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Preschool anxieties: constructions of risk and gender in preschool teachers' talk on physical interaction with children

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Abstract

Previous research shows that inexperienced preschool teachers experience anxiety in physical interaction with children. Against this backdrop, this article investigates how student-teachers and newly graduated preschool teachers talk about the risk of being accused of inappropriately touching children. The article is based on interviews with 20 women and men who recently started working in preschools, or who are soon to graduate as preschool teachers. Building on the notion of *relational touch*, the article shows that concerns over touch involve much more than the physical act itself. Relations among teachers, parents, children, management and policies are actualised in the informants' narratives, narratives that are also tied to notions of gender and gender equality. The article shows that anxiety over touch is not gender-specific. The concept of relational touch is suggested as a tool to gain a nuanced understanding of the worries that especially newly educated preschool teachers can experience in relation to touch.

Introduction

They're women, so there's nothing to worry about, is there?

This comment is excerpted from an interview with Åsa, who has just graduated as a preschool teacher. She describes her reaction to a comment from a parent who asked concerned questions at a parent-teacher conference about how the staff dealt with diaper changes. The parent asked how teachers touched the children, if more than one educator was present at diaper changes, and if camera surveillance was in place. Åsa explains that the parent's questions had created an 'eerie' mood at the meeting. Åsa was puzzled by the questions, and in the interview she laughs ironically at her own thought that the all-women staff could not pose a risk to the children. Åsa remarks that what she did not think of at the parent-teacher conference, was the fact that women are not 'automatically' safer for children than men are.

Åsa's association between women and safety during the parent-teacher conference is by no means unique; this line of reasoning is deeply rooted in many societies, and reflects a well-established gender order in which women and men evoke different associations (Connell,

2009). At the same time, Åsa's narrative tells of something more. When she laughs ironically at herself, this self-reflection indicates that she has *moved on* in her thinking on risk and gender. The self-reflecting Åsa is not entirely the same as the younger Åsa; she has gained a new understanding of risk. Risk is not something absolute and unchanging. Rather, perceptions of what might be dangerous and threatening are to a high degree social and cultural constructs (Douglas, 1992). Thus, what is deemed dangerous in a society can change over time.

In this article, we investigate how preschool student-teachers and newly graduated preschool teachers reason about risks and anxieties connected to touching in everyday interaction between teachers and children in preschool. Åsa's story about diaper changes is one example of such an everyday situation involving touch. Her story also underscores the significance of gender in these situations. Further on, we will provide more examples and an extended discussion on preschool teachers' conceptions of men and women in preschool as potential risks for children.

Background and previous research

In 2015, 83 percent of all Swedish children aged 1-5 attended preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017a). For the most part, children encounter women staff. Only some three percent of graduated preschool teachers are men (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017b). Today, preschool is a natural environment for Swedish children, and it needs to offer good care and good learning opportunities. In order to achieve that a national curriculum for preschools has been implemented (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Despite this development, the gender imbalance of the staff has remained constant. Since the 1970's several attempts to recruit more men have been made, with little success (Nordberg, 2011; Granbom and Wernersson, 2012). During recent years, one reason given for why the preschool profession does not attract men is the risks men run of being suspected of child abuse (Heikkilä, 2015).

Ulrich Beck's (1992) notion of the *risk society* emphasises that individuals have a need to control and push away fears, and that this need has escalated during modernity. If his

description is correct, it would be fair to say that we live in a culture of fear, in which it becomes ever more important to protect what is deemed valuable at any cost. This is underscored by a search of the Swedish daily newspaper database *Mediearkivet* which reveals that articles on risk and children have increased from some 7,000 in the year 2000, to more than 70,000 fifteen years later (cf. Lindqvist and Nordänger, 2007). As shown by Cameron (2001) different countries can view risks in relation to children in very different ways, where educators in Anglo-Saxon countries, at the time of her study, were more likely to become suspected of inappropriate touching of children compared to those in Scandinavian countries. The work of educators can be affected when suspicions directed towards adults in children's presence, gain a foothold. Teachers might avoid physical contact with children (Andrzejewski and Davis, 2007) and start looking at themselves as potential perpetrators (Jones, 2003).

Suspicious directed towards adults in preschool are to a high degree gendered. Research has shown that men are especially exposed (Jones, 2001a; Berill and Martino, 2002; King, 2004; Nordberg, 2005; Åberg and Hedlin, 2012; Eidevald, 2014), although women also risk being subjected to suspicions (Jones, 2004; Andrzejewski and Davis, 2007; Åberg and Hedlin, 2012). A quantitative study from Denmark found that 56 percent of male teachers and 21 percent of female teachers claimed they had changed their behaviour due to a perceived increased risk of being accused of paedophilia (Munk et al., 2013). In Sweden, preschools' risk prevention work is supported nationally by means of legislation that mandate and demand preschools to check the criminal record of new employees. This law has now been incorporated in the general Education Act (Swedish Education Act, 2010). At a local level, preschools regulate the work of temporary staff, for example, by not letting them work alone with children (Eidevald, 2016). The physical environment of preschools is also sometimes modified to increase transparency, so that adults' physical contact with children cannot be concealed (cf. Eidevald, 2016). Internationally, there are examples of preschools using far-reaching regulation of adults' physical conduct, for instance, through detailed rules on hugging (Cushman, 2009).

Research has suggested that inexperienced and newly educated preschool teachers express more concern of being suspected of touching children inappropriately, compared with more experienced teachers (Eidevald, 2014; Brody 2015). In this article, we want to examine this area closer, and our aim is to *investigate how preschool student-teachers at the end of their education, and newly graduated preschool teachers, reason about risks and anxieties connected to the physical interaction between teachers and children.*

Theory

Theoretically, our study relies on a constructionist perspective on gender. While essentialist perspectives on gender argue that maleness and femaleness are inherent properties, constructionist perspectives maintain that masculinities and femininities are dependent on actions and social interaction (Sabbe & Aeltermann, 2007). Through the repetition of such actions, the preschool profession has historically been associated with women and femininity (Hedlin and Åberg, 2013; Warin and Gannerud, 2014). This means that women and men in preschool can face different expectations. A man choosing an occupation coded as feminine can expect reactions which his female colleagues do not encounter. As reported by Sargent (2005) women's bodies commonly are associated with loving care, while men's bodies are seen as threatening, which means that physical contact with children and young students may be a particularly sensitive issue for men.

In alignment with how we define gender, we also see touch as a relational practice. Derrida (2005) argues, with reference to Aristotle, that touch contrary to the other senses has no determined object. While the object of vision is colour and the object of hearing is sound, the object of touch has many different traits. In fact, in line with Yi-Fu Tuan (2005) it could be argued that touch has the ability to modify and change its object, something other senses cannot do. The ability to physically affect and change an object is one aspect of the relationality of touch. Touch can only emerge through interaction and relations. This makes touch hard to fathom and rationalise. It always exceeds its own boundaries by its dependence on other senses (Classen, 2005) and by coming into existence only when different objects meet (Tuan, 2005). Touch is thus created in a borderland, where the border itself is a paradox; touch could not exist without the border, but the border cannot represent

touch by itself (Derrida, 2005). As argued by Barad (2012) the ambiguity of touch disrupts identity, making it 'radically queered'. Touch, we would argue, is closely associated with the emotions emerging from touching practices. Following Ahmed's (2004) thinking on *affective economies*, emotions never rest solely within an individual or an object, but must rather be understood as effects of the encounter between different objects (human and non-human). That is, the affinity between touch and emotions further underscores the unpredictable character of the anxieties about touch expressed by the informants.

In this article, our constructionist approaches to touch and gender are fused in the notion of *relational touch*. We have been inspired to use this concept by educational researchers Stronach and Piper (2008) (cf. Piper and Stronach, 2008). To them, relational touch underscores that touch is a contextual, composite and unpredictable practice. Stronach and Piper (2008) have used the concept in opposition to the 'no touch'-trend in the British school system. They argue that bureaucratic and organisational attempts to limit teachers' physical interaction with children have negative effects on their emotional contact. Relational touch is thus an ideal that encompasses the pedagogical and ethical aspects of touch. It accounts for human rather than organisational needs.

Departing from Stronach and Piper (2008), here we do not want to use the concept as a tool for detecting progressive pedagogical practices. Instead we use relational touch as an analytical concept emphasising the 'plural, displaced, and metonymic' (Stronach and Piper, 2008: 34, note 17) character of touch. For us the concept is useful in that it captures the unpredictability and complexity of touch. We also want to contribute to developing the concept by incorporating gender into the analysis. Even if Stronach and Piper (2008) argue that the gender of the teachers matters for relational touch, they do not elaborate on this in their analysis. As discussed above it is evident that touch in preschool is closely associated with notions of femininities and masculinities. However, to grasp fully the changing and relational character of touch, it is not enough to conceive of gender by means of a static binary gender model. Our understanding of relational touch entails an understanding of gender as dependent on actions (Butler, 1990). Similarly, touch itself needs movement to emerge (Classen, 2005), something only actions can create.

Method

The empiric material for this article was gathered within a larger ongoing project funded by the Swedish Research Council (project number 2014-2121), called *Touch in preschool: Care or risk?*. The overall aim of the project is to explore how the Swedish preschool and preschool teacher education discuss and handle the issue of physical contact between teachers and children. The project is based on surveys and interviews with preschool student-teachers, practising preschool teachers, and heads of preschools. A total of some 400 informants participated in the project. In addition, we conducted a document analysis of steering documents relevant to teacher education.

This article is based on interviews with 20 preschool student-teachers (14 women, 6 men) who at the time of the interviews were at the end of their training or had recently graduated. The majority of them were between 20 and 30 years old; two were in their forties. The informants were educated at four geographically-spread university colleges and universities in Sweden. We got in contact with them either via the faculty offices administrating preschool teacher education (faculty staff do not know which students we eventually contacted), or in connection with a survey we conducted at teacher training programmes. The survey is also part of the larger project.

As the informants were contacted they were informed both in writing and orally about the details and aim of the project. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary, and that the material would be anonymised. All names of persons and places, along with other pieces of information that could risk revealing the informants' identities, have been removed or altered. Quotes have been translated from Swedish. Lengthy quotes have been shortened to highlight analytical points. Omitted sentences are marked with blank space before and after three periods.

The one-to-one interviews were semi-structured. Most of them lasted about 90 minutes, the shortest being 45 minutes, and the longest 2 hours and 25 minutes. Sixteen interviews were conducted at places the informant and interviewer had agreed upon, most often in the informant's home. Due to vast geographical distances, three interviews were conducted via

telephone, and one via Skype. These interviews were all with men. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Each informant had the opportunity to comment on the transcript. Before conducting the interviews, we had anticipated that questions concerning touch could evoke strong or difficult emotional responses. For this reason the interviews concluded with questions on how the informants had experienced their participation. None of them expressed any concerns over this. Instead, they emphasised that it had been a relaxed and interesting conversation. Later, when informants received the transcripts, none of them expressed any concern or worry about their participation. The project in its entirety has been ethically vetted and approved by the Regional Ethical Board in Linköping, Sweden.

The empiric material was analysed by means of a thematic qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2008). Transcripts were read repeatedly, and relevant parts were marked. This process was done in two steps. First, we performed an overall reading, marking excerpts dealing with risks and anxieties associated with touching practices. As a second step, we scrutinised the marked segments, with the aim of identifying the relational aspects connected to the anxiety, that is, the way anxiety circulates between objects (cf. Ahmed, 2004). The analyses depart from statements about concerns over touch, but extend outwards to understanding the significance and meaning of these concerns. In this way, we have uncovered material, social, and emotional aspects of touch. During this process we identified three themes which also structure the results section below: 1) Self-angst, 2) Anxiety over men, and 3) Gender equal anxiety. We want to emphasise that these themes do not exhaust the relational aspects of touch in preschools. Rather, they represent mechanisms of relational touch that can be activated differently or not at all, depending on the social, organisational and historical context of a particular preschool.

Results

The results of the investigation are presented centring on the three themes described above.

Self-angst

One of the themes emerging from the empiric material we call self-angst. This refers to informants turning their concerns about touch towards themselves, in a self-reflective, often self-critical way. In the introductory quote of the paper, the newly graduated preschool teacher Åsa says that earlier she thought that women could pose no danger to children, in relation to touching practices. Self-reflectively she states that she has come to realise that this way of thinking is stereotypical, a representation of traditional thinking where women's closeness to children is perceived as natural and harmless. Implicitly, she thus criticises the link between women and what Connell (2005) has called 'emphasised femininity', that is, traits that underscore differences between women and men. Connell (2005) argues these differentiations maintain the gender order. At the same time though, Åsa states that it is professionally important for her to give children a lot of physical contact. She objects to teachers and pedagogical ideas that emphasise restrictive touching practices, of which she argues she has encountered a lot in teacher education.

So, while being aware that her physical closeness to children iterates a particular version of femininity to which she is opposed to on a cognitive level, Åsa is also self-reflective about the fact that during her teacher training she was more suspicious of male than of female students. In the interview, she says that she knows it is not okay to suspect men of wanting to become preschool teachers for the wrong reasons, but that she has felt this in relation to men whom she found were not engaging enough in their training. What we find interesting here is how Åsa's emotional concerns over touch circulate, involving relations to men, children, and parents and also, importantly, how her thinking on touch comes full circle when she exclaims in self-disgust: "...it's awful to think like that...". She is worried that she assesses men and women differently.

The 'concern over oneself', i.e. introspective reflections on one's thoughts and reactions, which Åsa expresses, also recurs in other students' narratives. Petra provides another example of this.

Petra is a young woman who obtained a full-time position immediately after finishing the teaching programme. By the time of the research interview, she had worked at the

preschool for approximately four months. The preschool faces some challenges: it is understaffed partly due to sick leave, the child groups are big partly due to a large influx of newly arrived refugees to Sweden, and resources are scarce. Despite being newly graduated and newly employed, Petra has immediately been given a lot of responsibility for her section of the preschool. She is also the only staff member with a teaching degree. In our conversation Petra speaks at length about her concern about being inadequate. At the same time, though, she is filled with energy and optimism; she is convinced that she will pull through, despite the demanding conditions at the preschool. Apart from the inadequate organisation, Petra airs her concern about physical interaction with children. Some of the kids want to be 'too close', and while not minding hugging the children, Petra has issues with acts of exaggerated intimacy from some of the children. It is difficult to find the right balance, to know what level of touch is 'just right'. Furthermore, there are some situations that are particularly sensitive, such as toilet situations. When asked what aspects of work she finds the most difficult to handle, this is what she says:

Petra: I had this one child. We were in the lunchroom, and she needed to go to the toilet. We eat at school and then you follow her to the toilet. She needs help wiping herself, she is four and we're at school, and there are a lot of school kids there. Then it is: Should I enter the toilet with her and lock the door while being with her? It's like you don't really know what...others...they can't know what I do. Like, what do they think...That's the hard part, I think. ... [I]t's like these thoughts - they are there. And it is really difficult, especially now when there are so many substitute staff. To what extent can you, that is, leave them alone? ... I'm not sure it's a concern about what others might think either, I believe it has more to do with what...

Interviewer. ...you think?

Petra. I think, yes. ... Yes. Well, it might be something...when something has come up in the media. ... That is, there's been a lot of that lately. Like, probably more than before. And then you get...you think more about it. I certainly do, in any case.

The worry Petra expresses over her own actions, and the uncertainty of how to handle the toilet situation with the child, is framed by the concern created in her by media reports on child abuse. The concern over her own actions is thus linked to a concern over what substitute staff might do to the children.

In a study on male educators, Foster and Newman (2005) coined the concept of *identity bruising*. They use it to describe what happens to a teacher who feels suspected of inappropriate touching. Suspicions from others are hurtful; they constitute a blow to the

educator's self-esteem. As research shows that men are more likely to become suspected of inappropriate touching than women (Piper and Stronach, 2008; Eidevald, 2016), Petra may run less risk of being suspected, and she states that no one has expressed concerns over her actions. This does not mean, however, that Petra is unaffected by the current widespread talk on child abuse. As asserted by Tobin (1997) the moral panic on touch started with gay men, but it has turned into a more general fear which affects all preschool staff. Petra's concern for how her interaction with children is perceived by others thus becomes something that injures her self-esteem, and creates her sense of insecurity in relation to bathroom situations. Petra is vulnerable, due to the current situation at her preschool, and due to the big responsibility she has to carry largely alone, despite being young and newly graduated. Compared to Åsa, who claims she actively seeks physical closeness with children, Petra's sense of 'injury' is enhanced by her uncomfortable reactions to children seeking to touch her. While the media reports she has read or heard about have revolved around men, they still impact on her in that her thinking on her own actions makes her more aware that touching can potentially involve risks. Her vulnerability certainly differs from that of educators who encounter outright suspicion. Still, there is a risk that the worry she actually feels is sustained by the poor working conditions at her workplace.

Anxiety over men

While the case with Petra above indicates that also women can be affected by media reports highlighting men as offenders, some of the male informants stated that they had experienced outright suspicions or measures to prevent them from physically engaging with children. The male preschool teacher Per, who in one way or another has been involved in preschool work since upper secondary school, says that he had a very difficult experience in upper secondary school. During a practice placement at a preschool, one of the regular staff took him aside to her office and started to question Per on his relation with one of the children. Per, who argues that he in fact was trying to support the child who was alone and marginalised by the peer group, says that this accusation was very offensive to him. Though the event didn't affect his choice of professional career, he says that it still impacts him, despite the fact that several years have passed since it occurred.

Interviewer: Does your [worry] in some way affect your interaction with the children and such...?

Per: Yes, it does, since I try not to touch them more than necessary. Today. I don't. If it's not on their initiative I don't touch them.

The majority of the preschool teachers and students we have met let us know that they have worked or trained at or know of preschools that have implemented different restrictive policies on touch. These are often targeted at students or substitute staff who cannot perform work tasks that might be considered sensitive, for example, changing diapers or being left alone with a child. The case of Oskar illustrates this point. He says that he is forbidden to change the diapers of some of the children in the preschool section where he works, something which concerns him. He says that this ban has to do with the traditional beliefs of some of the parents:

Oskar: ...one thing that worried me, and still does to some extent, is that I as a male preschool teacher [cannot] change diapers for every child, based on traditional beliefs. [...] So for starters I was very concerned, because I [didn't] even know all the children, so how was I expected to know which ones this rule applied to? Now I know, so I simply do not change diapers for these three or four, however many they are. My female colleagues are allowed to do that, but the remaining children I can change diapers on.

Interviewer: How did this become apparent for you, like the first time? Was it parents telling you, or colleagues who mentioned that you couldn't do it?

Oskar: It was simply my boss telling me straight up that "we have some parents who have some traditional beliefs", so she simply said that "now in the beginning, do not change diapers at all, until you are sure which children are okay to change, and which aren't". [...] So I just don't enter the changing area when they are being changed. It is as simple as that.

By the time of the interview Oskar has only been employed for a month. Despite him telling something that might be called gender discrimination according to the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008), he describes his situation as a practical rather than pedagogical or professional problem. He says he is somewhat concerned, but overall he argues that if people are met with respect and dialogue, things will be sorted out.

It is evident from our interviews that preschool touch policies differ greatly, if any are in place. At Oskar's preschool a touch policy had been negotiated by his superior, colleagues and parents before he started working at the preschool, ruling Oskar out from changing diapers for some of the children. For Per, formal restrictions on touch seem to be rather negotiable or flexible. On the one hand, he describes how he, as a substitute teacher, is

absolutely prohibited from changing diapers. On the other hand, he says that when children and parents have gotten to know him, he was allowed to change diapers during a practical placement. For Oskar, proving his 'innocence' through dialogue seems not to be a possibility; he has already been assessed as unsuitable in relation to some children.

In order to prevent sexual assaults on children, educators need to perform risk assessments of new colleagues. As argued by Jones (2004), in an era of 'no touch'-policies it becomes vital that teachers are assessed as 'safe'. However, 'safe' is not a neutral or static concept. As Per's and Oskar's narratives demonstrate, what is deemed 'safe' is an on-going negotiation through the interaction among teachers, management, parents and children. Implied in the notion of 'safe' is, as Tait (2001) argues, its opposite, 'the dangerous teacher'. That is, policies and measures to regulate touch are based on a mindset where danger is viewed as an inherent aspect of touch. Potentially dangerous adults need to be identified and isolated, as Oskar is separated from some of the children. However, this strategy may in turn produce other 'risks', e.g. the risk of men leaving the profession, or children who fear physical contact (Tait 2001).

Gender-equal anxiety

As the previous sections show, anxieties over touch often target men, but women are not unaffected by the discourse of risk prevention. Perhaps the clearest proof of the asymmetrical risk assessment of women and men, is that several women in our study stated that they pity men. Simone, who argues that she has developed restrictive touch behaviour during the course of her education, says:

Simone: ...it feels like you can get busted for anything sometimes. And especially the poor guys who are attacked for the tiniest...

Already in the 1990's, Tobin (1997) argued that suspicions had spread from first being directed towards gay men, then to men in general, and after that, also toward women. Around the same time, however, a Danish study stated the debate on the risks of enrolling male preschool teachers 'seems totally incomprehensible in a Danish context' (Jensen, 1996:25). In Cameron's review (2001) she found that the response to cases of child sexual abuse in both Denmark and Norway had been to support men from not being discouraged

from the profession, which was concurrent with the equal opportunities agenda of the Nordics. Based on our study, we would argue that this model for gender equality still impacts on the way anxieties over touch are construed in Swedish preschools. However, if it earlier revolved around 'supporting men', now in an era of anxiousness, it includes 'blaming women', too.

Petra (same woman as quoted above) elaborates on why she as a woman fears suspicions, despite the fact that media reports so often depict men as perpetrators:

Petra: Perhaps one reason is that there is a guy I usually talk to. ... That he affects me, too. ... I want guys to work in preschool, and to me it's wrong that... He is really competent. If he sort of gets those looks, and people don't trust him just because he's a guy. To me that's wrong, because that has nothing to do with him, all that is said. He is no paedophile! ... No, and then I go: 'But I might as well be.' Like. And I believe it is as common among women...

Oskar (same man as quoted above) states:

Oskar: ... given that every time there's a news flash of the kind 'oh, there was a paedophile in this school or in preschool,' then it's predominantly about men ... [S]ince the media most often choose to focus on the male, and it is those cases which they inflate, and like are heard more ... Perhaps there are as many on both sides, but it's that thing where there are so many more women, so it's not as visible there. Since it's a predominantly female profession.

Several of the informants, both men and women, express themselves in a similar manner as Petra and Oskar do, arguing that it is 'as common' for women to assault children as for men to do it. Men are perceived to be unjustly exposed, and the media is partly blamed for sustaining prejudice toward men by giving more attention to the cases in which men have molested children. The informants' comments that women are as likely to be perpetrators as men are, challenge the culturally well-established, stereotypical image of the sexual offender as a man. Media reports are mistrusted, and as in the case of Petra, informants do not seem to want to direct suspicions at a man they know well.

With Ahmed (2010) the 'male perpetrator' can be understood as another object of relevance for relational touch. The fact that informants do not accept the 'male perpetrator' as a 'touch truth' indicates precisely the relational character of touch. It's evolving and changing. Ahmed (2010) argues that people reach for that which is *proximate* to them in order to

establish positive emotional bonds, and that this proximity in part relies on how others have valued certain objects. Emotions thus always bear historical traces. When informants thus use 'women' as an object to negotiate the stereotype of the male offender, they are trying to change history, and the Swedish gender equality discourse is what enables them to attempt this.

At a national level, critical masculinity scholars have shown that political attempts to enhance gender equality have revolved around getting men to take a larger responsibility for children and family (Klinth, 2002). This has been done through appealing to and trying to inspire men, rather than by adjusting society and the social security system so that more gender-equal effects are created. Within this discourse an image of the Swedish man as a good, gender-equal father has been established. This idealised image has been exempt from any notion of 'danger' and has been built on ethnic and class-based stereotypes which transfer all the negative aspects of men's parenting to immigrant and working-class men (Gottzén and Jonsson, 2012). This discourse has been reiterated in the measures taken to recruit men to preschools. On the one hand, the need for male role models, especially for boys, has been emphasised. On the other hand, it has been argued that men are needed in order to break with traditional gender stereotypes (Nordberg, 2011). Sociologist Keith Pringle (2012) argues that Sweden has made the mistake of not paying enough attention to research showing that men are strongly overrepresented as sexual offenders, and that gender – neither class nor ethnicity – is the common denominator for the men assaulting children. Pringle (2012) makes the case that Sweden should look more to the UK, a country which, according to him, has discussed this in a much more serious manner for many years. We are afraid, however, that exclusively focusing on the potential danger posed by men risks both undermining teachers' important physical relational work with children and sustaining the 'no touch'-culture that several studies have shown is proliferating in the UK and other Anglophone countries (Jones, 2001b; Piper and Stronach, 2008).

Conclusion

In this article, we investigate how student-teachers and newly graduated preschool teachers talk about the risks of being accused of touching children inappropriately. We focus on

new teachers because they more often seem to express concern over the physical aspects of their work compared to more experienced colleagues (Eidevald, 2014; Brody, 2015). We believe that teacher training programmes and workplaces can benefit from a deeper understanding of the concerns experienced, but not always verbalised, by educators.

We use the notion of relational touch to frame the teachers' reasoning and experiences. This frame, however, lacks straight lines and clear borders. Instead we have come to understand anxiety as a node in a complex network of relations that includes teachers, preschool heads, parents, children, and the physical and organisational context of preschool, paired with relations exceeding preschools' boundaries in the form of media reports, political decisions, and societal discourses on gender and gender equality.

As shown in the section 'Self-angst', relational touch also highlights the interplay between social and psychological dimensions of touch. With Ahmed (2004) we understand emotions not as individual traits, but as something produced when different objects meet. With the cases of Åsa's and Petra's self-critiques, we were able to show that this is not only due to their individual intra-psychic processes, but rather something emerging via the meeting between the material and immaterial world. In other words, teacher training or workplaces aiming to help newly educated teachers cope with their worries, need to be sensitive to the context where the teachers' concerns are played out.

As shown throughout the paper, anxiety over touch is to a high degree gendered. Informants state that men are more likely than women to come under suspicion, but we would argue that gender is constructed in more complex ways than following a sharp gender division. As the cases with Åsa and Petra show, even though they both turn their concerns inwards, Åsa's worries deal with her own views on gender differences, while Petra is concerned over how her own actions can be perceived by others. Then in the next section, the cases with Per and Oskar illustrate that concerns over men are continually negotiated. While Oskar was subjected to negotiations that already had taken place between parents and preschool management, deeming him unsuitable to change diapers for some of the children, Per had found that dialogue and time to get to know children and colleagues had

given him more freedom at work. So, while informants confirm that there is a gender divide making it more probable for men to be perceived as potentially dangerous, their narratives also point to the fact that the femininities and masculinities they are able to perform are neither static nor homogenous.

An important result of the study is that both women and men actively negotiate the stereotypical image of the man as perpetrator. The Swedish discourse on gender equality enables them to juxtapose women and men ('we are all equal'), but in an era of anxiousness this idea of equality is transformed into the notion that 'women are as dangerous as men'. We believe that suspicions unjustly directed towards men cannot be corrected by a corresponding amount of distrust being directed towards women. There is an evident risk that this may increase a culture of touch-avoidance which has proliferated in many countries, and which according to Munk et al. (2013) now also seems to have expanded to the Nordics. Instead, we would argue that workplaces need in-depth discussions on touch and gender. These cannot be based on simplified notions of women and men at a group level, and they must balance positive and problematic aspects of touch.

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