

Kubandt, Melanie (2021). **On self-reflection in gender studies - challenges of understanding gender in ECEC**. Paper presented on the 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Online, 9.9.2021.

Abstract

In context of an ethnographic study in a German day-care centre focussing on doing gender of children, parents and educators, the challenges of understanding gender in ECEC are presented by focusing on self-reflection processes by the researcher. Thorne (1993), MacNaughton (2004) and Kelle (2016) criticize research on gender that only focus on gender differences and lacks of a self-reflection on researchers own doing gender processes while doing research. The danger is that pre-assumptions of gender differences on the part of researchers lead to the unintentional reproduction of stereotypes through research. Due to a self-reflective research perspective based on social constructivism (Breuer 2003; Kelle 2016) and the theoretical framework of the empirical constructivism (Knorr-Cetina 1989) the childrens`, parents` and educators` own doing gender processes are research subject and not assumptions on gender differences reproduced by the researcher. The ethnographic data are based on a weekly observation over 14 months and was coded with the aim of categorization based on the Grounded Theory according to Strauss and Corbin (1996). Ethical considerations were given priority throughout this study. F.e., the EECERA Ethical Code for early childhood Researchers (2014) was followed with voluntary, informed consent sought from children, parents and educators. The claim to conduct self-reflexive research on gender is associated with numerous pitfalls, which are traced using concrete data material from the ethnographic study. The paper reconstructs blind spots on the part of researchers for their own (stereotypical) assumptions on gender and shows different possibilities to conduct a self-reflexive gender research in ECEC.

Keywords

gender, self-reflection, stereotypes, ethnography, blind spots

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ON SELF-REFLECTION IN GENDER STUDIES - CHALLENGES OF UNDERSTANDING GENDER IN ECEC

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Structure

- Reification in research projects on doing gender
- Doing gender while doing research?! reification examples from a project on doing gender in kindergarten
- Reification and Self-Reflection as a productive research tool?!
- Conclusion

Reification in research projects on doing gender

- research on social differences is always research under conditions of social differences (Diehm et al. 2013)
- difficulty of reifying gender through research (cf. Hagemann-White 1993; Gildemeister/Wetterer 1995; Kelle 2000)
- REIFICATION = gender is not only empirically accessible by itself, but is also generated by the research process/researcher
- Critique: anyone looking for gender specifics and differences between the sexes will also find some (cf. Thorne 1993; Kelle 2016)

Reification in research projects on doing gender

- Thorne (1993) and Kelle (2016) criticize research that only focus on sex and gender differences and lacks of a self-reflection
- DANGER: pre-assumptions of sex/gender differences by researchers lead to the reproduction of stereotypes through research
- the avoidance of reification is a methodological challenge (cf. Thon 2017)
- research activities must be reflected on their reifying parts (cf. Kubandt 2017)

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

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)

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

- **reification-sensitive approach:** f.e. data material with regard to my own gender constructions were provided with own codes
- Problem:
 - my own gender attributions structured the material.
 - my focus on the field was characterized by a gender-focused view and stereotyped assumptions.

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

The boys and girls sit almost mixed, but "friends" tend to sit together.
(cf. Kubandt 2020)

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

The boys and girls sit almost mixed, but "friends" tend to sit together.
(cf. Kubandt 2020)

- ➔ if one looks for the categories ´boys` and ´girls` in research observation protocols, these often do not represent quotations from the field but are to be attributed to the observers themselves (cf. Kelle/Breidenstein 1998, p.54).



Doing gender while doing research?! Reification examples from a project Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

My attention is still being wooed, now the boys show me all the roles and somersaults they can do. More and more children, including girls, come and talk to me, if they don't know me yet, they want to know my name and what I do in kindergarten.

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

Timm, Lukas and Jannis are playing in the garden. Sophie is approaching and starts playing with the boys. The boys in the group seem to have nothing against a girl now playing in the "boys group".

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

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Timm, Lukas and Jannis are playing in the garden. Sophie is approaching and starts playing with the boys. The boys in the group seem to have nothing against a girl now playing in the "boys group".

- ➔ The reification process takes place by assuming my pre-assumption to be relevant for all participants.

Doing gender while doing research?!

Reification examples from a project

Study „Doing Gender in Kindergarten“

(vgl. Kubandt 2016, 2017, 2019)

- research focus on gender seems to increase a potential risk of reification
- differences between the sexes are boosted by the one-sided perspective on boys versus girls
- researcher are often guided by personal, subjective, cultural and biographical ideas of binary sexes
- BUT: researchers own doing gender constructions can serve as an aid in gaining insights into the children's perspectives on gender

Reification and self-reflection as a productive research tool?!

Boris, Lukas, Jannis and Felix climb down from the gallery, come to me and ask if I knew Han Solo and Luke Skywalker. "Yes, and I love Leia best!" I answer. At the same moment I am annoyed that I have chosen a stereotypical woman, also a princess! Jannis replies: "Leia? She`s got a two-sided lightsaber. She's stronger. She's strong!" I answer "Yes", at the same time I am a little surprised, I did not see her this way myself, but rather perceived her as passive.

Conclusion

- reification as an epistemological and methodological challenge in research projects
- empirically there is no way out of reification, yet it makes sense to meet this challenge theoretically and self-reflexively
- self-reflection helps to point out blind spots and implicit presuppositions in the research process
- subjectivity of researchers can also be seen as a means of insight to children's perspectives

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Thank you very much!
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