

Kubandt, Melanie (2018).

Gender differences: given or made?! Gender constructions of parents and professionals in a German daycare centre

Paper presented on the 28th EECERA Annual Conference, 29.8.2018, Budapest, Hungary.

Abstract

The provided gender constructions by professionals and parents are intended to show blind spots in everyday pedagogical life. The main challenge for gender studies has been the weight of culture over nature. The material shows that the question of the origin of gender differences is not only a subject of scientific debate, but is also of relevance in the everyday understanding of parents and professionals in a daycare centre. The study is based on the ethnomethodological doing gender concept and the empirical constructivism. I refer to empirical results from an ethnographic project on doing gender, which was carried out over a period of fourteen months in a Lower Saxony daycare centre. The question, which is based on the ethnomethodological paradigm, was how gender is constructed by children, parents and professionals in everyday educational life. It was above all important not to reify gender itself. Therefore, all constructions as a researcher were analysed, too. The thesis of gender's social constructiveness familiar to parents is juxtaposed with the personal experiences with one's own children, which speak in favour of innate gender differences and cast doubt on the hypotheses of social growth. Their own potential possibilities of influence are marginalised, but the child daycare centre is ascribed the task of breaking down supposedly existing one-sided gender preferences. The facilitation of gender equality thus becomes a matter for the institution and falls within the remit of the daycare centre. The study also shows, the challenges faced by professionals in daycare facilities for children.


Keywords

doing gender, expectations of parents, sex versus gender, challenges for professionals, blind spots

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GENDER DIFFERENCES: GIVEN OR MADE?!

**GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS OF PARENTS IN A GERMAN
DAY-CARE CENTRE**

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EECERA, Budapest 2018

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Study „Doing Gender in a early day care centre“
(vgl. Kubandt 2016)


➤ **Research Question:**
„How is gender constructed by children, parents and professionals in everyday educational life in the day care centre?“

➤ Ethnomethodological perspective on *doing gender* (cf. Garfinkel 1967; Kessler/McKenna 1978; West/Zimmerman 1987) of professionals, parents and children.

➤ Analyses based on Grounded Theory (cf. Strauss/Corbin 1996) and sequence-analytical methods (cf. Kruse 2014)


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Gender differences - On the question of the relationship between nature and culture

- change from biological-genetic patterns of explanation to the emphasis on a cultural constitution of gender differences (cf. De Beauvoir 1992).

 *What is nature with regard to gender?
And what is culturally determined?* (cf. Lindemann 1993).

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Gender differences - On the question of the relationship between nature and culture

- “Biological explanations of gender differences (...) often stand generally under suspicion of ideology” (Leonhardt/Hopfer 1996/2013, p.13, translated by M.K.).
- “Sex as a biological category, as the physical reality of gender (...) was often excluded from the analysis and declared an *Un category* within the framework of the deconstruction approach” (Schmitz 2002, p.7, translated by M.K.).

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Gender differences - On the question of the relationship between nature and culture

- **Central misunderstanding:**
“Already the formulation that something is ‚only constructed‘ points in this direction and far underestimates how construction processes inscribe themselves in the body, in the thinking of individuals, in culture and their agreements” (Rendtorff 2000, p.45f., translated by M.K.).
- The “still existing openness of anthropological questions (...) is all too easily overlooked in a discourse about the sexes” (Leonhardt/Hopfer 1996/2013, p.21, translated by M.K.).

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

- *I go out to the garden area of the day care centre, introduce myself to a mother and tell her briefly about my project. She goes straight to the subject of gender and says: "I always thought that everything was social in terms of gender, but even as an infant my son showed clear preferences for technical things. Gender differences must be biological". I tell her about scientific debates that neglect biological causes for gender differences. She seems interested, but sticks to her experience-based position that gender interests must be conditioned. (Kubandt 2016, p.203)*

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

- The mother takes up the gender theme of the study by positioning herself with regard to the question, where gender differences come from
- Based on her experience with her son, she argues that biological causes are the origin for the development of gender preferences and differences

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre


- She contrasts the social becoming of gender with a position that stresses gender interests as already contained in the genetic disposition
- Based on her experience with her son: an infant obviously cannot yet fall back on something that has become, but only on what has already been given

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

- Social construction of gender **vs.** biological given
- Based on her experience with her son: she neglects the aspect of social influences on gender differences

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

- *In the gymnastics room of the day care centre I talk to a mother, who comes in and says a friendly "Hello". She doesn't know me yet, I introduce myself and briefly tell her about my project. When I talk about discourses on the construction of gender, she says with a laugh: "These are the old discussions from the 70s!". She states: "Since I have had my children - an older boy who is already at school and my daughter Lina, who is a child here in the day care centre - I have noticed how much must actually be in the child, thus congenital! Tom has been interested in technical game material right from the start, Lina got all this too, but she never was interested. Much must already be there". Later she states: "Because the day care centre has relatively few toys on offer, the games between boys and girls are more similar and not so gender stereotypical. Therefore, the children can be freer and more creative." I confirm that I often notice games together. The mother asks apparently surprised: "Yes? I have the impression that it is more separated between the sexes than a few years ago. My son Tom was also here, it was even less separated and the togetherness between boys and girls was even stronger. But it's nice when it's still more than I think. I would prefer it was more like this and the day care centre would enhance it."*

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

Similarity to the argumentation of the first mother:

- The hypothesis of the social construction of gender is contrasted with personal experiences with her own children

 speaks for innate gender differences and gives rise to doubts about their former theses of a social construction of gender

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

- The link between masculinity and technical interest is used here as an explanation to confirm biological differences between boys and girls
- The associated differentiation of male and female characteristics are already preliminary to the observation, therefore the combination of masculinity and technical interest could also be seen as a reification of existing gender stereotypes and not as a biological proof

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

- The underlying argument is that – although Lina has been given various opportunities in her social environment to live out interests like her brother –, she was apparently not interested.

→ speaks for the mother for the existence of innate gender preferences

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Given or made?! Gender constructions of parents in a day care centre

Institutional context of the day care centre:

- By not having much play material available, the play of boys and girls is more similar and not driven by gender stereotypes
- The influence of the direct environment on supposedly gender-oriented preferences are addressed here
- The possibility of influencing gender preferences is attested to the day care centre, whereas this attribution was not given to the family environment by recourse to biological causes
- Differences between the sexes appear to be presupposed as a biological fact, but become the starting point for pedagogical influence and tend to be marginalized

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Conclusion: Child day care facilities as the lynchpin for gender equality

- The origin of gender differences not only determine gender studies, but is also of great relevance in parents' everyday understanding (cf. Kubandt 2016, p.218ff.)
- The lived experiences with their own children seem to have a great influence on what parents come to know about this
- They hardly address their own potential shares and possibilities of influence
- The day-care centre is ascribed as a space of opportunity to counteract supposedly existing one-sided gender preferences

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Conclusion: Child day care facilities as the lynchpin for gender equality

- The day care centre is attested an "active" part and the possibility of influencing the development of gender differences
- With recourse to biological causes a rather "passive" role is ascribed to the family environment
- Blind spots for their own contributions on side of the parents

→ **Child day care facilities become the lynchpin for gender equality**

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17
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18
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Thank you very much!
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