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Abstract

Purpose – This article reports the findings of a study of the effect of a women's MBA programme in Finland called the femaleMBA on the development of women's management competencies. The gendered nature of the competency development was also analyzed.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative interview study was conducted with twenty women who completed the programme. Content analysis was used to analyze the data.

Findings – In addition to improving the women's business competencies and their mastery of management language, the programme contributed to the creation of a clearer managerial identity, greater assertiveness, and increased credibility in a managerial role. The development of management competencies was shown to be gendered in varying ways. An all-women learning environment was experienced as a safe and supportive social context for development.

Research limitations/implications – Only a specifically women's MBA was studied. The topic should also be studied in a mixed MBA group.

Practical implications – MBAs should pay systematic attention to the informal and social learning context. A combination of "masculinity" and "femininity" might be worth taking into consideration when all-women management development programmes are planned and conducted. This study suggests that an all-women group in an MBA has the potential to challenge and even transform participants' ideas and assumptions about the dominance of masculinity in management, and to increase their understanding of the importance of femininity in management.

Originality/value – A gender angle on research into management development and particularly MBAs is very rare. This study shed light on the topic by showing that competency development in MBAs is not, as is often assumed, gender neutral but gendered.

Keywords MBA, Gender, Women, Management competencies, Management development, Content analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Women account for one half of the potential talent base throughout the world. However, despite their making up a prominent share of the workforce, women are still a minority in managerial positions (Carli and Eagly, 2011; Klenke, 2011; Haussman *et al.*, 2012). Moreover in Finland, the social context of this study, despite an advanced level of gender equality both politically and legally, men continue to have greater access to positions with power and resources in Finnish organisations (Lehto, 2009). The self-employment rate for males in Finland is also nearly twice as high as it is for females (Tervo and Haapanen, 2007, 2010).

Because women occupy a smaller proportion of managerial and entrepreneurial positions, societies and organisations do not fully benefit from their resources. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (Haussmann *et al.*, 2012), an important factor in closing the gender gap would be an increase in women's opportunities in economic decision-making and management. One crucial way to reach this goal is to develop women's management competencies (Liff and Ward, 2001; Lämsä and Tiensuu, 2002; Ryan and Haslam, 2007).

Despite being criticised for failing to adequately affect management practices (e.g. Doh, 2003; Mintzberg, 2004; Ghoshal, 2005), management development and specifically MBA (Master of Business Administration) programmes are very popular. The MBA qualification is often viewed as a prerequisite for managerial positions (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000), and it is seen by many women as a way of breaking the glass ceiling (Simpson, 2006). The obvious contradiction between the popularity of the programmes and the criticisms they have received raises the question of the value of an MBA. Evaluations of MBAs are in fact seldom supported by evidence from research (Hay, 2006). This is surprising, given the considerable resources invested by both organisations and individuals in the programmes every year.

The present study contributes in two ways to the literature on management development, and more specifically the MBA, from a gender viewpoint. Firstly, consequent upon the observed positive association between appropriately educated women and their presence in management (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000; Ibeh *et al.*, 2008), this study aims to fill the research gap about the value of an MBA to its participants by investigating how women managers experience the effect of an MBA on the development of their management competencies. We apply the management competencies model developed by Viitala (2006) to study the topic. We focus on the MBA programme called femaleMBA (fMBA hereafter), which was designed specifically for women, and we examine the value of this all-women programme for its participants. Particularly we seek to answer the

following research questions: What kind of goals for development, in terms of management competencies, did the participants have before joining the fMBA programme? What kind of management competencies did the fMBA programme develop, in the participants' opinion? To what extent were the participants' goals for development, in terms of management competencies, met in the fMBA programme?

The fMBA that is the focus of this research can be regarded as exceptional, since MBAs in Finland are usually targeted at both men and women. However, here too there is in practice a tendency for the majority of participants to be men. Prior research confirms that the proportion of women in MBAs is smaller than that of men (Sturges et al. 2003; Simpson, 2006; Ibeh *et al*., 2008; Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010). Nowadays an increasing number of top business schools in the world report programmes targeted at women. According to Ibeh *et al.* (2008), of the 100 top business schools, 10 per cent have a specialist centre for developing female business leaders, and a third offer women-focused programmes.

Secondly, given the limited research into the MBA from a gender perspective (Simpson, 2006; Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010), we aim to increase knowledge about the development of management competencies in the fMBA by including a gender viewpoint in our study of the topic. Very few studies have examined in more detail, which specific skills the MBA affects. In even fewer studies has gender been considered in the analysis. Drawing upon Acker's (1992) seminal theory of gendered organisations, we argue that organisations, management and specifically management development such as the MBA are not gender neutral but are in fact gendered in many ways. Several scholars argue that MBA courses are commonly seen as masculine; they prioritize analytical and "hard" competencies, as well as individualism, competitiveness and instrumentalism in the classroom to the detriment of more feminine skills relating to interpersonal and personal development (Simpson *et al.*, 2005; Simpson, 2006; Simpson and Ituma, 2007; Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010). This supports a masculine ethos for the MBA and is a reason why women in many MBA programmes feel that they are in the uncomfortable position of having to act in the "right" way in order to fit in. This is one of the main reasons why women avoid entering MBA programmes. (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010.) Simpson (2006) in particular argues for a "feminization" of MBA course content and design. Such an ethos would, it is said, be in line with the needs of current management, which is facing continuous organisational changes, a flattening of hierarchies, increasing reliance on teamwork and an enhanced customer focus (Simpson, 2006; Klenke, 2011).

However, rather than accepting that the competencies developed in the MBA are always and inevitably masculine, we can argue that it is possible to design an MBA specifically for women in which competencies can be gendered in a more complex way. An all-women group may have a more various gendered effect on the participants' management competencies than a traditional MBA where most of the participants are men. Our idea is therefore to add the gender viewpoint presented by Simpson (2006) to the adopted management competencies framework (Viitala, 2006) and then analyse how the actual experiences of women who have participated in an MBA programme targeted at women are gendered. We seek to answer the following question: How are the goals and achievement of management competencies of women who have participated in an fMBA programme gendered? Women's voices are often silenced within the field of management development (Simpson *et al.*, 2005). We are interested in hearing what women have to say on the topic.

In this paper, we adopt the idea that for cultural and historical reasons men are expected to orientate to masculinity and women to femininity (Lämsä *et al.,* 2000, 2003; Powell and Graves, 2003; Simpson, 2006). We are aware that the categories are not mutually exclusively and homogeneous but, following an idea of Simpson and Ituma (2007), we think that this definition of gender categories offers an appropriate conceptual approach to study and reflect on the role of gender in the MBA.

Theoretical framework

Management competencies development is defined here as a planned process (Mumford *et al*., 2000), carried out with the help of an MBA, to expand a person's capacity to be effective in a manager's roles and processes (McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004). According to the majority view in the management development literature, management competencies can be developed intentionally through planned education (Mumford *et al*., 2000; Yukl, 2010; Day, 2011) such as the MBA. An MBA is said to contribute in two ways to management development: through the formal curriculum and through informal learning processes (Warhurst, 2012). Originally, the MBA was introduced to create a basis for professionalism in management; nowadays it is a widely accepted qualification in management, seen as essential for anyone planning a career in management (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000). It has been argued that for a woman an MBA can work against gender discrimination in managerial positions by giving her the credentials of a competent professional (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000). It is commonly assumed that many of the competencies managers need

are transferable and generic in nature and that, in fact, is the basis for planned and organised management development (Mumford *et al*., 2000). A common understanding is that it is possible to identify broadly defined shared competencies, competency clusters, which can provide a framework for both MBA programmes and their investigation (Hayes *et al.*, 2000).

In this article the management competencies framework developed by Viitala (2006) is adopted. Viitala used several models (e.g. Pickett, 1998; Rifkin *et al.*, 1999; Mumford *et al.*, 2000; Garavan and McGuire, 2001; Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003) and made a synthesis which categorises management competencies into six clusters. The framework can be said to be appropriate to the purposes of this paper, since it represents broadly different management competencies – both analytical, "hard", competencies and personal and interpersonal, "soft", competencies.

The management competencies are distinguished in the framework as follows (Viitala, 2006): (1) technical competencies, (2) business competencies, (3) knowledge management competencies, (4) leadership competencies, (5) social competencies and (6) intrapersonal competencies. The competencies in the framework are understood to form a hierarchy: the first-named competencies are linked to specific work tasks and are easier to develop than the last ones, which are linked to personality and to one's personal growth as a human being, which is more challenging (Garavan and McGuire, 2001; Viitala, 2006). In particular, the last three competencies in the framework are crucial to a person's development potential and performance in management and leadership (Viitala, 2006).

The first cluster, technical competencies, refers to practical methods and techniques in management. These competencies are not typically stressed in MBA programmes. The second cluster, business competencies, is more generic in nature than technical competencies. This refers to general managerial work in any business (Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003). Viitala (2006) and Simpson (2006) argue that business competencies typically form the core focus of an MBA. Business competencies include knowing about strategic management, having rational and analytical business decision-making skills, being able to think logically in terms of large systems and manage them, and being able to give the organisation direction. Organising, stakeholder management, marketing and strategic management are crucial functional areas of business competencies (Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003).

Viitala (2006) contends that in the cluster of knowledge management competencies such areas as searching for, processing and handling information, learning skills, conceptual and theoretical knowledge, problem-solving skills, and the ability to facilitate other people's learning are crucial (Mumford *et al*, 2000; Yukl, 2010). Leadership competencies, the fourth cluster, include the ability to lead people to achieve the organisation's shared objectives (Avolio *et al*., 2009; Yukl, 2010). Essential abilities here are to be able to direct, motivate, support and empower employees. As Viitala (2006) mentions, these competencies overlap with knowledge management and social competencies, but compared to social competencies they are more closely connected to the relationships between the manager and her/his subordinates in an organisation. Furthermore, while in knowledge management competencies the focus is more on issues, leadership competencies deal with people. Knowledge and leadership competencies are perceived increasingly important in MBA programmes.

The fifth cluster includes social competencies, which refer more broadly than leadership competencies to coping in social relationships (Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003; Viitala, 2006). Social cooperation and judgment skills (Mumford *et al.*, 2000), understanding people and their behaviour in general, and the ability to communicate effectively with other people are important social competencies. Finally, intrapersonal competencies lie deep in the manager's personality (Viitala, 2006). Intrapersonal competencies also refer to the fundamental being and development of a manager as a human being, both generally and specifically in her/his role as a manager. Awareness of her/his values, needs, strengths and weaknesses as well as managerial identity are crucial areas in this cluster. It is increasingly accepted in the literature on management and leadership (see Warhurst, 2012) that the formation of identity, the relatively stable but not unchanging constellation of beliefs, values and experiences in terms of which people define themselves (Ibarra, 1999), is crucial for success in a managerial role from both the individual and organisational viewpoints. An MBA can help participants clarify and shape their identity (Anderson, 2010; Warhurst, 2012).

Since intrapersonal competencies tend to be more tacit than explicit, their development is both difficult and time-consuming. Boyatzis and Saatcioglu (2008) found in their study that the intrapersonal as well as the interpersonal competencies that are necessary for outstanding management can be developed in an MBA. Developing emotional, cognitive, social and value-laden competencies requires not a focus on knowledge acquisition but a more holistic approach. According to Navarro (2008), the development of soft skills such as interpersonal and intrapersonal skills tends not to be an integral part of today's MBA curriculum.

Although the framework developed by Viitala (2006) highlights broadly different management competencies, it does not recognise a gender viewpoint and it is not sufficient on its own for the purposes of this paper. The approach presented by Simpson (2006) which brings out the gendered nature of the MBA is therefore adopted here. In general, MBA courses tend to operate as if gender has no role there, even if in fact masculinity is typically the underlying assumption (Mavin *et al.*, 2004; Simpson, 2006; Simpson and Ituma, 2007, Kelan and Dunley Jones, 2010). So let us now examine Viitala's (2006) framework of management competencies as reflected through the gender lens presented by Simpson (2006) (Figure 1).
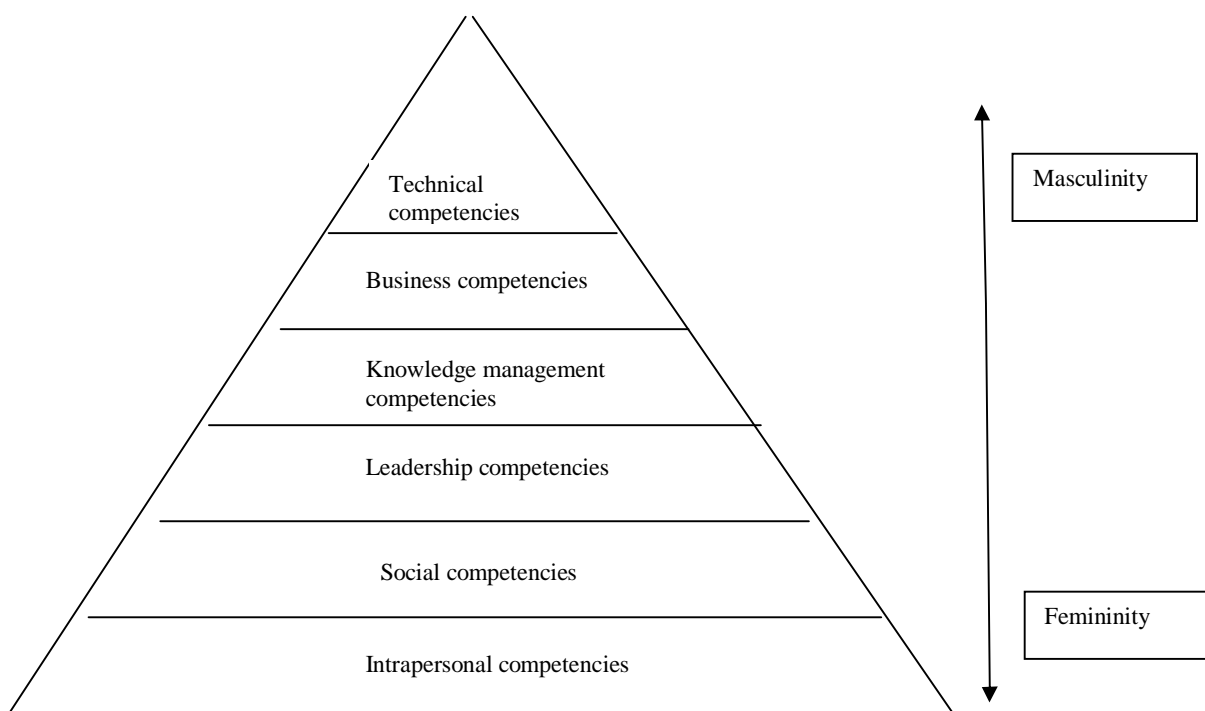

Figure I. A synthesis of the adopted management competencies framework (Viitala, 2006) and a gender viewpoint (Simpson, 2006)

Figure 1 shows that masculinity is dominant in the uppermost categories of management competencies in the model, while femininity dominates in the lower categories of leadership, social and intrapersonal competencies. Simpson (2006) argues that MBAs are gendered in that they emphasize the centrality of "hard", that is masculine, competencies, which are specifically the business and technical competencies in Viitala's (2006) model. This supports a masculine ethos for the MBA and creates a definition of management that is essentially and specifically masculine. This managerial masculinity is linked to competitiveness, rationality, decisiveness, independence,

ambition, result-oriented behaviour, assertiveness and confidence in power use (Olsson, 2002). According to Simpson (2006), this kind of masculine dominance is problematic in the MBA since it easily excludes from management women, who are traditionally considered to be feminine and therefore to be social, nurturing, emotional, compassionate and sensitive to other people's needs (Powell *et al.*, 2002; Powell and Graves, 2003).

Even though prior research has indicated that the MBA has a positive effect on managerial abilities and career progress (e.g. Hilgert, 1995, 1998; Kretovics, 1999; Baruch and Peiperl, 2000; Simpson, 2000; Sturges *et al.*, 2003), very few studies have examined in more detail which specific skills the MBA affects. In even fewer studies has gender been considered in the analysis. When gender is taken into consideration it is typically used only as a background variable.

Hilgert (1998) studied women in an MBA programme and found that the MBA was perceived to support women's personal development. This study showed that there is a movement from a specialist to a generalist orientation during the MBA, important outcomes of which are areas such as improved self-esteem and broader perspectives. Simpson (2000) investigated both women and men. She found that women and men benefited from the MBA in different ways. Men gained more in terms of extrinsic benefits, which refer to external career factors such as status and salary, while women benefited more in terms of intrinsic benefits, which are linked to relationships and work satisfaction. Simpson contends that particularly women enjoy the process of self-discovery that takes place during the course of the MBA and brings them a new awareness of themselves. A similar result was reported by Sturges *et al.* (2003), who also studied both women and men. According to Sturges and colleagues, competencies relating to career values, meanings and motivations were the most important outcome of the MBA. This study found some gender differences in the reported effects of the participants' increased self-confidence. Both genders thought that increased self-confidence helped them to be more comfortable with change, but women tended to identify greater development in assertiveness and a stronger belief in their own capacity for effectiveness. A study among Finnish women MBA candidates suggests that women perceive a high level of competence to be a key factor in career success (Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008).

Research method

The fMBA programme in focus in this study was conducted in Finland by Oulu University of Applied Sciences and supported by the European Union Social Fund. Its main aim was to increase gender equality in management. The competencies goals of the programme were related to the

opportunity to strengthen the women's identity as managers, encourage them to find their own way of management and leadership, and support them in career development and in building a more meaningful career. Business management skills and networking were also crucial elements in the programme. (Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008.) Since the programme aimed to achieve the European Union's objective of promoting gender equality in working life, the participants were women with limited opportunities to participate in privately financed MBAs. The programme is part of the larger femaleForum model, which Finland put forward in 2011 for the European Enteprises Award set up by the European Commission. (Lämsä and Savela, 2011.)

All the women who completed the fMBA programme were interviewed. In other words, the data of the empirical research comprise 20 in-depth interviews with the women who completed the programme. The period of time between completion of the programme and the collection of data for this study was approximately one year and a half, which means the participants were still able to remember the programme (Mutanen and Lämsä, 2006), but the period was still long enough to avoid the honeymoon effect of educational programmes (Boyatzis, 2008). The honeymoon effect refers to participants experiencing changes in their thinking and actions immediately after completing an educational programme, only to see them dissipate over time.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with interviews conducted using open-ended questions. The research design applies the model presented in Figure 1 to the context of the fMBA programme: the model is the basis for organising the empirical data (see Neuman, 2011, p. 519). The interviews were carried out face to face by the first author of this article, recorded, and transcribed word for word (Patton, 2002; Bryman and Bell, 2003). The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide covering the following themes: reasons for participating in the fMBA, the learning of management and its different areas, development in leadership, career advancement, attitudes to the programme and their modification over time, social networking, and the role of gender. Each woman was assigned a number from 1 to 20 which is used later on in this article to refer to each particular manager in order to guarantee their anonymity. The anonymity of the respondents is an important ethical principle of this study, one that was guaranteed to them before they began to take part in the research. On the subject of research ethics, the interviewees were also informed beforehand about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Finally, after the analysis the participants were offered a meeting with the researchers to get feedback on the results. At this meeting they were invited to comment on and discuss the results. In fact at the

meeting no criticism arose, and the interviewees regarded the results as valid and in line with their experiences.

The mean age of the interviewees was 47 years. All had a long general work history of an average of 24 years with almost 15 years in supervisory, managerial and entrepreneur positions. Nine interviewees had a master's level degree, ten had either a bachelor's or vocational level degree, and one had another further education qualification. Seven women already had a business degree while 13 had a degree in other fields including health care, dentistry, law, the humanities, engineering, pharmacy, cosmetics, and home economics. Seven women were small business owners and 13 worked as managers or experts in larger organisations.

A content analysis was used to analyse the interview data (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). A content analysis can be quantitative, which allows a great amount of textual data to be reduced to numbers and frequencies that are suitable for a detailed statistical analysis, or qualitative, which aims to reduce the text to categories which provide a meaningful interpretation of the topic (Patton, 2002). This article focused on qualitative content analysis, although some simple quantification was carried out to make the effect of the fMBA as visible as possible.

In the first phase of the analysis we read the data many times in order to become properly familiar with the research material and to achieve a sense of the whole. In the second phase, a more detailed analysis was done. First the transcribed data was coded (Neuman, 2011, p. 510). This meant that pieces of texts in the data containing an idea about particular competencies were detected, coded and sorted into competencies categories. The coded pieces of texts contained typically a sentence or several sentences with a coherent meaning about a particular competence. This coding and sorting focused on the participants' goals for development and their achievement of management competencies. Simply quantification by counting the frequency of the competencies was also carried out. This was an important stage since it helped us to compare the compencies goals to the achieved competencies both according to each interviewee and among all the interviewees. Thus, a more accurate picture could be painted of the extent to which the interviewees' goals for development were met in the programme.

Results

Goals for development

The categorisation showed that developing business competencies was experienced as the most significant competencies cluster and the most important reason for participating in the programme (mentioned by 16 people). The cluster of business competencies, particularly strategic management, was emphasised by the women as a key goal when joining the programme. A comment from interviewee no. 17 highlights the issue as follows:

> 'And a master's degree in another field is in my background. In that degree there was really very little about things like running a business and that sort of strategic management. I began to be really enthusiastic, I asked my boss, could I get something like that, could I apply for this kind of course.'

(17)

In the field of knowledge management competencies, although they were less emphasized than business competencies, the interviewees typically wanted to make their practical and tacit knowledge more explicit in terms of concepts and theories. Interviewee no. 16, for example, talked about the issue in the following way:

> 'When you've been working for a long time on practical things, it's difficult for a lot of people to make decisions when you haven't got a proper theoretical background. I feel that I haven't always been good enough professionally. Or I haven't been able to describe things so that other people understand. '

(16)

Some other goals were also mentioned, including finding new satisfaction for work and life (mentioned by 6 people) and clarifying one's own role in working life (mentioned by 3 people). These refer particularly to intrapersonal competencies. Moreover, a few interviewees mentioned leadership and social competencies such as networking and understanding employees' behaviour as their goals for development.

Even if some other competencies were briefly mentioned by the respondents business competencies and particularly strategic management were clearly emphasised as a crucial goal for development. The respondents understood the value of the programme for them to be in learning "hard" skills. Consequently, the goals for the fMBA can be seen as gendered, in that they were mostly masculine, as Simpson, puts it (2006). It seems that the women's expectations for the MBA course were

underpinned by masculinity. The women did not challenge or critically reflect on their assumptions about this but mostly took it for granted in their goals. They tended to stress the deficiencies in their current competencies and the need to overcome them. In other words, they typically felt themselves to be inadequate managers who needed particular "hard" skills from the MBA to become competent and credible managers. Interestingly, enhancing their feminine orientation and identity and making it a strength and resource in a managerial role was not typically viewed as a development goal.

Even though quite a lot of the respondents (9) felt that an all women's group could be an inspiring environment in which to study, the majority (11 respondents) said that they had conflicting and negative attitudes to the women's group. For example, interviewees 3 and 14 highlighted their attitudes in the following ways:

>'Certainly I suspected, that this programme has lower status. You know, that it was organised just for a bunch of women.
>
>(3)
>
>'I suspected that this might be some kind of act of charity, let's fix up a course for the girls.'
>
>(14)

Although the fMBA was perceived as a beneficial way to acquire "hard" management competencies, the fact that it was an all-women's group made some of the participants doubt the value of the programme. Many of the women in the study felt before they joined the programme that it may be devaluing women and what they could do as compared with men. In this way these women maintained the appreciation of the masculinity of the MBA and perceived an all-women's group to be a suspicious alternative way of learning management competencies.

Development of competencies and accomplishment of goals

As we have seen, in Viitala's (2006) framework, six clusters of competencies were originally presented, but in this study the competencies of leadership and social competencies could be combined into one cluster of leadership competencies. The interviewees did not talk about social competencies in general but linked them to their leadership role.

Technical competencies were the area least emphasised by the interviewees. This result is in line with the objectives of the programme, which aimed for a more comprehensive development of

management competencies than of technical skills. 18 respondents felt that their business competencies had developed, specifically in strategic management, which was mentioned by 14 interviewees. Marketing was mentioned as the second most important development area. Other business areas were also mentioned, such as international business, organisational communication, business ethics, and finance, but their role seemed somewhat less important than strategic management and marketing. Comparing the development of business competencies with the interviewees' goals, it was found that specifically strategic management was highlighted as both an important goal for development and a significant area of improved competence.

As far as knowledge management competencies are concerned, the interviewees mentioned as the key area of development the learning of theoretical frameworks and concepts of experiential knowledge. This was mentioned by 13 interviewees. Seven said that the ability to search for new knowledge was an important outcome. Interestingly, only five respondents said that they had set the development of knowledge management competencies as a goal prior to the start of the programme. However, a significantly larger share of the respondents reported having developed in this particular area after completing the programme and highlighted its importance in their work.

16 interviewees mentioned that their leadership skills had improved as a result of the programme. In particular they experienced that they had developed their leadership competencies in relation to employees. Five of the respondents also mentioned that networking with others both within their organisation and outside it had improved. However, comments on improving in external networking were rather scarce and this therefore cannot be said to be one of the key areas of development.

A more detailed analysis of development in leadership competencies showed that increased assertiveness was experienced as a significant area of development. The interviewees stated that they gained a better understanding of the fact that a manager does not have to, and sometimes cannot, please others, and that it is more important to make the right decisions from the perspective of the organisation. None of the interviewees associated assertiveness with being tough or unfriendly, but rather as acting more clearly, and being more independent of other people's opinions. In particular, workplace conflicts and difficulties with employees were seen as challenges that were easier to handle with the assertiveness gained from the development process. Being able to delegate, taking employees' perspectives better into account, and motivating and encouraging employees were also highlighted as areas of development.

The interviewees provided a lot of detail regarding social relationships within the fMBA group and it clearly emerged that the open and supportive atmosphere of the group was seen as a key factor in promoting leadership skills. While theoretical learning was also considered to be important, the group's support and their sharing of experiences were perceived as even more significant in the development of leadership competencies. Discussions, and sharing and exchanging experiences were seen as necessary and valuable forms of peer support, as interviewee no. 1 makes clear:

> 'When we talked there about that and talked about it with other people, others on the course, there were rather similar experiences. I definitely felt that it got me thinking that OK, I've understood certain challenges, where they came from in a way, why I couldn't take them into consideration. And to understand that if you've been working closely with people as a colleague, why it's difficult to think that suddenly you're the boss.'

> (1)

Despite having quite a number of suspicions about a women's group before they joined the fMBA the interviewees gave positive feedback when the programme was over about the fact that the programme was targeted specifically at women. This was seen as promoting openness and trust in discussions and encouraging the sharing of ideas and experiences with each other. The respondents emphasised the open and dialogue-oriented atmosphere of the women's group. The atmosphere was perceived as more open than that of the mixed groups that many of the respondents had experienced in the context of other training programmes.

In general, the interviewees' attitudes to the women's development programme were clearly more positive after completing the programme than before it. It is also worth noting with regard to the interviewees' experiences of networking with each other that it was mainly non-instrumental in nature. In most cases, relationships in the group were seen as a form of social support or even friendship. In other words, the women's group was seen as a positive social and psychological resource that was rarely perceived as having calculative or instrumental characteristics.

Comparing the development of leadership competencies to the goals set for participation, only a few people indicated that they had originally set leadership as a major goal of their participation in the programme. This observation is similar to that in the area of knowledge management competencies: the programme was experienced as having produced a significantly greater improvement in competencies in these clusters than the respondents had expected.

In relation to intrapersonal competencies, all the interviewees reported development. 19 interviewees spoke of improved self-awareness and clarification of their identity as a manager, while 12 respondents reported improved confidence and greater assurance. Five people mentioned that they had improved their self-efficacy skills. Increasing self-awareness and identity was, in most cases, linked to recognizing one's own strengths and weaknesses and accepting them to a larger extent than before. The interviewees said that in the women's group they had had a chance to analyze and reflect on their own behaviour in a safe context with other women, and that was experienced as valuable. Further, the majority of the interviewees said that the programme had helped them achieve a clearer understanding of what types of tasks and positions were most suitable for them.

The respondents said that their clearer identity as a manager and improved self-understanding had helped them develop confidence and be more assured in carrying out their work. They also saw these developments as stemming from their improved business competence and their better grasp of knowledge management competencies. The role of gender was associated with this development in that many women said they now felt it was easier to deal with men managers. The following excerpt from the interview with interviewee no. 15 demonstrates the increase in self-confidence in relation to men:

> 'I've said it before, that I noticed that I do far more work than the men, and they know how to exploit me. So I decided to put a stop to it, so hold on, I've got two men working for me. I should demand more of them. And then when there were some other male colleagues, I'm not going to go running around after them in exactly the same way as before. That was one thing I realised when I began to think about this women's and men's leadership, that I do far too much. I can manage with doing less. And really, I've learnt to delegate more. And to demand things from the men just as I do from the women.'
>
> (15)

According to Simpson (2006), not only leadership but also intrapersonal competencies are feminine skills in the MBA. A number of things were mentioned by the women in this study as reasons for the improvement of their intrapersonal competencies. The most commonly highlighted aspect, however, was the same as for leadership competencies: the group's peer and social support and open discussions within the group. Finally, it is worth mentioning that very few interviewees

mentioned intrapersonal (or feminine) competencies as their main goal at the beginning of the programme.

The fMBA seemed to contribute to the development in the participants of "hard", masculine competencies, which had also been set as the most significant developmental goal by participants at the start of the programme. In other words, the perception that they were not competent (masculine) managers became less strong during the programme. However, even though this was not often expected before joining the fMBA, the participants also felt that their feminine competencies, specifically leadership and intrapersonal competencies, had developed significantly during the fMBA too. This signals that the all-women group – often contrary to the participating women's expectations – contributed to their understanding of their feminine identity and a feminine way of acting as an important resource in management. Indeed, the women's valuation of femininity per se increased during the fMBA. By the end of the programme the fact that it was an all-women group was no longer experienced as suspicious; rather, experience had shown them that it was an encouraging and safe environment in which to learn management competencies.

Discussion and conclusions

The first aim of this research was to investigate the value of an MBA to its participants, with the focus on the effect of an MBA targeted specifically at women on the development of the women's management competencies. The effect of the MBA was studied through the women's perceptions of both their goals for management competencies and their achievement. The second aim was to analyse how these goals and achievement were gendered. Our idea was that an MBA which was targeted specifically at women could be gendered in a more complex way than a traditional MBA, where the vast majority of participants are men.

This study revealed that the women in this research had originally set relatively modest goals for improving their management competencies in their MBA programme. They had put the emphasis on developing business competencies and specifically strategic management, which refers to the expectation of learning "hard", masculine skills (cf. Simpson, 2006).

It was shown that the value of the all-women MBA programme was felt to be high by the participants. The women subsequently experienced a significantly larger improvement than expected in both their "hard", masculine and "soft", feminine competencies. It was crucially important to the women that in addition to giving them improved business competencies and

mastery of management language, the programme contributed to their development of a clearer managerial identity, greater assertiveness and more credibility in a managerial role.

Several reasons can be given for this positive outcome. First, the quality of the programme was obviously high. Both the participants' feedback and the fact mentioned above that the programme was part of Finland's entry in the European Enteprises Award of the European Commission in 2011 (Lämsä and Savela, 2011) support this claim. Secondly, the fMBA was a publicly subsidised programme with low tuition fees. Due to the low fees, the participants may not have originally had very high expectations of it: but the cost-benefit relationship was positive. Thirdly, seen from the adopted gender viewpoint, the finding may be explained by general cultural and social expectations for women, which suggest that they should be modest rather than ambitious in their aims, at least in public (Heilman, 2001; Fels, 2004; Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008), to avoid being interpreted as too tough and too ambitious. This kind of gendered expectation – albeit often implicit – may have affected and even restricted the women's orientation when they originally set goals for their development. Finally, since modest expectations are easier to meet, it might have been easier to satisfy the participants' goals for development in the programme. To conclude, in contrast to the negative view that MBA programmes provide little of value to their participants (e.g. Doh, 2003; Mintzberg, 2004; Ghoshal, 2005), the participants in this study spoke very positively of the value of the fMBA to their management competencies. This supports the argument of Hay and Hodgkinson (2008) that an MBA can be a more positive experience for its participants than is often assumed by researchers.

Seen from the adopted gender viewpoint, the development of "hard", masculine competencies (Simpson *et al.,* 2005; Simpson, 2006) was shown to be experienced as useful by the women in this study. Even though the women in this study were qualified professionals with extensive work experience, many of them felt that the development of "hard" skills was the key to a more credible position and a bigger say in managerial activities, and a feature of management's masculine reality. The women did not often argue for a need to feminise (Simpson, 2006) the subject contents of the MBA.

Even though they were not mentioned as an important goal for development, "soft", feminine skills were experienced by the women in this study as having developed significantly. This study confirms several earlier research results on the significance of an MBA to the development of participants' intrapersonal competencies (e.g. Hilgert, 1995, 1998; Simpson, 2000; Sturges *et al.*,

2003; Hay, 2006; Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008; Hay and Hodgkinson, 2008; Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008; Navarro, 2008; Anderson, 2010; Warhurst, 2012). In addition to improved assertiveness and self-confidence, the women reported a clearer identity and deeper self-awareness as a manager. Thus, it can be argued that an MBA can have a crucial effect on a participant's self-understanding and identity in a managerial role. Questions of identity are probably more challenging for women in management than for men since the traditional view is that the manager is a man and, in a certain sense, masculine (Heilman, 2001; Lämsä and Sintonen, 2001; Olsson, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2002; Klenke, 2011).

One reason for the development of a clearer identity and greater self-awareness could be that the fMBA was targeted at women. The respondents' comments about the benefits of an all-women group can be interpreted in the light of Tannen's (1990) suggestion that women's and men's approaches to communication are gendered, so that for many women conversation is primarily a way of building social connections and negotiating relationships while for many men talk is a means to preserve their independence and negotiate status in a hierarchical social order. According to Tannen (1990), men often dominate communication in public, and so women, when off the public stage and in their own group, feel unusually free to share experiences, engage in discussion, enjoy safe peer support and get ideas and models from other group members. This being the case, it seems obvious that the gendered way in which the programme was designed – the all-women group and a lot of opportunities for social cooperation and open communication – contributed to the improvement in the women's intrapersonal as well as leadership competencies. Consequently, in line with Simpson *et al.* (2005), we suggest that the learning of management competencies in MBAs seems to be the outcome not only of formal teaching and learning, but also – and largely – of informal social experiences in the programme.

In line with Simpson (2006), we found that not only did the women's competencies develop during the programme, but also that their original goals before the programme were gendered. We therefore suggest that the development of management competencies in an MBA is a gendered phenomenon in various ways, even though the majority of research and the actual practices of management development assume a gender neutral viewpoint. However, our findings do not fully support Simpson's (2006) argument for a need to "feminize" the MBA course and content. Rather we think that the need for the "feminization" of an MBA programme depends on the gender construction of the group. Simpson assumes that groups are male-dominated – as they in fact usually are. However, when the group is targeted at women, as was the case in this study and is

often the case nowadays in many business schools around the world (Ibeh *et al.*, 2008), we think that the combination of "masculinity" and "femininity" might be worth taking into consideration. We suggest that in all-women MBA groups the design and implementation of the programme can rely more on a "feminine" way of doing things while the subject content can draw more upon "hard" business and management knowledge.

Finally, this study showed that there was a gendered pattern in the women's experience of their goals and achievement of management competencies in the MBA programme targeted specifically at women. The women joined the programme to learn primarily "hard", masculine skills, and they often underestimated the value of an all-women group before the programme. However, after finishing the programme they felt that they had developed in both "hard", masculine and "soft", feminine skills. Moreover, their valuation of women and femininity in general increased. Even though management and masculinity are typically viewed as convergent, and management and femininity as divergent (Mavin *et al.*, 2004; Simpson, 2006), it can be concluded that an all-women group in the MBA has the potential to challenge and even transform the participants' ideas and assumptions about the dominance of masculinity in management, and it can help them understand the importance of femininity in their own managerial role and in management in general.

Research limitations and further research
The limitations of this study must also be borne in mind when considering its findings. The study was conducted among women who participated in an all-women MBA, so we cannot say how similar or how different the women's experiences would have been if the group had included both women and men. Therefore it would be interesting to study the topic in a mixed MBA group.

However, since a gender approach to research on the development of management competencies specifically in MBAs is very rare, our study could shed light on the topic by showing that gender is not a simple and univocal phenomenon, but rather that MBAs and the development of competencies that takes place during them are gendered in many ways. In general, researchers in the field of management education should be more aware of the role of gender as well as of other diversity dimensions (e.g. ethnicity, age). A limitation of this study is that we adopted a rather simple understanding of gender by assuming that men are masculine and women feminine (Lämsä *et al.,* 2000, 2003; Powell and Graves, 2003; Simpson and Ituma, 2007). Although this is a widely recognised idea, we think that in the future it would be important to study the MBA using a more complex understanding of gender. A fruitful direction would be, for example, to analyse discursive

and other social practices in the MBA around masculinities and femininities among both men and women.

Finally, management competencies are argued to be one factor that promotes career advancement (Peiperl and Baruch, 2000; Sturges *et al.*, 2003). However, in this study we did not study the link between competencies and career development, and that can be seen as a limitation. It is important to investigate this link in the future. This could be done using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

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