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Men as Middle Managers Doing and Undoing Gender In Organizations

ABSTRACT

Although middle managers are often presumed to resist change in organizations, they can act as change drivers. This article shows how men as middle managers aim to act as change agents for gender equality through doing and undoing gender. Through practices such as bonding with women by objectifying them, being engaged in women-focused initiatives and using gender equality to advance their own careers, men as middle managers aim to create gender equality but often reaffirm existing gender inequalities. However, men were more successful in moving towards gender equality when developing those who are different from themselves. The article contributes to understanding the complexities in analyzing and conceptualizing how men as middle managers are undoing gender by showing that many undoing gender practices can lead to a (re)doing of gender. However, only by engaging with those complexities can men in middle management positions become effective change agents for gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Change Agents, Gender, Men, Middle Managers, Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Men are increasingly seen as change agents for gender equality by practice (Male Champions of Change, 2017; United Nations, 2016; Davis, 2014; Esquire, 2016; Harrison, 2015) and research (de Vries, 2015; Hekman et al., 2017; Kelan & Wratil, 2021; Humbert, Kelan, & van den Brink, 2019; Metz, 2016; Wahl, 2014; Kelan & Wratil, 2018). Most of the extant

research focuses on senior leaders, but research on middle managers is emerging (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, & Benschop, 2020; Kelan, 2020; Williamson, Colley, & Foley, 2020; Colley, Williamson, & Foley, 2021). Middle managers are central for gender equality because they often translate gender equality strategy into everyday practices (Balogun, 2003; Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992).

However, more research is needed to understand how men as middle managers are doing and undoing gender. Although there are different definitions of doing and undoing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990; Butler, 1997), one interpretation of doing gender is to recreate gender inequality, and undoing gender means accordingly to establish gender equality (Deutsch, 2007). This interpretation has been used for a review of the academic literature on men doing and undoing gender, which produced a compendium of practices (Kelan, 2018). Such a compendium of practices is ideally suited to analyze how men as middle managers are doing and undoing gender.

The purpose of the article is to analyze how men in middle management positions are doing and undoing gender by applying and expanding a compendium of practices. The article shows how men as middle managers face a specific and complex set of challenges that can be understood and theorized against the backdrop of doing and undoing gender. The article proceeds as follows. First, the literature on men as change agents in general and in relation to gender equality is discussed, before reviewing practices of doing and undoing gender. Second, the methodology and methods used to collect and analyze the material are presented. The findings provide an overview of the context in which the managers worked, and four practices of men as middle managers doing and undoing gender are discussed. Finally, the findings are set in the context of the existing literature and further research. The article

contributes an understanding that using the theory of doing and undoing gender allows seeing some of the complexities that emerge when men as managers are called upon to act as change agents.

MEN AS MIDDLE MANAGERS DOING AND UNDOING GENDER

With men increasingly being conceptualized as central for achieving gender equality in the workplace, it is useful to explore how men can fulfil this change agency role. Research on doing and undoing gender has shown the continuities and the potential for change in gender relations. Men as change agents can be conceptualized as men doing gender and undoing gender. It has been suggested that the compendium of practices of men doing and undoing gender is a useful framework through which to analyze the way in which men as managers do and undo gender.

While senior leaders are often constructed as the architects of change in organizations, it is middle managers who drive change through their daily activities (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Harding et al., 2014). Middle managers are a central linchpin who link senior leadership with junior staff (Harding et al., 2014). Given their unique position, research has highlighted the complex and contradictory identity constructions of middle managers (Harding et al., 2014; Thomas & Linstead, 2002), such as moving between being resisted and resisting others and being controlled and controlling others (Harding et al., 2014). Even though middle managers are often seen as resisting change in organizations, research has highlighted different roles that middle managers can play in developing and implementing strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Middle managers act as ‘change intermediaries’ (Balogun, 2003). This role requires middle managers to interpret why the change is needed and to develop appropriate resources to translate this change into practice (Balogun, 2003). The micro

practices of sense-making of middle managers are central in this process because they need to understand the change required and then sell it to others in the organization (Rouleau, 2005). If organizational priorities change, as for instance in organizational restructuring, middle managers' sense-making practices have to change at the same time (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In order to enact strategic change, middle managers need to draw on specific discursive resources to convince others that change is needed (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). This means that in order to drive change, middle managers need to show discursive competence in order to act as strategic change agents (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Since gender equality is regularly positioned as a strategic priority for senior leadership, middle managers are often expected to translate this strategic imperative into practice (Williamson et al., 2020; Colley et al., 2021). Men as managers have been seen as central for gender equality (Mattis, 2001; Morrison, 1992; Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009; Kelan & Wratil, 2021; Wahl, 2014; Metz, 2016). This is partly due to the fact that men account for 70% of middle manager positions (International Labour Organization, 2015). Men are also perceived as better change agents for gender equality than women, because women are often seen as self-serving when they support gender equality (Kirton, Robertson, & Avdelidou-Fischer, 2016; de Vries, 2015; Hekman et al., 2017). Yet, men as managers have been shown to be more likely to see gender in essentialist terms (Humbert et al., 2019), to have a strong belief in meritocracy (Kelan & Wratil, 2021), and to try to maintain the status quo (Cortis, Foley, & Williamson, 2021). They are also offered a limited number of subject positions (Kelan, 2020), which restricts their ability to act as change agents. This suggests that men's positions in gender equality efforts need to be critically evaluated (Flood, 2017; Kelan & Wratil, 2018; de Vries, 2015; Kelan & Wratil, 2021). It has also been shown that hierarchy plays a role for which change strategies individuals can employ (Lansu et al., 2020; Kelan,

2020; Mattis, 2001). A specific challenge for middle managers is that even though they might be committed to gender equality, they struggle to translate this commitment into action (Williamson et al., 2020; Colley et al., 2021). This inability for middle managers to operationalize gender equality might also be linked to the fact that these middle managers have a limited understanding of how gender is done (Williamson & Colley, 2018). This means that analyzing how middle managers are doing and undoing gender could be a useful avenue to understand how middle managers can unfold their change potential. In turn, this would also help to refine theories of how doing and undoing gender unfolds in different hierarchical positions (Kelan, 2018).

Whilst there are different understandings of doing and undoing gender (Kelan, 2010; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014; Butler, 1990; Butler, 1997), the compendium of practices used Deutsch's (2007) approach. This in turn is based on an ethnomethodological understanding of doing and undoing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987), where gender is established in relation to sex categories in interactions. Deutsch (2007) suggested that undoing gender means to reduce gender difference and to achieve gender equality, whereas doing gender means to reproduce gender difference and to create gender inequality.¹ The practices of how men are doing and undoing gendered were reviewed and summarized in a compendium of practices that encompasses four themes (Kelan, 2018): men creating connection with other men, men distancing themselves from women, men impressing others, and men displaying heroism, which each contain specific practices. For example, bonding through sexually objectifying women was identified as a way in which men create a connection with other men, whereas a second example relates to identifying with the similar, which means that men are more comfortable with recruiting and promoting people who look like them. Falling under the theme of men distancing themselves from women, men might be absent or

undermining women's events, and the corresponding undoing gender practice is to be present and engaged at women's events. Men impressing others contained a variety of practices such as self-promotion, where men construct their talent as exceptional, and an undoing practice would be to use one's power to advance women. The compendium of practices provides a useful theoretical framework to evaluate how men as middle managers are doing and undoing gender.

With men as change agents for gender equality gaining recent prominence, it is important to analyze how men are engaging in these change efforts by doing and undoing gender. Middle managers are expected to translate strategic change imperatives into daily practices, but often fail to understand how gender is done and undone. There is thus a need to understand how men as middle managers are doing and undoing gender when they aim to be change agents for gender equality. The article will highlight how men as middle managers are doing and undoing gender through applying a compendium of practices (Kelan, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to analyze how men as middle managers are doing and undoing gender when acting as change agents for gender equality. This study focuses on middle managers who were engaged in gender equality efforts. Even though those managers had the intention to create gender equality, they were caught up in the complex ways in which doing and undoing gender takes place. Being engaged in gender equality was operationalized by being seen by others as an advocate for gender equality, by being involved in organizing events for gender equality or by having a reputation in the organization as a manager who tries to ensure gender equality. It was assumed that organizations that have a track record in working towards gender equality were more likely to have middle managers who aim to drive

change towards gender equality. Such organizations were approached via gatekeepers who often were responsible for diversity and inclusion in their organization. The gatekeepers nominated middle managers who in the gatekeepers' opinion were supportive of gender equality in the workplace. The suggested middle managers were then invited to volunteer to participate in the study. During initial conversations, the details of the study were discussed and the middle managers were invited to describe what they do to support gender equality. Often, these examples were then used to select a time to visit the organization. For instance, if a middle manager said that he was active on a task force, a field visit was scheduled for a time when the task force would meet. Since the focus on gender equality was primary, other considerations like managers working in comparable functions, industries or countries were secondary. Apart from supporting gender equality initiatives, it was not attempted to identify different kinds of middle managers. The definition of middle managers was operationalized as the linchpin between senior leadership and junior staff (Harding et al., 2014), which means that middle managers were not in the senior leadership team and had people reporting to them (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990).

In order to analyze the doing and undoing of gender by men as middle managers, this article draws on observation, and in particular, job shadowing (Czarniawska, 2008, 2014; Noordegraaf, 2014) of middle managers, and interviews with middle managers and their co-workers. Three middle managers were selected and agreed to participate in the research. The middle managers managed small teams of less than a dozen people. The managers were all white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and from a middle class background, identified as men and thus, belonged to a majority men background. They worked in *Accounting*, *Broadcasting*, or *Chemicals*. Two organizations are privately held while one is publicly held. The organizations were based in Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom.

In order to explore how doing and undoing gender happens, the middle managers' daily interactions were observed. This meant that the researcher was a shadow for the entire day, which included working group meetings, casual lunches, networking events, etc. Together with the shadowee, days where there are specific events or meetings pertaining to gender equality efforts such as meetings of gender equality task forces or gender equality events were identified. By selecting occasions where gender was heightened, it was expected that such occasions would be particularly potent to include doing and undoing gender. During the fieldwork, observations were noted down and special attention was paid to symbols, phrases and metaphors used, how people interacted and moved through space. More detailed notes were written at night, transferring, condensing and summarizing some of the days' observations (McDonald, 2005), while also reflecting on what has been observed. It was also noted when the presence of the researcher was referenced in interactions such as by asking the researcher's opinion (Gill, 2011). Overall, 130 hours of workplace interactions were included in this research.

To supplement the job-shadowing part of the study, 23 individual interviews with the middle managers and their co-workers were conducted in a discourse analytic tradition (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The aims of the interviews were three-fold. First, to elucidate further examples of how doing and undoing gender in the workplace might happen, questions on elements identified in the compendium were asked, often by reading out a vignette or showing a cartoon. Second, it was asked how the middle manager shows support for gender equality. Third, the interviews were used to clarify specific observations such as if interviewees notice how gender mattered in a situation and what alternative behaviors would have been possible in that situation. Seven interviews were conducted in *Accounting*, nine in

Broadcasting, and seven in *Chemicals*. 11 interviewees identified as men and 12 as women. The average length of the recorded interviews was 47 minutes, and the interviews were transcribed in full using a version of the Jefferson system.²

After reading and re-reading the interviews several times, the transcripts, the fieldwork notes and a transcribed recording of an event were coded in the software Dedoose. The first round of coding followed a largely thematic analysis. The second round of coding focused more closely on practices that had been identified in the compendium of practices (Kelan, 2018) and those that emerged from the material, which led to the introduction of new codes. In this article, the main codes used include: bonding through sexual objectification of women, identifying with the similar, visibility and presence at women's events, showing openness to failure (admitting mistakes), and displaying emotional intelligence. The final round of coding focused on interpretative repertoires, which are units of sense-making and are central to discourse analysis (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Some of the interview extracts for this article were translated by the author from German into English. A full list of the shadowees, the interviewees and other actors is included in Table 1. The individuals have been given pseudonyms, starting with A, B, and C, to reflect the organization in which they worked.

— Insert Table 1 about here —

As can be expected with an ethnographic approach, the research generated a lot of material. Although gender is potentially present in all interactions, in many interactions that were observed, a doing or undoing gender was not discernible.

UNDOING GENDER

Since the research reports on ethnographic observations, it is useful to start with a short

description of settings and individuals. In Accounting, Andrew was shadowed; he was in his 30s and worked in a provincial office of a large professional services company. His team occupied a cluster of desks in an open plan office. One of his team members is Amelia, who is fairly junior and working towards a promotion at Accounting. Alexander functioned as the gatekeeper in Accounting, who sent an email to the diversity and inclusion list asking for suggestions on who could be studied for this research. Audrey, Andrew's line manager, suggested him, because in her view, Andrew's practices were particularly gender inclusive. Alexander was not involved in the daily activities of Andrew's team, and in his interview, he spoke more generally about diversity and inclusion in Accounting.

The contact in Broadcasting came through Brunhilde, the diversity and inclusion lead, who suggested that Benjamin to be shadowed. Benjamin was part of the gender equality task force at Broadcasting and had been one of the first men who asked for some time off when his child, who was at the time of the observation a teenager, was born. His then-boss was Bianca, who took pride in the fact that she put gender equality on the agenda at Broadcasting. Benjamin's office was in one of the main sites that Broadcasting occupied. One had to pass through the office in which Birte and the remainder of his team sat to get to Benjamin's office; normally, Benjamin left his office door open, unless he held meetings in his office, when the door was then closed. As part of the observations at Broadcasting, an event was held where various speakers talked about gender equality at Broadcasting. The event was moderated by Bernd, who was a well-established senior journalist, and was attended by Bernadette, a junior journalist who had recently finished her training.

In Chemicals, Christoph was job-shadowed after being suggested by Cordula, the diversity and inclusion lead at the organization. Christoph was working in the company headquarters

and he occupied a private corner office. Most of his teams and colleagues were in the same building, albeit on different floors. He was part of the gender equality task force and cited both his desire to be involved in a major change project and the birth of his daughter as reasons for joining this task force. Christoph worked alongside Carl on the gender equality task force and both were peers.

The focus of this article are practices that are embedded in their empirical context. Although the compendium identified a range of practices, most empirical studies on which the compendium is based only discussed a small number of practices. Similarly, this article will focus on four practices that relate to and expand the compendium of practices. Table 2 shows how the empirical examples relate to the compendium of practices.

— Insert Table 2 about here —

Bonding through sexual objectification with women. Men create a connection with other men by bonding through sexual objectification of women. While the research did not observe this practice in the traditional sense, it nevertheless made an appearance; in this case, women were included in the objectification that is indicated through the ‘with’. While it is an attempt to undo gender, it was not successful.

The situation took place during an event that was organized at Broadcasting to advance gender equality. The event was held in the evening, included various speakers, and an audience consisting of internal staff from Broadcasting and external participants such as journalists who might work with Broadcasting in the future. The event was not broadcast but recorded, and the extracts were transcribed from this recording. One of the external

participants was Bernadette, who is a junior journalist who has finished her training recently. Not surprising for such an event, the majority of participants were women, with a few exceptions such as Benjamin, who attended due to his work on gender equality, and Bernd, who had been chosen because he was perceived as a skilled moderator. At the beginning of the event, Bern introduced two women:

Bernd: I will start with two young women who do not sit up here on the podium. This is Bernadette and [name of another woman]. Could you maybe stand up and show yourself in order for everyone to know whom I am talking about? Bernadette, I want to add, just finished her journalistic training (...) She is a freelance journalist and if anybody could use her, she would be available, as I hear, [slight laughs in audience] (.) only strictly professionally of course.

Apart from the slight laughs in the audience, the statement was not questioned until towards the end of event, when Bernadette was invited to reflect on the event and what she wanted to take away.

Bernadette: What I missed a bit and which I only noticed when you introduced me, [Bernd] where you said that I am available for a job, only professionally, that was a dig, probably intended as a funny remark, but that really bothers me a lot at work, that I am constantly reminded of the fact that for men, I am a young woman at work, and you can take some digs at her in passing. I don't want to attack you personally (.hee) but that is what I noticed. ((audience is clapping)) (...) I also think that men today are appreciating women and also know that something has to be done, that equality is a good thing (...) And if that works, I think, that the small things in everyday life, such as sexism in

the workplace, will disappear relatively fast.

Bernadette is calling out the awkward way in which she was introduced and states that such introductions undermine her professionally, even though they might be well-intentioned. It is notable that the emotional labor to state that something was not appropriate is left to a woman, as is often the case. However, Bernadette's statement is ambivalent in her effort to tell Bernd about her discomfort, while also talking about women being appreciated. In a sense, Bernd's introduction reflected appreciation for Bernadette, as a woman who constructed as attractive. Bernadette possibly felt flattered by this statement. This is, in a sense, not surprising because women, too, are caught in the same gender system. However, she also realized that it undermines her professionally, which is why she spoke up. Bernadette chose to speak about gendered appreciation, which is what Bernd was offering. However, she then realizes that she probably has to speak about equality as well and adds that in the next statement. This might have been her attempt to be inclusive of Bernd and not to offend him.

It is unclear what Bernd attempted to achieve with this sexualized remark. It did not seem to be a conscious decision but it rather felt like something that he had done several times in different settings where it passed without being an issue. It might even be possible that it created the bonding effect that men often try to achieve by sexualizing women, and apart from some laughter, it did not seem to go down well with the audience of largely women.

Bernd tries to justify himself by saying:

Bernd: Okay. ((audience is still clapping after Bernadette's comment)) Yes, if I insulted you, then, I would like to apologize, of course. I simply meant that you are looking for a job and if somebody knows somebody, but if that was uncomfortable then I will learn something

from it.

Bernd justifies his remarks by saying that he only had her best intentions at heart and he was not aware of the fact that she might feel insulted. However, his apology appears mechanic and he actually apologises for offending her but not the actual remark.

Although neither Bernd nor Bernadette were interviewed, I met Bernd several times during my visit in the organization and he talked about the incident unprompted but in a joking manner, as if he wanted to brush it aside. However, he also insisted that this provided a good learning opportunity for him. Comments about his learning were possibly orientated towards me as a researcher studying gender in the workplace. He might have wanted to ensure that I captured that he has learned from it.

I also asked Benjamin in his interview about what had happened in his view during the event and how he would have reacted.

Benjamin: The first reflex would be to apologize. (.) Well, that that was a, eh, eh, eh a stupid slip and – I think the most sensible thing is to make a clear break (.hhh), eh, eh to apologize and to say ‘okay, let’s start from the very beginning, that (.) was rubbish’. Trying to fudge it will not work (.) because it is already an issue. Eh, and the less-, or more I try to cover it up (.hhh) the more I confirm that, eh, cannot handle it adequately, and I think, if a, a blunder happens (.hhh), it is the most sensible thing to simply admit it, afterwards it is off the table.

Benjamin here suggests that it is best in such a situation to address the comment straightaway

by saying that it was a mistake, because at this point in time, everyone has noticed it already, making it difficult to ignore. Benjamin therefore suggests addressing it straightaway to deal with the issue rather than letting it sit too long.

This could be seen as an example of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), but it led to Bernadette's professional skills being discursively diminished. For Bernd, the remarks were well-intentioned, but the only linguistic repertoire he seemed to have access to in this situation is one that can be read as a dubious advertisement. However, what Bernd was doing could be seen as a failed attempt to bond with either a woman or an audience mainly consisting of women. While sexual remarks about women would work well to bond with other men, they do not work well if one attempts to bond with women. It is also interesting to note that Bernadette felt comfortable enough to call out this behavior as inappropriate, which provided the potential opportunity to avoid such situations in the future. While on first sight, bonding through sexual objectification followed a common doing gender practice, what happened here seems to be an attempt to undo gender by creating more gender equality. However, it could be argued that this attempt backfired, but by addressing it, the opportunity for undoing gender through creating gender equality was at least formed.

Identifying with the other. The compendium included identifying with the similar as a practice through which men create a connection with other men due to perceived shared similarity, which led to developmental opportunities, hiring and promotion. However, in the research, an undoing was observed where men were identifying with those who were different from themselves. Men made efforts to ensure that they were not simply developing others who were similar to themselves. This often meant that they were nourishing women to develop their skillset.

During the fieldwork, I observed a phone call between Christoph, who was trying to convince a woman to be an expert on a panel.

Christoph is organizing an event and needs to convene a panel of speakers. He calls a female colleague to ask her if she would be willing to contribute, to be a speaker. I hear the response of the woman because she is on loudspeaker. She is very hesitant about participating in the event. She claims that this would be too political for her and that she might have to engage in topics that are outside of her area of expertise. Christoph tries to assure her that this is not a political event but an event that is designed for mutual learning, and as such, she would only be talking about her subject matter expertise. She remains hesitant. Christoph makes another attempt to convince her to be a speaker and she says that she would like to think about it. [...] [The next day], Christoph receives an email from the woman he invited to be a speaker. She has agreed to participate in the event. Christoph appears happy about it. His strategy to convince her has paid off. I ask him why he wanted the woman on the panel. He responds that she is a great expert on that topic and there are few experts and even fewer female experts who can talk about that area.

This situation illustrates how Christoph tries to ensure that women are represented at a specific event. Rather than relying on his network of male experts, Christoph put extra effort into ensuring that he had a female panelist, and was tenacious to ensure that he convinced her to be on the panel.

At Accounting, Andrew prepared one of his team members, Amelia, who is a junior woman, for a promotion, by encouraging her to take on a specific piece of work.

Junior staff in the organization had a weekly call to catch up on new developments in the field. Andrew finds out that the call has not happened for a few weeks and tries to explore why. Through a junior member of his team, he finds out that that this is because the person who used to lead the call has been promoted and reassigned and no one has taken on that role. He then walks over to Amelia. I hear how he suggests to Amelia to take on the leadership of the call. Amelia is hesitant. She is not sure that she can do it and that she really wants to do it. Andrew suggests that this would be the kind of activity that would look good if she wants to go for promotion soon. Amelia then agrees to take on the role.

Similarly to the first example, Amelia needed a bit of convincing to take on the role, and only after the career benefits had been spelled out did she actually take it on. This required Andrew not only to think of Amelia for this role but also to be tenacious to convince her that this would be a good way to build her profile. Andrew could have equally well encouraged one of the male team members to take on this leadership opportunity, but instead, ensured that Amelia takes it on.

Alexander, the diversity and inclusion lead of Accounting, referred to similar interactions that he had observed.

Alexander: If I look at somebody that I've coached in [business area], it's a really nice guy who just does not have the language or the life experience to know how to interact with people that are very different from them. You know his life experience of women is his second wife who's not his intellectual equal and is his female PA, and it's not really an equal female professional. So, it's basically trying to reconfigure for him HE

(.) that (.) women as equal as professionals can add to his professional experience by bringing a different thought process to the table, and by challenging his thought process and so forth, can help him interact with different clients through appealing to different clients and having different conversations. In other words, how can actually (.) he try and see the world from someone else's perspective that is not what he thought he knew?

Alexander describes how through coaching, he can open up a new perspective in men who have a myopic worldview and need to develop perspective-taking skills.

Carl, who was part of the gender equality efforts at Chemicals, also raised a similar point:

Carl: This is exactly what one learns if one has undergone diversity and inclusion training, namely that one likes to reproduce oneself.

Through the diversity and inclusion training that Carl has received, he appears aware that people like to work with others who are like themselves and reproduces this insight in the research interview.

By identifying with others, these examples illustrate how men were able to develop those who were different from themselves. This represents an undoing gender because gender equality is attempted to be established.

Being engaged in and defending women-focused initiatives. One of the themes included in the compendium is men distancing themselves from women, which included men absent from or undermining women's events. As we have seen above, Bernd and Benjamin were supporting an event that was meant to support gender equality, which corresponds with the

undoing gender practice identified in the compendium. Similarly, this research identified a related and supplementary undoing practice being engaged in and defending women-focused initiatives. Carl, Christoph and Benjamin were for instance engaged in gender equality efforts in their organizations, even though this was not part of their official role. However, these men were not only part of these gender efforts; they also defended the work that was happening around gender equality.

In this vignette, Benjamin overhears Birte, who reports to him, being critical about a girls' day that Broadcasting was organizing.

We sit in Benjamin's office. As usual, the door to the neighboring office where his team sits is open. Birte, in the office next door, notices (potentially through seeing an email or spotting it on the website) that there is a girls' day planned in the organization and complains that this is discriminatory for 'boys'. Her sons are unable to attend. Benjamin gets up and walks over to explain that the boys can come to visit the organization whenever they want through regular open days. He explains that this is a special day for girls to develop their interest in technical areas. Birte says, 'As long as my boys can visit, I am happy'.

In this situation, it would have been easy for Benjamin to ignore the criticism Birte offers in regard to the girls' day, and it would appear as though that the girls' day means that boys are discriminated against. The comments were not targeted at Benjamin but presumably at the other women she shares an office with. However, Benjamin overhears the remarks and feels the need to go over to explain the thinking behind the girls' day. This ensures that the initiative is fully understood by his team, but also that the idea of boys being discriminated against is refuted.

If men defend gender equality initiatives or are engaging on gender equality in general, they often experience pushback to them being men.

For instance, Benjamin refers to a training course for gender equality, where men were in the minority and were both made fun of and admired:

Benjamin: They [the women attending the event] even made fun of the quota man, eh, eh and appreciated him (.hhh) (...) Or even giving excessive praise 'I see, how nice that you are interested in the topic'.

Men thereby occupy a dual position of being an object of ridicule but also being praised for their presence and interest in gender equality.

Christoph also experienced surprised reactions to his work on gender equality and was required to defend his engagement in gender equality.

Christoph has agreed to lead an important work package on gender in the organization, which was motivated by his personal interest in the topic but also the ability to lead an important change project in the organization, which can build his profile. I ask him how this is received, that he has taken this on in addition to his other duties. He recounts that some of the men reacted rather surprised and presumed that he had been asked to take this on but surely could not have volunteered for it. The other men seemed to presume that he had been given this additional task for doing something wrong. I ask him how he reacted to that. He said he just explained that he is fully committed to the gender agenda and sees that as an

important strategic goal for the organization. He suggests that after having done this role for a while, it is no longer seen as unusual.

Showing an interest in gender equality is often seen as something that is unusual for men, and the comments that Christoph received indicate that men are given this task rather than voluntarily engaging in it. Christoph seems to have responded by explaining his commitment, but it could well be imagined that other men find Christoph's involvement in the gender equality initiative dubious.

This indicates that for men to show an involvement in gender equality is considered unusual. It disrupts the gender order where gender issues are firmly associated with women. Women advocating for gender equality is expected, but men doing the same is seen as questionable. This means that men who engage in gender equality challenge the gender order and are punished with ridicule and surprise. At the same time, they might also experience praise for showing an interest in the subject, and their involvement might even be seen as giving gender equality special importance, making them more effective change agents (de Vries, 2015; Hekman et al., 2017). While this might appear as an undoing gender practice, in many ways, it is also redoing gender in that gender difference is re-established in that men are constructed as desired and effective change agents (Tennhoff, Nentwich, & Vogt, 2015; Nentwich et al., 2013).

Using gender initiatives to advance their own career. The final practice identified falls into the theme of men impressing others. One undoing gender practice identified in the compendium is to use power to advance women. As described earlier, Andrew and Christoph were developing women and thus advancing their careers. However, using one's own power

to advance women was not a goal in its own right but also a vehicle to advance one's own career as a man. With gender equality being valued in the organizations studied, men support gender equality to advance their own ambitions.

Alexander, as the diversity and inclusion lead in Accounting, talks about how men try to show their commitment to diversity and inclusion when their own promotions are due.

Alexander: I think there is definitely some cynicism about this, but, you know, say for example, when we have (...) promotions (...), it's amazing how many white men come to see me to learn about diversity and inclusion and to convince me that they are committed. HEHE That is definitely something that you observed I think very well. I don't think it's widespread, actually question mark, I would like it to be more widespread (.) because again, people come at this for different reasons (...) but for a lot of people who have never considered this before, they need different reasons to get involved, and I've got a couple of cases of men who have got involved for cynical reasons, they think it's a good strategic career enhancer, even at the very top of the organization, they think this is good, but then actually, through engagement, they have learnt more and they have thought more, I think they have developed into more of a genuine interest in it rather than just a strategic interest.

With diversity and inclusion being part of the evaluation in this organization, Alexander suggests that men get involved in gender equality work, not because they believe in gender equality, but rather because senior leaders want to achieve gender equality in the

organization, and if men further down the chain of command display it, this allows them to advance their own careers. Alexander does not necessarily see that as a negative because, in his view, it is then possible for these white men to learn about diversity and inclusion and move from being cynical to being genuinely interested.

Bianca, who was involved in initiating the women's network in Broadcasting, has observed a similar strategic behavior in men to get their own way.

Bianca: He [a colleague] (.) wanted to make a woman a departmental management (.) but she was still (.) on parental leave. (.) (...) then he, because he valued the woman, turned to the women's network for support and together with him, we have pushed it through. He (inaud) did not necessarily support women but wanted this female colleague in that position (...) That is why I say it wasn't (.) necessarily an issue of promoting women but he was at least clever enough that he (.) also (.) that he pointed to the gender equality dimension and made it a gender issue.

In this example, Bianca recounts how she helped a colleague to employ a woman in a leadership role. He 'played the gender card' by making it an issue about women. Bianca seems unconvinced that he was genuinely committed to gender equality, but she suggests that the manager used gender equality as a strategic tool to ensure that he was able to employ the woman in the role that he wanted.

The opportunistic use of gender equality to advance one's own ambitions suggests that gender equality is being used by men to advance their own career or their own agenda. This

raises some questions in how far this practice is undoing gender or is in fact accentuating gender inequality in outcomes.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The article analyzed the complexities of men as middle managers doing and undoing when acting as change agents for gender equality. The article focused on four practices. First, bonding through sexual objectification with women was a doing gender practice but this was called out. This calling out created the conditions of undoing gender. A second practice was identifying with the other, which meant to develop different individuals. As this is a practice to establish gender equality, it falls under undoing gender. Being engaged in and defending women-focused initiatives was identified as an undoing gender practice because it showcases support for initiatives that aim at achieving gender equality. However, at the same time, it was suggested that celebrating men as agents of change for gender equality can also repeat existing gender patterns, which would then rather be a doing gender. Finally, while using one's own power to advance women is an undoing gender practice, the research has shown how men use their support for gender initiatives to support their own career advancement. It is difficult to say if such a practice should be undoing or doing gender. If men use gender equality to advance their career, they might profit from gender equality and get a promotion. However, they show practices that are supportive of women and might thus contribute to a wider cultural change. Such an ambivalence is in fact common for most of the doing and undoing gender practices where a detailed analysis of the situational context is required to determine if a practice is in fact doing or undoing gender. It has therefore been shown how complex actions and conceptualizations of men as middle managers who are change agents for gender equality are. It is exactly because of these complexities that doing and undoing gender entails that men as middle managers should learn about this; only by understanding

these complexities will men in middle management positions be able to act as effective change agents for gender equality.

The article has pointed to a number of areas, which might be useful to explore in further research. First, further research is needed to better understand how an undoing of gender by men can look in organizational settings. Second, it would be interesting to explore how far men doing and undoing gender is a conscious or subconscious effort, and how far that makes a difference in terms of effectiveness. Third, there seems to be the assumption that men undoing gender will eventually lead to more gender equality, but longitudinal research is needed to substantiate such claims. While this study focused on largely majority men who were white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle class, men who do not share this background are likely to experience change agency on gender equality differently. Finally, the undoing practices rely on gender as a binary, and further research could explore as to how far queering this binary would be possible. The article has thus contributed to a refinement of the compendium of practices of men doing and undoing gender by showing some complexities and challenges that emerge in empirical research. The article has also suggested that a more detailed engagement with men's practices as change agents is fruitful to expand the theoretical, empirical and practical bases of such approaches.

In terms of limitations, the fieldwork was conducted in 2015, which in a sense concurs with and pre-dates recent initiatives and movements around gender equality, such as #HeforShe and #MeToo. It is possible that this attention to gender equality has led to changes in the workplace, although it has been suggested that the ability to talk about gender inequalities often does not mean that individuals have a better idea of how gender equality can be established (Scharff, 2021). It would be interesting for further research to analyze if those

doing and undoing gender practices have changed in light of the recent focus on gender equality. The research also focused on middle managers that are active on gender equality. This means that the research has not looked at those middle managers who resist or ignore gender equality in the workplace. Further research should explore how middle managers who are not supporting gender equality are doing and undoing gender. In addition, the research was based on specific contexts and cultures, and the practices described might be unique to these settings. It would therefore be important to conduct further research that is better able to discern if practices are unique to specific settings, cultures and contexts, or if they transcend these. Similarly, it should be explored if different types of middle managers can draw on different doing and undoing gender practices to create gender equality.

With men being increasingly conceptualized as change agents for gender equality by both practitioners and by academics, this article has contributed to the literature of how the ability to inspire change in relation to gender equality has to be considered from the perspective of doing and undoing gender. This has been achieved by looking specifically at how men as middle managers are undoing gender. Applying a compendium of practices of men doing and undoing gender, the article has focused on four practices of undoing gender by men to show how complex and context-dependent the notion of men as managers undoing gender to achieve gender equality is.

Table 1: Summary of Data Sources

Data Source	Organisation		
	<i>Accounting</i>	<i>Broadcasting</i>	<i>Chemicals</i>
Interviewees and Relationship to Shadowee			
Shadowee	Andrew	Benjamin	Christoph
Current or Former Line Manager	Audrey*	Bianca	Clemens
Team Member	Amelia Aidan Aurora Aron	Babette Birte	Celine Constantin
Diversity & Inclusion Lead	Alexander	Brunhilde*	Cordula*
Senior Colleague	/	Bjorn Bastian	/
Peer	/	Bella	Carl Carola
Administrative Assistant	n.a.	Betty	n.a.
Total Number of Interviews	7	9	7
Observation			
Additional Actors		Bernadette Bernd	
Total Hours of Observation	38	51	41

n.a. indicates that position did not exist in the team or organisation. / indicates that no-one in that position was interviewed in that organisation. * indicates gatekeeper who suggested shadowee.

Table 2: Undoing Gender Practices

Organisation	Illustrative Example	Undoing Gender Practice	Theme in Compendium
Broadcasting	-At an evening event for gender equality, Bernd introduces Bernadette in a sexualised way; Bernadette calls this out, which created a learning opportunity for Bernd and Benjamin	<i>Bonding through sexual objectification with women</i>	Men creating connection with other men
Accounting	-Andrew convincing a junior female colleague to take on a leadership development role	<i>Identifying with the other – men supporting those who are different from themselves</i>	Men creating connection with other men
Chemicals	-Alexander coaching male professionals on gender equality -Christoph convincing a female colleague to be a panellist -Carl's awareness of the dangers of identifying with the similar		
Broadcasting	-Bernd and Benjamin attending the event focused on gender equality	Visibility and presence at women's events	Men distancing themselves from women
Chemicals	-Carl, Christoph and Benjamin being part of gender equality task forces	<i>Being engaged in and defending women-focused initiatives</i>	Men distancing themselves from women
Broadcasting			
Broadcasting, Chemicals	-Benjamin explaining a gender equality initiative to Birte -Men being ridiculed for engaging in gender equality and having to defend their engagement (Benjamin, Christoph)		
Accounting, Chemicals	-Andrew and Christoph advanced women such as through ensuring they develop their career by taking on assignments or being on a panel	Using power to advance women	Men impressing others
Accounting	-Alexander discusses how men try to convince him of their diversity and	<i>Using gender initiatives to advance their own career</i>	Men impressing others

Broadcasting inclusion credentials to
get a promotion
-Bianca recounts how
some managers see
gender equality as
important when it
advances their own goals

Modified from Kelan (2018), additional practices in italics, examples originate from the fieldwork reported in this article.

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¹ Studies have highlighted the complexities of doing and undoing gender by men (Nentwich & Vogt, 2021; Tennhoff, Nentwich, & Vogt, 2015; Nentwich et al., 2013).

² The transcription system is an adapted and simplified version of the Jefferson system (.) is a short notable pause, (0.9) an exactly timed longer pause (more than 5 seconds, here 9 seconds), (inaud) inaudible, (text) transcriber clarification on unclear parts of tape, ((text)) annotation of non-verbal activity or supplemental information, (...) material deliberately omitted, '...' direct speech reported by interviewee, wor- sharp cut off, abrupt halt or interruption of utterance, wo:rd extreme stretching of preceding sound, prolongation of a sound, HAHA loud laughter, HEHE laughter, TEXT strong emphasis or loud volume of speech, ^Text^quieter than usual, [...] start and end point of overlapping talk, = break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance, <text> indicates that the speech was delivered much slower than usual for the speaker, >text< indicates that the speech was delivered much faster than usual for the speaker, (hhh) audible exhalation, (.hhh) audible inhalation.