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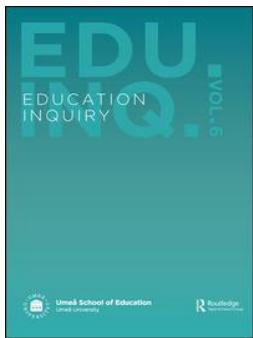
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



## Fun guy and possible perpetrator: an interview study of how men are positioned within early childhood education and care

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### ABSTRACT

Many countries call for more men to be teachers in early childhood education and care (ECEC). In Sweden, the issue has been discussed since the early 1970s, but despite these discussions there is little Swedish research that examines the notions and expectations associated with male teachers. International research has found that perceptions of men in ECEC can be very ambivalent and that physical contact between the male educator and children is a sensitive issue. By focusing on the interaction between educators and children, the purpose of this study is to investigate gender-specific beliefs about male preschool teachers. The empirical material consists of interviews with 50 informants. Of these, 17 are men and 33 are women. The results show that “the fun guy” and “the possible perpetrator” are two gender-specific positions that male informants are subjected to. The article discusses how men take up and resist the two positions, and argues for the need to further challenge gendered stereotypes in preschools.

### KEYWORDS

Men in early years (ECEC); masculinity; preschool teachers; gendered expectations

This Swedish study examines gender-specific notions about male preschool teachers and various ways men handle these notions. The background of international research has found that perceptions of men in early childhood education and care (ECEC) can be very ambivalent. Researchers from Anglo-Saxon countries report that men are depicted as both heroes and demons (Evans & Jones, 2008) and that men are expected to display both sex stereotypic and non-stereotypic behaviour (Sargent, 2005). Despite ambivalent notions, there is a strong demand for male educators in many countries (Coordination Centre for Men in ECEC, 2012). In Sweden, there have been measures to recruit more men to preschools since the early 1970s. The men in the Swedish preschools have first and foremost been appreciated and welcomed by staff and parents (Granbom & Wernersson, 2012; Wernersson & Lander, 1979). Still, mistrust towards men in ECEC, which has long been common in other countries (Cameron, 2001; Jones, 2001), has also surfaced in Sweden in recent years. Despite the political measures encouraging Swedish men to take care of their own children – measures that have also gained great acceptance (Klinth, 2002) – men in preschools are nevertheless in danger of being regarded with suspicion (Eidevald, 2013).

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Although there are few studies undertaken in Sweden, there is quite a lot of research from other countries on how gendered ideas are associated with male ECEC educators. An account of this research is given below. Next, the purpose, theoretical basis and methods of the present study are presented. Then the paper describes the findings and ends with a discussion of the results.

## Men and ECEC

The call for more men in ECEC is often driven by ideas about men bringing something particularly “male” to the job (Martino, 2008; Wohlgemuth, 2015; cf., 2016). Many researchers have criticised this reasoning for having dubious presumptions and for sustaining dominant gender norms that limit both men and women (see e.g. Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Bullough, 2015; Martino, 2008; Pulsford, 2014). Men are also expected to display a gender-equal ideal (Hedlin & Åberg, 2013; Nordberg, 2005). Warin (2006) denotes this identity dissonance, i.e. a tension between different ways of presenting masculinity (cf. Heikkilä & Hellman, 2016; Nentwich, Poppen, Schälin, & Vogt, 2013).

However, within ECEC men not only encounter the expectation that they are to contribute with something, they may also face questioning and negative discrimination. It is not unusual that physical contact between the male educator and children is perceived as a sensitive issue. Something that is of significance is the kind of associations that the male body in ECEC can evoke. Sargent (2000) describes how the male body gives rise to notions that are different from those suggested by the female body. While women’s bodies are associated with loving care, men’s bodies instead evoke thoughts of risk and danger.

A Danish study found that even men who have never been discriminated against (e.g. by not being allowed to change diapers) feel worried about it happening. Furthermore, their female colleagues may take a protective attitude towards them. This protective attitude, however, risks further undermining the status of men, according to researchers (Munk, Larsen, & Leander, 2013). Many countries have introduced a so-called “no-touch policy”, i.e. guidelines for physical contact between educators and children. Formally, the guidelines are gender-neutral, but in practice they are often perceived as being aimed at men (Jones, 2001).

Nevertheless, not all studies indicate that the physical contact between male educators and children is a sensitive area. Brody (2015) found in an interview and observation study of male educators in six different countries (The Netherlands, Switzerland, U.K., Norway, U.S.A. and Israel) that the men have frequent and close physical contact with the children. However, they all have long professional experience, which is crucial to their approach. According to what the men say in the study, they had a cautious attitude towards physical touch when they were new in their job.

For a good number of countries that are calling for male teachers, their interest mainly applies to primary school (see Skelton, 2009; for examples; cf. Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl, 2014). A common argument is that boys need more male role models (Brownhill, 2015). However, the belief that children see their teachers as role models has been questioned by researchers (Francis et al., 2008; cf. Warin, 2013). According to Brownhill (2014) the saying that men should be role models belongs to common sense discourse. Furthermore, Brownhill maintains that it is not the teacher’s

gender, but the teacher being perceived as a genuine person that is of importance in relationships with children.

The argument that men should be male role models has been heavily criticised for presupposing outdated views of gender identities. These ideas are based on gender role theory and an essentialist view of gender, which have been challenged by researchers who instead assume a constructionist perspective (Skelton, 2002). Based on a constructionist perspective, researchers examine how masculinity and femininity are negotiated and embodied in social processes (Connell, 2009). McDonald (2013) highlights examples of this in a research review, where he finds that men working in female-dominated occupations construct masculinity in essentially four different ways: by distancing themselves from their female colleagues; by highlighting traditional masculine attributes and values; by redefining the profession so that it appears more masculine; or by, on the contrary, redefining what it is to be a man and masculine so that it does not conflict with the profession and its tasks. Similar approaches have also been identified by researchers who studied men in ECEC. For example, a German study of men in ECEC shows how most of the men primarily perform a traditional masculine ideal, while on the other hand some perform what Buschmeyer (2013) calls an alternative masculinity which implies broadened masculinity norms.

From a constructionist perspective, gender norms and the expectations placed on men are central. A study of principals in New Zealand and their expectations of men in school showed that the principals call for “real men”, reflecting a narrow picture of how male teachers are expected to be (Cushman, 2008). Jones (2007) reports in a study from the U.K. that female teachers in early years classrooms, who list qualities desirable in male colleagues, state that a man working in ECEC should be perceptive and patient, but he should also be “macho – not a ‘wimp’ ” (Jones, 2007, p. 188). Likewise, Sargent (2013) interviewed ECEC staff and faculty members in colleges of education in the U.S. A. and found that the requested male teachers were expected to present a rather stereotyped masculinity (cf. Mallozzi & Galman, 2014). While a desirable female role model is associated with women who challenge traditional gender norms, the coveted male role model is often described as a man who lives up to traditional masculinity norms. A man who acts like a “real man” is sought after (Sargent, 2013).

Those who do not live up to the image of a “real man” run the risk of coming under suspicion, though merely being a man is enough to be questioned. Connell (1995) uses the term “gender vertigo” to describe the puzzlement and disorientation that can occur when someone acts in a way that clashes with prevailing gender norms. When a man chooses the preschool teacher profession, the man’s career choice is in conflict with the cultural associations of women and femininity that are connected to the preschool teacher profession. This may lead to confusion and even hostility. A concrete example illustrating how a gender vertigo situation progresses and evokes ideas about child abuse is reported by Pruitt (2015) who describes how perceptions move from the concrete man to notions of the man’s interactions with children. In his U.S. study, Pruitt finds that the issue of men in ECEC tends to form a succession of associations. This chain may start with surprise that a man wants to work with children, which then leads to the notion that he is not masculine enough to get a real job. In turn, the man’s job choice is interpreted as being unmanly, a perception associated with sexuality, leading on to ideas about perversion and abuse of children. These notions and

associations therefore become something men in the ECEC field have to deal with. In an interview study of men working as childcare workers in nurseries in Switzerland, researchers noted that especially the elderly men emphasised their professional skills, which the researchers interpreted as a way to escape negative associations (Tennhoff, Nentwich, & Vogt, 2015).

Pruit (2015) talks about a discourse of suspicion affecting men. The suspicion can be expressed openly, but it may also be detected in the way people watch the male educator. The informants in Pruit's study talk about "the look"; the researcher explains that "[i]t is the surveillance and gendering of the body, along with perceived subordination and marginalisation, experienced through the gaze of another" (Pruit, 2015, p. 521). The male educators in Pruit's study had different strategies that they used when they felt the discourse of suspicion, e.g. *using family*, *being visible* and *setting boundaries*. *Using family* means that the male educator hints that he is heterosexual, is married and has a family, by making his wedding ring visible or by mentioning his family. *Being visible* is a way of presenting oneself as innocent to parents, colleagues and other staff. Similarly, Nentwich et al. (2013) found in a study from Switzerland that for male educators who work with young children, "becoming unsuspicious" (p. 336) is part of everyday work. The third of the above-mentioned strategies, *setting boundaries*, is about setting up personal restrictions; for instance, deciding not to kiss the children.

The ambivalent position that men in ECEC may have must be understood on the basis that the field is strongly gendered; it is associated with women and femininity. Historically, both care and work with children have been connected with women (Warin & Gannerud, 2014). Page (2011, 2017) has coined the concept of professional love to describe care when the needs of children are met in an early years setting. This includes showing affection and being physically close in ways that are beneficial for children and their social and emotional development. With care, professional love and the professional preschool teacher being culturally strongly linked to women, women's bodies and femininity, consequently men do not have the same obvious place within ECEC as women have.

### **The Swedish context**

In Sweden and other Nordic countries the term "educare" is used to refer to the facilities where learning and care are bound together. In many countries, preschools are divided into care-oriented and school-oriented institutions. There may be care-oriented childcare centres for the youngest children, and organisations included in the school system for children from the age of four (Harwood & Tukonic, 2016). In Swedish preschools there is no such division. Swedish preschool teachers can be said to be trained for the professional love described above. The care thus includes touch as an obvious part of the daily work. The type of no-touch policy found in other countries has not been discussed. Lately, learning has been emphasised in the pre-school curriculum, something which, in practice, does not seem to have reduced care. Swedish preschool teachers themselves emphasise that care is a major part of their work (Jönsson, Sandell, & Tallberg-Broman, 2012).

In Sweden, how to get more men interested in working in preschool has been discussed for almost 50 years. As Heikkilä (2015a) notes, there are few Swedish research

studies in this field, despite the fact that the discussion has been going on for so long. Given that Sweden has well-developed preschools and a long history of gender-equality policies (Florin & Nilsson, 1999), it may be considered particularly important to investigate gender-specific beliefs associated with male preschool teachers in Sweden.

That men in ECEC would be suspect and associated with abuse was long something unfamiliar in Swedish society. The discourse of suspicion took time to take hold in Sweden (Cameron, 2001). However, recent studies have found that nowadays preschool teachers who are men raise concerns and suspicions even in Sweden (Eidevald, 2013, 2016; cf. Heikkilä & Hellman, 2016). One reason why these associations still spread relatively slowly and seem to have met some resistance may be that it has been considered important to connect men with the care of young children since the early 1970s. Several policy measures have been implemented to strengthen men's position in their care role. From 1971 to 1980 men were given priority in admission to preschool teacher education by a quota procedure (Hedlin, 2018; Wernersson & Lander, 1979). Fathers are encouraged to take care of their young children, and in 1974 Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce paid parental leave for fathers (Haas & Hwang, 2008). Furthermore, a law was introduced in 1998 which states that parents who divorce get joint custody for their children (Schiratzki, 1999).

Given this background and the Swedish tradition of promoting men's care for young children, it is important to investigate gender-specific beliefs about male preschool teachers in a Swedish preschool context.

## The present study

This study is part of a larger project, "Touch in Preschool – Care or Risk?", which is funded by the Swedish Research Council. Through surveys, interviews and examination of documents, the project "Touch in Preschool" investigates how the physical contact between educators and children is discussed and dealt with in Swedish preschools and preschool teacher education. Although the purpose of the larger project was not primarily concerned with gender-specific notions of men, many such ideas were expressed in the collected interviews. We have therefore conducted an in-depth analysis of these notions in the present study. Previous research, though primarily from countries other than Sweden, has shown that gender-specific beliefs about the interaction between educators and children tend to get activated when the preschool teacher is a man.

## Research questions

Based on a focus on the interaction between educators and children, the purpose of this study is to investigate gender-specific beliefs about men in ECEC. The research questions are:

- What gender-specific ideas about men are expressed in preschool teachers' talk about physical touch?
- What different ways for the men to handle these ideas can be found?



## ***Theoretical framework***

The study draws on a social constructionist perspective on gender. In contrast to an essentialist perspective in which feminine and masculine are regarded as innate, inner qualities, we rely on a constructionist perspective according to which the contents of the terms “feminine” and “masculine” are created and negotiated in social processes (Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). According to our gender-theoretical point of departure, gender is a fundamental principle for both attributing meaning and organising social life.

Davies (1989, 2003) describes how gender is constructed in interaction with a binary gender model. In this model, masculinity and femininity are often constructed as opposite one another. For example, activity, reason and independence are linked to men and masculinity, while passivity, emotion and dependency are associated with women and femininity. The real spread and variation of human behaviour is thus squeezed into a strongly simplified model. The language offers two homogenous gender categories, which we have to relate to again and again. Not only traits are gendered, but also things like clothes, hairstyles, body movements, hobbies, tasks and jobs. According to Davies, we constitute our gender identities as we relate to the gendered notions around us. Contrary to the gender role theory popular some decades ago, which maintained that gender roles are more or less forced upon us, Davies highlights the joy and satisfaction that may be experienced in the active process of “doing gender”.

Since we are interested in gendered beliefs about men, we have found Davies and Harré's (2003) concept of positioning useful as an analytical tool. A fundamental point of departure for positioning theory is that meaning-making is an ongoing process. We act within discourses which both enable and limit our thinking and our actions. Davies and Harré describe how meaning-making and subjectivity are negotiated. In the encounter with others, established stereotypes, categories and notions are used as we interpret and locate each other. Positioning is the discursive process in which individuals relate themselves and others to normalised ideas and behaviour. This thus presupposes that we have a common cultural meaning system. Davies and Harre (2003) liken the positions to known characters in shared storylines. The person who addresses someone may position the other, which attributes a certain “role” to the person; for example, being a “nerd” and thus addressing the person as such. The person who is positioned in this way may respond in various ways, such as by taking up the position and acting in line with the expectations and requirements the position holds, or in another way by responding to the position by rejecting it, and perhaps instead positioning oneself as a “macho-man”. The possibility to escape being positioned by others thus depends on the availability of alternative discursive positions. We are constantly negotiating how we and others are to be understood by taking up positions and using the discourses that are relevant for these positions. Identity work is a continuous process accomplished through both words and actions.

## ***Method and material***

The empirical material of the present study consists of interviews with 50 informants, of whom 30 are experienced preschool teachers and 20 are people who are either newly



graduated preschool teachers or preschool student-teachers very close to graduation. Of the 50 informants, 17 are men and 33 are women. The informants are from southern, central and northern Sweden. Before the interviews were carried out, the informants received both written and oral information about the research project and its purpose, as well as the assurance that their participation was voluntary and that the data material would be anonymised. In this article, details that could reveal the identity of the participants have been omitted or changed, and the participants have been given fictitious names. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Swedish. Since the larger project, of which the present study forms a part, focuses on physical contact, a variety of questions about physical contact were raised, such as: “Can you describe situations where physical contact between teachers and children are part of the job?” “Is physical contact discussed in the staff group?” “Have you experienced, or heard of, that parents have had opinions on the physical contact between preschool teachers and children?” We had not anticipated, however, that the talk about physical contact would include as many gender-specific notions as it did.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 150 minutes and were recorded with the informants’ consent. The recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were sent to the informants to ensure that nothing had been misunderstood. For this article, the excerpts have been translated into English.

A theoretically informed analysis of the empirical material has been conducted using Davies’ (1989, 2003) and Davies and Harre’s (2003) discussions about gender and positioning as starting points. The interviews with both male and female participants have provided the basis for the analysis concerning the first research question above. The second research question, however, primarily applies to the male participants as they relate to the gender-specific ideas about men when they negotiate their identities as male preschool teachers. The women are thus represented to a lesser extent.

We have done the analysis of the empirical material in several steps. To begin with, all transcripts were read through repeatedly to acquire a good overview. Next, parts dealing with the first research question of the study were marked and provided with summary headings. Then the different headings were compared and put together to form preliminary positions. After further comparisons and some reorganisation, the final positions – “The fun guy” and “The possible perpetrator” – were completed.

In the analysis for research question one, we were looking for repeated gender-specific ideas about men in the material. For example, the men were described as fun and focused on physical activity. These ideas were expressed in both the women’s and men’s stories. For instance, one female preschool teacher told of a male colleague who lifts the children and spins them around. Another female teacher talked about men who get the role of “the funny one”. The terms “clownish” and “clown” [Swedish: *latjola-j-banfarbror*] were also used. Yet another educator used the term “slacker” when describing male colleagues who shirk responsibility and avoid everyday routines in order to engage in tasks that they enjoy more, such as sports activities. Statements like these were brought together under one heading: The fun guy position. In the final step of the analysis, answering to our second research question, the material was re-examined as to how the men handled the positions according to their narratives. Drawing on Davies and Harre (2003), the men relate themselves to normalised ideas, and in this process they negotiate their subjectivity (identity) as male preschool teachers. The negotiation

basically consists of men either taking up or resisting the positions they are subjected to. As we show below, this is a dynamic process carrying several nuances.

## Gendered positions in ECEC

Based on a focus on the interaction between educators and children, we present below the notions of men which take the form of two positions. The first is *the fun guy*, which is described together with the various ways men relate to this position. The approaches found in the preschool teachers' discussions are *taking up the position*, *taking up the position reluctantly* and *rejecting the position*.

Thereafter, the second position, *the possible perpetrator*, is presented, also with its approaches: *positioning oneself as a physically cautious man*, *positioning oneself as a "safe" man*, *positioning oneself as someone who no longer takes much notice*, *positioning oneself in line with heteronormative ideals* and *positioning women as threats*.

### The fun guy

We have called a position that can be found in the material, *the fun guy*. *The fun guy* is someone who plays, jokes and focuses on physical activity. This position includes both larking about with the kids and playing sports games.

### Taking up the position

Anders is a preschool manager today and pays attention to how the staff work, but many years ago he worked as a preschool teacher at a preschool that had an unusually high proportion of men employed. Anders brings up *the fun guy* position when he explains that the men did different things from their female colleagues. The men were involved in a lot of sports activities, and sometimes they played water war indoors. This way of acting together did not last in the long run, but it is clear from Anders' description how men may take up *the fun guy* position together. "There were those who tidied up and took care of everything and fixed things, and we did the fun things with the kids", he says. But after some time, they realised that they could not continue in the same manner, Anders says. He explains:

There was a kind of male thing ... There was a masculinity among us that overtook everything ... We talked more about football than ... We were no educators and we realised it wasn't okay. We could not work together: it wasn't okay. It became too male; we had a jargon that wasn't good. So we had to split our group.

In Anders' narrative, it becomes clear that the taking up of a particular version of gendered subjectivity is an ongoing process. While Anders and his male colleagues enjoyed doing the "male thing", they concluded that it was not professionally sound, so they split up the group; that is, they resisted the position they had once taken up.

Gender scholars have shown that sports and physical activity are strongly associated with masculinity in many cultures (Connell, 1995; Kidd, 2013). This connection is strong even in Sweden (Fundberg, 2003; Ljunggren, 1999; Pihl Skoog, 2017). The association is discursively iterated in the material; being physically active is something

that is repeatedly associated with men and masculinity. Bertil talks about expectations aimed at men to play football and floor hockey [Swedish: *bandy*] with the children. Bertil describes it as a trap to meet these expectations. He who takes on that role will never get away from it, he says. Perhaps this is what is illustrated in Ole's description when he says that he lifts and spins the children even though he knows he should not do it, considering possible occupational injuries. Ole says he does what the children appreciate, but

I know I should stop doing it because I won't manage to do this job very long, but in the gym, you pick them up and you spin them around a little, if they think it's fun. A bit like that, some larking about, only if they like it, of course. You hold them upside-down so they can see the room from the upside-down perspective, things like that.

Being expected to lift, carry and spin the children is something that is repeated in the men's narratives. According to the descriptions above, some men assume the expectations and the position they are invited to. Being involved in sports activities is another aspect of the position. *The fun guy* position holds quite traditional notions on masculinity; the male educator should be fast, strong and active. Based on Davies' (2003) discussion on positions as central when subjectivity is being negotiated, for the man to take up *the fun guy* position can be seen as a way to construct his identity as a male preschool teacher. But based on the examples above, this construction is not necessarily free from conflict or ambivalence; it can be understood both as enjoyment (Anders) and as a trap (Bertil).

### *Taking up the position reluctantly*

In the last quote of the previous section, Ole states that he "knows" he should not lift children, yet he still does it. There are several examples in the material of men reluctantly taking up *the fun guy* position. The men who tell of this way of positioning themselves explain that for different reasons, they do not really want to lift the children. It might be for health concerns, working conditions or for integrity reasons. Nevertheless, according to the men, they sometimes take up *the fun guy* position to make the children happy. Johan says he has a problem with his back and usually avoids lifting anything heavy, but sometimes he makes an exception. He explains:

Sometimes it happens that you lift the children and kid around with them. I don't think I have ever seen any female colleague do it. The children can be pretty heavy. [...] I have a problem with my back so I avoid lifting heavy stuff as far as possible. But sometimes you have to give them a treat; the kids get so happy. But often it's "no, my back hurts too much".

Markus' story also shows that he does not really want to be *the fun guy*, but the children have strong expectations, he says. Even when he wants to have quiet time with the children, they want him to take up a more boisterous position. The children want to hang on him in a way that intrudes on his physical integrity, and therefore he usually says "no". But sometimes, on certain occasions, he lifts the children and lets them hang on him. Markus describes how it happens:

Well, "you can lark about", sort of. They expect more of that from me, compared to my colleagues who are women. And then I stress that "no, I will not do it", unless I feel that

“oh, now you’re all alone, come here, up you go!” Sort of. It may be for something to do when only one child is left, for that kid to have a little extra fun while waiting for Mum or Dad. But that hanging on me, well, it intrudes on my “personal space”, when they hang on you.

In the quotations above the men state that they do not really want to lift the children and let them cling on them, but they might make exceptions sometimes to make the children happy. They point out that these activities distinguish them from their female colleagues. Davies (2003) describes a gender-order based on a binary division between masculine and feminine. In this dichotomous thinking, closeness is associated with femininity, and masculinity is associated with its opposite, i.e. distance. The men describe strong expectations that they should lift, carry and spin the children. These are actions that imply a tangible, physical closeness between the educator and the children, but as the closeness occurs in a masculine form, the binary division between masculine and feminine is not exceeded. One of the men tells that even when he wants to relax and have some quiet time with the children, they expect a more masculine interaction. By taking up *the fun guy* position and meeting the expectations of lifting and carrying, the men not only make the children happy, but also constitute themselves as strong and masculine. On the one hand, there are major disadvantages with acting strong and masculine. As Messner (1997) points out, men risk paying with ill health when they try to live up to expectations concerning physical strength. The activities that male preschool teachers are expected to perform are, or threaten to be, a work environment problem. The lifting is a heavy strain on the body (Nordberg, 2005). On the other hand, the activities are not only burdensome; there is also joy in doing them. The children get happy, and the men have fun together with the kids. As Davies (2003) highlights, masculinity and femininity are not just about limitations; there is also joy and satisfaction in “doing gender”.

### Rejecting the position

As shown above, the men are constantly negotiating *the fun guy* position, but to escape it entirely is difficult, especially since children often are the ones doing the positioning. Still, some men do reject the position, using e.g. work conditions or the risk for occupational injuries as arguments. The rejection may also be based on how the preschool teacher views his professional role.

Erik has a lot of experience behind him, and his description makes it clear that he has a different way of managing the position *fun guy* compared to when he was younger. Earlier, he took up the position. He says he lived up to the expectations, but that is no longer the case. He may still experience these expectations, but now he escapes them by emphasising his professional role, his interests and competencies related to his job as a preschool teacher. Erik describes *the fun guy* position in terms of “hustle and bustle”. Also, it’s about physical activities like climbing trees and playing floor hockey with the boys. Erik tells about the expectations:

**Erik:** “Now the guy comes; there will be some hustle and bustle, great fun; he can climb trees.” (laughing)

**Interviewer:** (laughing) What do you do when you’re met with such expectations?

**Erik:** Now I'm much more secure in my role: "This is what I do, this is what I think is interesting, this is how I do my job." But when I was younger, it was more that I lived up to their expectations, and I was out playing floor hockey with the oldest boys.

**Interviewer:** But now you reject the expectations?

**Erik:** Yes, and now there is awareness about that. There is a more lively discussion about masculinity and femininity.

For boys and men to engage in sports activities together is a common way for men to constitute themselves as masculine (Whitson, 1990). As Davies and Harre (2003) point out, the possibility to resist being positioned by others is constrained by the range of the available discursive positions. With increased experience, and, as Erik notes, more gender-aware discussions, the men gain access to more resources of this kind. For a couple of decades, Swedish preschools have carried out so-called gender pedagogy projects (Bayne, 2009). This has included in-service training and discussion time for the staff, which presumably have contributed to more discursive positions being accessible. Now Erik rejects *the fun guy* position, and, when doing that, he rejects being addressed as a man and the expectations connected to his gender. Due to his awareness he is able to take up a gender-neutral position as a professional preschool teacher. Above, Erik tells that now when he is experienced and confident in his role, he has no problem referring to his interests and competencies linked to the preschool teacher job. He no longer needs to constitute himself as a masculine *fun guy*.

### **Resisting the possible perpetrator**

The second position interpreted from the material we have called *the possible perpetrator*. The educators, both women and men, who have worked in preschools for decades, describe a major change in the view of men. Peter, who started his preschool teacher education in the 1970s, reports that there was no link between men and abuse in people's thinking at that time (cf. Hedlin, 2018). In line with Nordberg's (2005) research, Peter argues that these ideas arrived as something new in Sweden in the 1990s. In the late 1990s, "the first true paedophile horror reached us", as Peter expresses it. The newspapers wrote a lot about the matter. He says:

There was a lot written in the press and a lot happened. There were many men who left at that time or they started working with older kids. Many men quit completely. You wouldn't change diapers without having a colleague in the room. When the children took their naps, you were never alone with them; you would have a colleague with you. It was in the late [19]90s. Something happened at that time.

Just as researchers have reported (Eidevald, 2016; Heikkilä, 2015b), the informants give the picture that the suspicion against men is now established, not always and not everywhere, but it is hard to ignore. Many times, it is a mistrust that is not verbally expressed, but the male educators feel it. It is not always easy to put your finger on how the mistrust is expressed. Sven says he has noticed how people look at him, but nobody has said anything. Ted, too, describes that no one has said anything to him, but he has felt suspicion from certain parents. The female preschool teachers also bring up the suspicion against men. Margareta describes how a male fellow student was praised for

everything he did at his practicum; nevertheless, he felt that he could not hug the children as much as if he had been a woman, she says. Ingrid tells about parents who have stated that they do not want any man to change their children's diapers.

Recurring in the men's stories is that they actively prevent being positioned as *possible perpetrators*. As Davies and Harre (2003) stress, the possibility to escape being positioned by others depends on the availability of alternative positions. Five approaches are expressed in the material. These are described below: *positioning oneself as a physically cautious man*, *positioning oneself as a "safe" man*, *positioning oneself as someone who no longer takes much notice*, *positioning oneself in line with heteronormative ideals* and *positioning women as threats*.

### *Positioning oneself as a physically cautious man*

Positioning oneself as a physically cautious man appears to be extra characteristic for those men who are new to a workplace, according to the men's narratives. But also preschool teachers with long experience, such as Peter, describe how they position themselves using physical caution as a means. When the topic of kisses comes up, Peter says that he, being a man, is extra careful. He also is careful concerning how the kids, especially the girls, sit if he has a girl in his lap:

- Interviewer:** I was talking to a preschool teacher. She said this, "I'm not kissing the children, but if they want to kiss me, they may kiss my cheek. But *never* my mouth." Then I asked if she had made any exceptions, and she had.
- Peter:** No, being a man I'm probably extra careful. And when they want to sit in my lap, especially when girls are sitting in my lap, I am very careful making them sit like this (shows over one of his thighs) and then they have to have their legs on the side of my thigh.

Markus also is cautious about how children sit in his lap. Nowadays, Markus feels comfortable in his job and does not think so much about his body and his hands, but when he was new at work it was a matter of concern:

It may be, as I said, it is possible that for the time being I think more about how I handle the physical contact with the girls. But the first month, you thought about it a lot more, how do I hold my hands when I have them in my lap?

Rickard tells about how he positioned himself and kept a certain distance when he was new to the job and inexperienced. He describes insecurity in the presence of the children's parents:

It felt like some parents ... I tried to keep some distance until they knew me. I didn't want to be that unknown guy hugging their children. I tried to be a bit ... It was not easy. I was brand new at the job, a big workplace and there were a lot of parents and children. But I work just as my female colleagues. I do pretty much the same things as they do.

In the quotation above, Rickard describes the balancing act he had to perform as a man in preschool. He wanted to work just as his female colleagues, while feeling an extra tension with the parents, a tension that was due to his gender.

The men resist others' positioning of them as *possible perpetrators* by non-verbal responses. By not kissing and hugging the children and by being extra careful when children sit in their lap, these men position themselves as physically cautious when negotiating their identities as male preschool teachers.

### *Positioning oneself as a "safe" man*

Another way of avoiding the risk of being positioned as *the possible perpetrator* is to position oneself as a "safe" man; for example, by calling attention to oneself (cf. Nentwich et al., 2013). Ivar tells of an occasion when he changed a child's diaper and the child was screaming on the baby changing-table. He was fearful of being interpreted as a threat to the children, so he called for his colleagues to come and see that he was not doing anything inappropriate. Ivar says:

I remember a situation. It was a boy, he had diapers and he had a red bottom. He was very red, and I had to smooth on some lotion. He screamed because it hurt so badly. I called for my colleagues, "It is not me doing anything, come here and look." Then I felt, but oh my God, if there were parents or someone passing by, seeing me changing diapers and a little boy screaming on the changing-table.

Having the door open during the diaper change is another way to prevent being interpreted as a threat to the children and instead positioning oneself as a safe man. It is an example of "small things so people don't have a reason to start questioning", as Sixten expresses it.

The preschool facilities may also affect the men's positions. Some preschools are located in older buildings with areas that are not adapted for preschool activities. Others have been built recently or renovated. Erik, who works in newly renovated premises, says it is nice that his workplace is as open as it is. There are windows between the rooms that provide transparency. Erik describes the preschool as an aquarium. He says: "There are windows everywhere. I almost feel that it is like a protection." Judging from Erik's comments, being visible may work as a way of positioning himself as a "safe" man and thus constructing his identity as a male preschool teacher.

### *Positioning oneself as someone who no longer takes much notice*

Some of the men describe how they position themselves as someone who no longer takes much notice of the distrust. These men try not to take any notice of the suspicions that may exist. A variant of this approach is to shield oneself from unwelcome looks. Johan describes that people can look strangely at him when they see him together with a group of children. He says his strategy is to shield himself when he goes outdoors with the kids:

**Johan:** Well, when I started working, I was very cautious about physical contact and I was perceived as cold. So I had to develop; I must dare to have physical contact with the children. Now I feel secure in my work, but I try to disregard the surroundings, those outside. It's none of their business.

**Interviewer:** Those outside, who are they? Is anyone saying anything? Have you heard any comments?



**Johan:** No, I have never heard any comment, but when you go out, for example, when you pass other people in town. Now, I do not know if that is so, but that is how I perceive it, that they give me a weird look because I'm a guy and I'm out walking with a bunch of small kids. I had that feeling very much in the beginning.

Another variant is not to worry so much, but instead decide to deal with the accusations on the day they come, if they happen. Sixten describes that he was more concerned earlier, but nowadays he does not worry in advance. Sixten says:

It would be a lie to say you haven't thought about this. There has been quite a lot of fear for paedophiles. And you cannot be a male preschool teacher without the question being raised in one way or another. So I would say that in the beginning I was much more worried, but now time has passed. If a child decides to say that, say that I have done something, well, you deal with it then.

The men describe above a process in which they gradually have come to disregard other people's suspicions. Judging from Sixten's story, concerns about the presence of men have been raised verbally, while for Johan, on the contrary, no comments have been heard. Nevertheless, he describes a strong sense of being questioned. Pruitt (2015) talks about the discourse of suspicion, which is a discourse that positions the men as presumptive perpetrators and which the men are forced to relate to. The mistrust may be expressed verbally or communicated by people's looks. Positioning oneself as someone who no longer takes much notice is an approach that can be used when men feel the gaze of others, like when they are out walking with the kids, meaning that the men ignore the suspicion they feel.

### *Positioning oneself in line with heteronormative ideals*

Men who do not have children of their own risk being positioned as more or less suspect, especially if they are no longer considered as young men. Ted, who is over 40 years old, tells how a colleague reacted when he said he had no children:

Actually, a colleague I had not worked with very long asked if I had children of my own. "No", I replied, and then she laughed a bit. And it was, a man who does not have children of his own works with this. It was like it was a bit weird.

Hence, positioning oneself in line with heteronormative ideals, by making clear you are a father and a family man (Warner, 1991), can be a way to resist *the possible perpetrator* position. When Ivar started a new job, he was questioned by parents who did not think he should change diapers. In Ivar's response he referred to his private role as a father, that he himself has a child:

**Ivar:** It is hard to handle this. When I started here several children had diapers and then the parents questioned if I would change diapers.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and how do you handle that?

**Ivar:** I explained to them that it's my job to do that, and I have a child myself. I have no such.

Felicia, too, discusses how positioning oneself in line with heteronormative ideals can be decisive for whether the association with being *the possible perpetrator* occurs.

When she is asked if she is worried about being suspected herself, she answers in a way that addresses several circumstances that are in her favour for not being associated with child abuse. She says: “I think that, as a young woman with a common-law husband, I don’t get suspected that easily.” Felicia does not have children of her own, but her gender, age and heterosexual lifestyle are conditions that reduce the risk of her being positioned as *the possible perpetrator*.

### **Positioning women as threats**

Another approach to suspicions towards men, and the risk of being positioned as *the possible perpetrator*, is to focus on women and highlight them as guilty of child sexual abuse, thus positioning women as threats. Women can also help to position (other) women as *possible perpetrators*. Bea, for example, says that women as much as men may be paedophiles. Nick believes that “exactly” as many women as men have a paedophile disposition and may abuse preschool children. He has discussed the matter with his female colleagues and according to his description they agree with him. The fact that there is a large group of paedophile women abusing children seems to be something everyone knows, but chooses not to talk about, according to Nick. He also claims that the female perpetrators expose the children to even greater damage, because they are considered to be mother figures. To emphasise and give substance to his words, he makes a general reference to some unspecified research:

You have to keep in mind that it’s not only men who do it, if we talk about paedophiles, for example. There are probably exactly as many women who do it, who have such thoughts and the sexual orientation in that direction. But we choose not to talk about it. We discussed it in our team at work, and we could not really figure out why, but if every educator is a potential rapist, no one would want to leave their children at preschool. So you choose not to talk about it, but research has shown that with abuse by female paedophiles, the trauma of the child is much more severe because women are often seen as mother figures.

As Nick above positions women as the real threat, he resists men as perpetrators. Ole has a similar reasoning. He says there can be as many women as men who are paedophiles:

Well, every time there’s some news like this, “oh, there was a paedophile at this school or preschool”, the stories are about men, even though there are examples of women who have committed these crimes as well. But the media usually choose to focus on the men. And [the] media blow these stories out of proportion. I think there are probably women, too, but it may just be because ... Maybe there are as many women as men, but there are so many more women in preschool, so it is not as noticeable, because it is a women-dominated profession.

As stated in the quotation above, Ole also is convinced that the abuse by men is overemphasised. Ole, too, believes a choice is made. The reason why the cases discussed most often concern men is that the media usually choose to highlight men, he says.

When the men focus on the women, there is both sameness and difference in comparing men and women. According to the men who use this approach, the paedophile orientation is gender-neutral. In this way, men and women appear to be the same. Nevertheless, one respondent maintains that women’s abuse leads to much greater damage, which can be seen as a way of creating distance and a way of

constructing men as superior and different from women. Positioning women as threats, and even worse threats than men, may thus be a way for the men to construct their identity as a male preschool teacher.

## Conclusions

In this study we have investigated gender-specific beliefs about men in ECEC. Our findings are in line with previous research, though primarily from countries other than Sweden. As a good number of international research studies have found, when the preschool teacher is a man, gender-specific beliefs and expectations about the interaction between the teacher and children get activated. Studies show that the physical contact between the men in ECEC and children may be perceived as a suspicious and sensitive issue (see, for instance, Pruit, 2015; Sargent, 2000; Tennhoff et al., 2015). In the present study we have drawn on a social constructionist perspective on gender (Davies, 1989, 2003) and on Davies and Harre's (2003) position theory. By focusing on the interaction between teachers and children in Swedish preschools, gender-specific beliefs about men in the form of the positions *the fun guy* and *the possible perpetrator* have been identified. So how can these findings be understood? Connell's (1995) term "gender vertigo" refers to the confusion and puzzlement that can occur when someone acts in a way that clashes with prevailing gender norms. A man as a preschool teacher clashes with expectations of which jobs men should choose. And as Pruit (2015) describes, in this confusion the associations may even move on to distrust and suspicion of child abuse.

The present study adds to the knowledge in this area by showing how the men are surrounded by contradictory gender-specific notions and expectations. We have also intended with the study to deepen our knowledge by showing how the men take up or resist the positions they are subjected to. Contrary to gender role theory, positioning theory highlights how a person being positioned in a certain way may respond in various and even unexpected ways, depending on the availability of alternative discursive positions.

Male preschool teachers may feel pressure from children and parents to conform to be *fun guys*. There are strong expectations on the men that they will add something particularly "male" to the job (cf. Martino, 2008; Wohlgemuth, 2015); in this case they are associated with playing and larking about. As Davies and Harre (2003) point out, in order to resist being positioned by others, one must have access to other discursive positions. Some of the men in the study experience ambivalence when they feel pressured to act as *the fun guy*, while seeing that it might hurt them in the long run to do so. Resolving this ambivalence may be difficult since *the fun guy* position is often also enjoyed. Another aspect of the constant negotiations surrounding positioning is work experience. Some of the men stress that they used to take up *the fun guy* position when they were new in their job; as inexperienced preschool teachers they went along with the expectations. With experience supported by discussions about gender-awareness in the workplace, another position may become available: the professional preschool teacher.

As many researchers have pointed out, men in the ECEC field have to deal with being associated with the abuse of children. The risk for the men in the present

study of being seen as a *possible perpetrator* is evident in the material. Positioning oneself as a physically cautious man, as a “safe” man or in line with heteronormative ideals are approaches to resist being positioned as a *possible perpetrator*. These approaches have similarities with Pruitt’s (2015) strategies of setting boundaries, being visible and using family. The approaches can also be compared with the strategy of becoming unsuspicious as Nentwich et al. (2013) describe. At the same time, researchers have argued that consciously acting as innocent is acknowledging the need for constant monitoring, which in turn contributes to maintaining and strengthening the discourse of suspicion (Jones, 2004; Pruitt, 2015). In contrast, positioning oneself as someone who no longer takes much notice, which means ignoring the suspicion one feels, is a position that is less defensive. Positioning women as threats is an additional way for men to resist being positioned by others as *possible perpetrator*. We would argue, however, that attempts to position women as risks do little to improve the work environment for either the children or the men and women. Extending the *possible perpetrator* position to women only adds to the culture of suspicion already manifest in preschools. Gendered stereotypes such as *the fun guy* and *the possible perpetrator* need to be challenged in more constructive ways for the development of early childhood education and care.

The claim that as many women as men are paedophiles may stand out as an odd statement and has no support in research and statistics (Pringle, 2012; Svensson, 2012). How can this claim be understood? Davies (2003) describes how the language and binary division into feminine and masculine offer two unified gender categories that affect our thinking. For those who do not have the tools to analyse this thought pattern, the only alternative to considering all men as perpetrators may be that there are no differences between men and women; either women and men are two uniform but opposing groups, or there are no gender differences at the group level altogether. This way of thinking can be assumed to be influenced by the Swedish gender-equality ambition. In Sweden, considerable effort has been made to diminish the binary divide with women as responsible for the care of the children and men as the family providers. Even though the division has been weakened, the binary gender categories remain in a more concealed way. In this context Kimmel (2010) talks about “culture lag” (p. 41); this means that society changes but old ideas and beliefs about women and men remain.

Our findings are intended to contribute to challenging gendered stereotypes such as *the fun guy* and *the possible perpetrator*. One way of doing this would be for preschool teacher educators to encourage their students to explore gender norms and expectations. Connell’s (1995) term “gender vertigo” can be used to understand why men’s presence in preschool can give rise to the expectations, beliefs and suspicions that have been reported in this study. Exploring moments of gender vertigo from all kinds of settings and situations in class may dismantle socially constructed gender norms that otherwise may be taken for granted and thus concealed.

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