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Kubandt, Melanie (2022). **The rigid/flexible gender in children's play?! Doing gender practices in child day care centres between binarity and flexibility.** Paper presented on the 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Glasgow/Scotland, 25.8.2022.

Two ethnographic studies in day care centres in Germany focused on doing gender by children in everyday life. One aim was to show when and how gender becomes a topic in children's play and which ideas of gender are contained in it. Research has shown that educators tend to encourage sex segregation and limiting gender stereotypes in children's play (Edward, Knoche, Kumru 2001). But the meta-analysis by Davis and Hines (2020) show far more differentiated references to sex and gender by children. The theoretical framework is based on ethnomethodological Perspectives on Gender (Gildemeister 2017) and refer to social-constructivist Theories according to Kelle (2009) and Knorr-Cetina (1989). Both studies followed a qualitative interpretive research paradigm (Denzin/Lincoln 2018) based on ethnographic fieldnotes and videographic data in two child day care centres. The Data was coded according to Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin (1996). The EECERA Ethical Code for early childhood Researchers (2015) was followed with voluntary, informed consent sought from children and parents. All names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms. The results show different non-binary doing gender practices by children while playing games in large groups, but also point to the high relevance of binary gender logics in role play. Depending on different forms of play, references to gender are sometimes more flexible. Based on the results, recommendations can be derived for both parents and educators on how the identification with gender can be supported without confining children to strict gender role concepts.

Keywords

doing gender, ethnography, children`s play, child day care, gender flexibility

Presenter:

Melanie Kubandt, University of Vechta, Germany

THE RIGID/FLEXIBLE GENDER IN CHILDREN'S PLAY?!

DOING GENDER PRACTICES BETWEEN BINARITY AND FLEXIBILITY

Prof. Dr. Melanie Kubandt

Assistant Professor for Gender and Education

University of Vechta

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German education policy concerning gender equality → Perspektives on Gender Differences as Starting Point (vgl. Kelle 2016, Kubandt 2016, 2019)

The Bavarian Education Plan for Children in Day Care Facilities

"If girls and boys can choose freely, they prefer play partners of the same sex and similar age. In groups with an extended age mix, there are not always enough play partners of the preferred age and gender. What at first glance appears to be a disadvantage can turn out to be an advantage, as boys and girls naturally expand their range of activities and play spaces under these conditions (e.g. by older boys behaving in a caring manner towards the youngest ones or by girls being included in the football team)"
(Bavarian State Ministry of Labour and Social Order, Family and Women 2012, p.120)

German education policy concerning gender equality → Perspektives on Gender Differences as Starting Point (vgl. Kelle 2016, Kubandt 2016, 2019)

- Kelle (2004, 2016): Research desideratum concerning the lack of empirical data on the variance of situated meanings of the gender category for children
- Awareness of children's agency and the role that children play in constructing gender as well as a perspective beyond binary differences (f.e. Blaise 2014; Davies, 2012, 2014; Thorne 1993, 2005)

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

- Research Question: "How is gender constructed by children, parents und professionals in kindergarten?"
- 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)

Study „Doing Difference in everyday pedagogical life “

(cf. Kubandt/Meyer 2017; Meyer 2018)

- Theoretical framework is merging socio-cultural theories with the idea of children's agency (cf. Eßer 2016, Gallagher 2019)
- Children as active constructors of their self, environment and childhood

Research question of the secondary analysis: *how do children construct gender in their play?*

Children's doing gender in Play: Empirical Findings

Doing Gender in Children`s Play

- The flexible use of gender in group games
- The extension of the gender binarity
- The Rigidity of Gender in Child Role Play

Doing Gender in Children`s Play

- **The flexible use of gender in group games**
- The extension of the gender binarity
- The Rigidity of Gender in Child Role Play

The flexible use of gender in group games

Lina calls out "Linus and Max, in which group are you? For us, for the girls or for the boys?" Max answers "Girls". Linus repeats, facing Lina, "For the girls!" Then he turns to Max and asks "For the girls we are, aren't we?" At the same time Linus calls out to Lina in a strong voice "I'm for the girls. And Max is, too!" Sophie then replies "Good! You have to run and catch the boys, and all of them, right away!" (Kubandt 2019, transl. by MK)

Doing Gender in Children's Play

- The flexible use of gender in group games
- **The extension of the gender binarity**
- The Rigidity of Gender in Child Role Play

The extension of the gender dichotomy

Ronja, who is fighting in the boys' group, says in a determined voice to Timm, who is now coming towards her: "And you're not allowed to catch me!" She adds, "In the boys' team, the girls are not allowed to be caught... the boygirls!" "But only one!" retorts Timm. "Only one!" Ronja confirms by nodding.

Doing Gender in Children`s Play

- The flexible use of gender in group games
- The extension of the gender binarity
- **The Rigidity of Gender in Child Role Play**



Marie, Ronja, Lina, Bella and Emily play together in the self-built hut. They sit in a circle and eat cakes that Emily has baked out of sand. "Everyone gets two pieces!" says Marie. I sit in front of the entrance and watch, I am apparently only tolerated. The girls divide the sand cake among themselves, all sitting tightly in a circle around the bucket of sand that serves as a cake. Marie says: "We are sleeping, children. But unfortunately we can only sleep sitting up, the den is much too small!". Ronja and Marie hum a lullaby, everyone huddles together on their knees and pretends to sleep. Marie gets up while the others are still pretending to be asleep and says, "I woke everyone up and the father!" I ask, "Who's the father?" Everyone except Emily shouts loudly in chorus, "EMILY!" Emily shouts indignantly, "No....the father has died. I'm Mummy!" Marie says firmly: "I'm the greatest of all, so I'm Mummy!"

The Rigidity of Gender in Child Role Play

I go out to the outdoor area and sit down next to Anne. She gives me information about the typical weekly schedule of the day care centre and I take notes. Some children gather around us, want to have their jackets zipped up, we both help. I hear Peter, who is sitting on the tricycle, ask Ben "Can't I be daddy, too?" "No!" "And can I be grandpa then?" "No, Konstantin is already the grandpa!" "But what can I be then? I want to play along!". "You're the visitor!" They both leave on their bikes and continue to play together in the corner with Konstantin.

Summary and Conclusions

- Gender dichotomy and the compulsiveness of assigning oneself to one gender apparently leads to the children generating creative and situational intermediate forms: *boy-girls* etc.
- In role-playing, the children are obviously concerned with occupying roles according to their own gender → gender as an essential identity feature both of the role and their own person
- Situational variability and flexibility in how gender is constructed by the children → frequent changes between gender as a collective category and as an characteristic of individuals

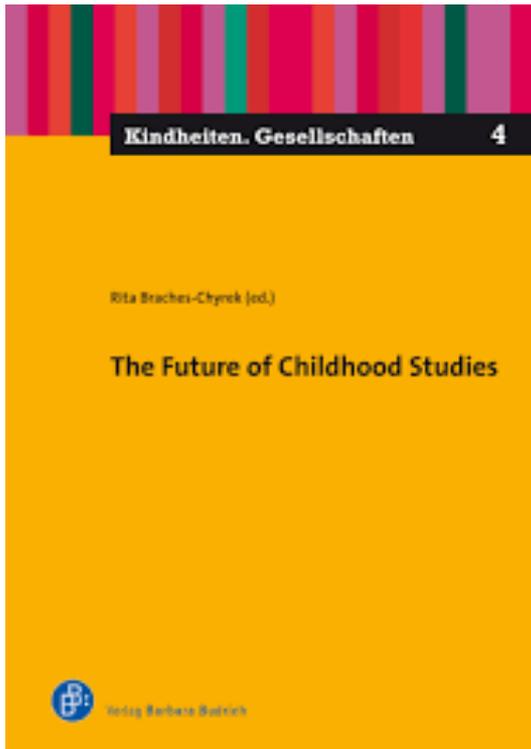
Summary and Conclusions

- Various dimensions of gender as a resource in diverse play situations
- The variety of patterns and contexts in which gender is constructed by the children in play point to the situational and variable relevance of gender
- Essentialising and stereotypical comparisons of differences between girls and boys are under-complex
- Karsten (2017): against the persistent, dual construction of gender roles of girls and boys, it is necessary to adopt a broader and more differentiated perspective that offers "complex possibilities instead of polar views" in ECEC (ibid., p. 585. transl. by MK).

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Thank you very much!
Melanie.Kubandt@uni-vechta.de