you’d said something. You’d say what was that...no, no, and everyone would be having a bit of a titter because he’d made some rude comment.”

A more common form of backlash experienced by participants involved subordinates ‘*complaining*’ about them to ‘*senior males*’. Participants experienced these complaints as ‘*undermining their authority*’. However, the participants anticipated and managed these complaints by discussing the situation with, and securing the support of, their senior [and mostly male] management team. The participants regarded this support as critical to maintaining their authority and ability to manage conflict. As one describes:

“He got really aggressive at that point. I just kept restating my position and he said right well, we’ll see about that kind of thing and so off he stormed and to see [my male CEO], whom of course, because ‘ducks in a row’ I’d already been to see and said this is highly likely to get to this position.”

Encountering aggression during conflict management was also common. Typically, this aggression took the form of heated and angry discussions and verbal abuse. However, two participants experienced physical intimidation during ‘*heated discussions*’; in one case, a male subordinate stood over the participant and in the other, the male subordinate blocked the doorway. The description below is typical of the verbally aggressive encounters experienced by the participants:

“He absolutely hit the roof. He got so aggressive and angry, leap straight into well I might as well be out of here then, that’s it, bloody hell.”

Mostly, participants described *'brushing off'* aggressive behaviour and frequently suggested that such aggression was *'an expected aspect of stressful processes'* and that managing such behaviour was *'simply part of their position'*. However, the depth of aggression embedded in these incidences were destabilising, leaving some feeling *'bullied'* and in one instance, *"a bit shocked and surprised ... [and] scared by her aggression"*. Moreover, the accumulative effect of backlash incidences was described as akin to:

"battered wife syndrome. Everyone knows that's what happens, but no one does anything about it."

In summary, amidst the participants androgynous leadership identity multiple and contradictory discourses shaped their experiences of managing conflict within their organisations. These tensions are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Our research, with the focus on *women leaders' experiences of gender in conflict management situations*, played out across several organisations and industries. The women's experiences revealed multiple complimentary and contradictory discourses that simultaneously frame ideal leadership as androgynous (Kim and Shin, 2016); construct females as possessing both communal and agentic qualities (Duehr and Bono, 2016); suggest women have an androgynous leadership advantage (Korabik, 1990); and uphold descriptive and prescriptive gender binaries of women, men, and leadership (Barket *et al.*, 2016; Eagly, 1987).

The tension between discourses of intended or preferred approach, and of organisational context or expectations, resulted in participants experiencing conflict management as a contested and highly gendered experience. This process is described in Figure 2 below.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Within this discursive complexity, the participants' descriptions of a flexible and balanced androgynous leadership style (Mustafa and Nazir, 2018) framed themselves as combining a range of feminine and masculine traits (e.g. care with firmness), along with gender-shared (e.g. analytical, assertive) in their approach to conflict management. This played out by first adopting a communal approach and then drawing on agentic qualities and skills if conflict persisted. Moving from a communal to an agentic style, and 'crossing the line', was both a preferred approach and considered decision. These decisions, as acts of agency, enabled the women leaders to navigate, disrupt and resist discursive gender binaries within their respective working environments (Butler, 1990). Their repeated performances, of drawing on a wide range of qualities and skills to resolve conflict, as Butler (1990) suggests, might work towards changing societal understandings. Through their persistence of doing androgynous leadership, we may be bearing witness to the transformation in the constructions of women and of leadership, and an expansion of qualities and skills associated with women (Duehr and Bono, 2016).

When adopting an androgynous leadership approach, however, participants encountered the prescriptively prescribed environment, and conflict management experiences were discursively shaped by expectations that they only be caring and motherly. These experiences of resistance indicate that for some subordinates, there is no existing expectation, or citation (Butler, 1990), for women leaders being assertive or firm. Instead, such expectations appear predicated on pre-existing meanings that uphold prescriptive gender binaries. Using agentic qualities were seemingly experienced by some subordinates as performative *misfires* manifesting in backlash against the women leaders (Davis, Capobianco and Kraus, 2010,

Butler, 1990). These subordinates undermined the legitimacy of the women's leadership and questioned their validity as 'social subjects' (Fine, 2016, p. 72).

Yet, the women expected backlash and, as an act of agency, negotiated their legitimacy as leaders by gaining support of male peers prior to engaging in the conflict. Through these negotiations, the women affirmed their subject positions as leaders and established relations of power within the conflict situations. Despite these negotiations and gaining peer support, power is not held within one person but rather is shaped by cultural practices and relational negotiations between subject positions (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021). We suggest that subordinate backlash is part of the culture that frame women leaders' experiences of managing conflict. As a cultural backdrop, backlash was present across all industries; enacted by members spanning organisational hierarchies and tenure; and was normalised by participants themselves through a discourse of simply being a part of the job. Backlash, described as being akin to domestic violence, was experienced as oppressive, repeated, citational and ritualised; and sanctioned by routinely calling upon women to manage difficult situations.

By enacting androgynous leadership, women leaders negotiated, challenged and navigated gender binaries. This manifest in fragmented subjectivities, and simultaneous experiences of agency, resistance, power and oppression. Fine (2016) reminds us that as social constructions, the meanings we are born into are fragile, and through repeated 'mis-performances' (p.72), individuals contest the boundaries of what is considered intelligible, and over time reshape what it means to be a woman and a leader.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored how senior women leaders experienced gender in the context of managing conflict. Researchers have documented considerable advantages arising from the increase in women leaders, including improved team cohesion (Post, 2015), higher profitability

(International Labour Organization, 2019) and greater entrepreneurial outcomes in established firms (Lyngsie and Foss, 2017). Increasingly, women's representation in leadership has been framed as a much-needed ethical response to poor leadership practice (Elliot and Stead, 2018).

More recently, senior women leaders are being framed as empathetic and decisive (Henley and Roy, 2020). Androgynous leadership, predicated on flexibility and balance, contests traditional gender binaries by engaging a range of skills and qualities. Indeed, the women leaders in this research actively navigated, negotiated, and disrupted gender binaries by drawing on multiple skills and qualities to manage conflict. The women were undoing gender within cultural environments that shaped their contradictory experiences of support and backlash when managing conflict. Within these contradictions, the present study highlights the importance of negotiating peer-support to augment women's legitimacy as leaders in the face of subordinate backlash that undermined this legitimacy.

An increase in the number of women leaders, and global examples of women leaders displaying androgynous styles, point to an undoing of gendered leadership. However, our research also reveals that this undoing is still played out in cultural environments and organisational contexts where gender-binary expectations of women leaders prevail. Despite recent celebrations of women world leaders (Henley and Roy, 2020), our research suggests that undoing gender, reconstructing legitimacy (Fine, 2016), and re-shaping the context to embrace non-binary performances is both an ongoing and contested endeavour. We concur with Jenkins and Finneman (2018, p. 165) who signal 'the difficulty involved with undoing gender [and] that performativity cannot be turned on and off like a theatre performance.'

Our intention to explore the ways in which women leaders experience gender in everyday conflict situations has raised several implications for future research. The sample in this research is limited New Zealand where there relatively few senior women leaders who are well known to each other. Thus, ethical considerations to protection participant identity shaped

our decision to provide limited details contextualising the data and the use of focus group discussions to disguise individuals. For our study, underpinned by a discursive approach and a need for participant protection, this was appropriate. However, we acknowledge that deeper the insights could be gained by conducting similar studies in different contexts. For example, larger contexts, such as North America or Europe, might enable contextual considerations such as organisation size, position, and ethnicity of the leader/follower, might provide fruitful avenues for future research. In addition, while not the focus of this paper, the documented acts of hostility and violence towards our participants is both a concern and represents an empirical gap. Indeed, although it has been suggested that leaders ‘have a moral imperative to...minimize the violence enacted on others’ (Fine, 2016, p. 69), our research suggests that future exploration of the forms of violence towards leaders could provide fruitful, and important framing for future research. Moreover, in this work we explore the experiences of women leaders. Future research exploring the gendered performances of male, and non-binary leaders who are claiming an androgynous leadership approach, would provide significant contribution to our continued exploration of gendered performativity in organisations.

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