



Gender play - Play gender

Elkarif, Halah & Rohrmann, Tim (2023). **Don't you live here? The necessity of clarifying children's assumptions about male ECE educators.** Paper presented on the 11th EECERA SIG Gender Balance Research Conference, Estoril, Portugal, 29th August 2023.

Children have different assumption about why men are present in an ECEC setting: they believe that the male worker 'lives' in the kindergarten, see him as a 'father', or ask him when he will 'go to work'. Building up on reports and research on the role of male teachers in ECEC settings during the last three decades, this paper connects earlier debates to recent research on cultural factors affecting the professional identity of ECEC workers in Germany with and without migration background from MENA (Middle East & North African) countries. It is reflected that children's assumptions about men's roles in the setting should be clarified, in order to keep the role of the male ece educator within the professionalism frame, focusing on this profession as a 'real job'.

Presenters:

Halah Elkarif, Hildesheim University, Germany

Tim Rohrmann, HAWK Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany



Cairo University



**“Don't you live here?”
The necessity of clarifying children's
assumptions about male ECE educators**

**SIG Gender Balance - 11th Research conference 2023
Curiosity about Gender in the ECEC workforce**

HALAH ELKARIF

**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
FOR EDUCATION, CAIRO UNIVERSITY,
EGYPT**

TIM ROHRMANN

**HAWK HILDESHEIM UNIVERSITY OF
APPLIED SCIENCES AND ARTS,
GERMANY**

Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Results
- 3 Questions for discussion



An old story...

Decades ago... one of the first reports on men in ECEC in Germany started with a child's question:

And when do you go to work?

[Orig. „Und wann gehst du arbeiten?“]

(Seubert 1995)

An old story...

And several publications discussed the role of male pedagogues as “father substitutes”, especially for children from single mother’s families, and especially for boys.

E.g., in an Austrian study we found that

some male ECE educators' distanced themselves from the role as a ‘father substitute’, while some other men – especially young men – happily adopted such a role.

(Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012; cf. Brownhill 2014, Hurrelmann & Schultz 2012, and more)

Is this still a topic?

YES.

An old story ... and **new research**

How do male ECEC professionals from different cultural backgrounds deal with children's assumptions that

- **Men do not „work“ when they are in kindergarten?**
- **Male workers in kindergarten are „fathers“?**

And how are these assumptions connected to dominant discourses on men in ECEC?

Introduction

- Drawing on data collected from my PhD research project *Social and cultural factors affecting the involvement of the male educators in ECEC: A cross cultural study*.
- Long **interviews with male educators in ECE field in Germany** were conducted, where half of the participants were German while the other half were practitioners with migrant background (MENA countries).



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Introduction

The conducted thematic analysis uncovered multiple **perceived roles adopted by the male ECE practitioners**. These perceived roles were developed, confirmed, and reinforced through three different lines of expectations:

- 1 *The internal self-efficacy perceptions, self-expectations, and assumed values of presence in ECE field.*



- 2 *The external societal expectations of the male educators in ECE field (presented in families' feedback, mothers, fathers, etc)*



- 3 *The children's comments, feedback, questions, assumptions, perspectives.*



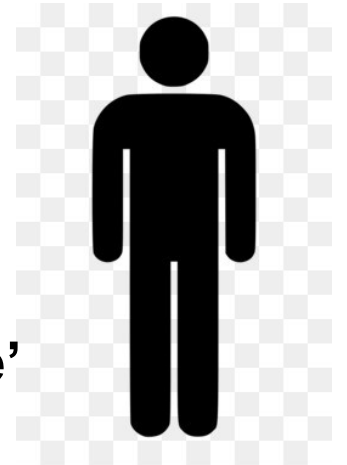
The lenses



The perceived roles

The majority of the participants perceived their roles in ECE field from a **gendered perspective**, where **‘being a man’** was very significant for their roles in the ECEC institution, either based on their *self-expectations* or based on *the feedback from the families of the children*, and sometimes even *from the children themselves*.

Many participants highlighted their role as a **‘father substitute’** to the children, especially children from **single mother’s families**. They reported good connections between boys and girls from single’ mother’s families and themselves as ‘men’.



The perceived roles

On the other hand, some (few) participants criticized such gendered expectations of 'the male ECE worker', while stressing the '**professionalism**' argument, and their identity as '**professional ECE workers**' regardless of their gender.



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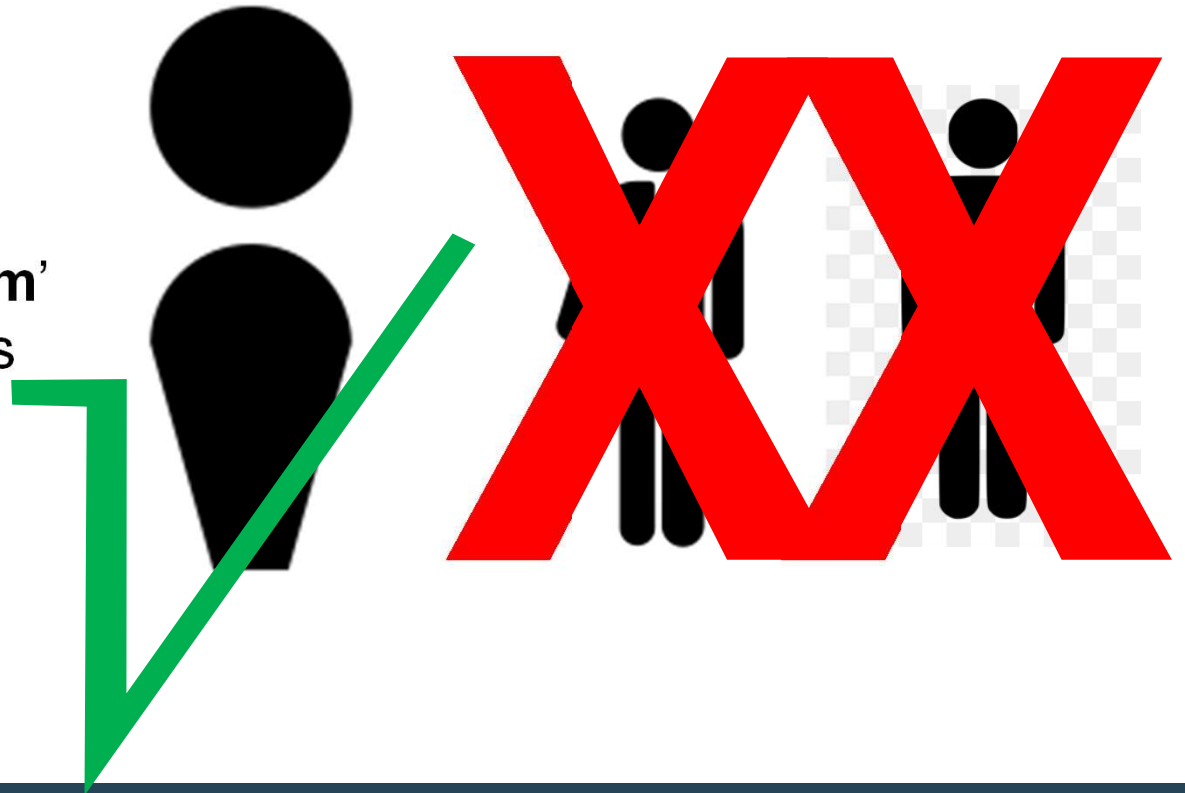
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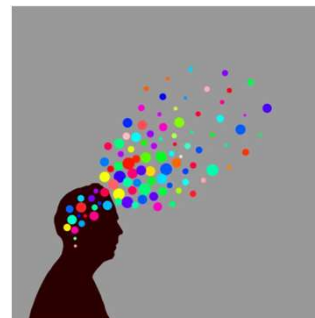


The perceived roles

consistency



inconsistency



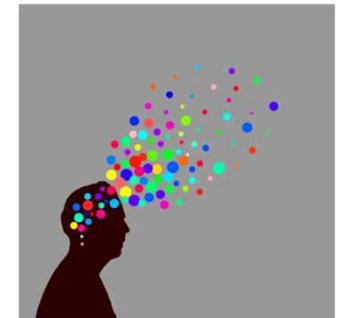
As a father/ father substitute & the 'absent father' argument

I am already a father. I have two daughters, I raised them. So, I can deal with other people's children like if they are mine. I really feel the children here as if they are my own children and I treat them on this basis.

(Ameen - a non-German participant – My translation)

Sometimes I joke with the children and tell them "I am your kindergarten dad!". That's true somehow. I am their kindergarten dad, and my female colleagues are the kindergarten's moms.

(Jonas – a German participant – My translation)



As a father/ father substitute & the 'absent father' argument

The majority of the participants reported the positive feedback they are getting from the families of the children, in relation to their roles as 'substitute for the father' during the daytime in the kindergarten, which they considered 'very important' for the children who are growing with single mothers, or even with the families where the fathers are 'very busy in work and come home late and do not see their children much'.



Many children here call me dad
(Omar - a non-German participant – My translation)



The perceived roles

consistency



inconsistency

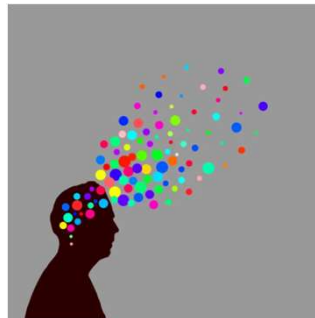


The perceived roles

consistency



? inconsistency

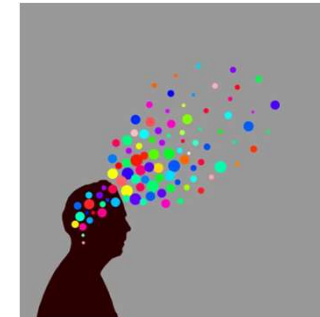


Self-expectations VS societal expectations

For most families, I think the expectations are similar. The man the father. The father who is not there all day, and I am practically a good “addition” [orig. “Ergänzung”] here, not substitute. I am no replacement.

I am no substitute. I do not want that, and I am not that either. But I am a good addition in what I am doing here.

(Erik - a German participant – My translation)



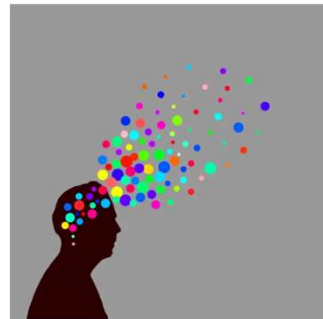
The inconsistency

Recently, I had "Feierabend"/I took the rest of the day off, so I finished work one hour earlier that day. And I am usually one of the last people who leave the kindergarten. So, every day when the children are being picked up, I am there, so, they usually go home before I do. So, that day, I got my backpack on, my jacket, my hat, said goodbye, I am going now. And some children looked at me with their eyes in disbelief and said: "where to? Don't you live here?". I said: "No, I do not live here!". Other children came and said "goodbye, you're going to work now, aren't you?". "No, I am not going to work now". But that's clear to me from the point of view of the child. The adults here, who say goodbye in the morning, they go to work. Of course, mums and dads, they all go to work, because the children are here. So, of course I clarified that, when mums and dads go to work, the children have to be somewhere and that's my work, my profession, that's why I am here.

(Erik - a German participant – My translation)



The inconsistency



Clarification –
real job, real profession



Professional relationship –
respectful addressing
[e.g. “Siezen” & “Duzen”,
formal and non-formal addressing
in German language]



Children's expectations

One time I dressed as a waiter for the Fasching (German traditional Carneval). I wear black trousers, a white shirt and a tie. And a child said, "I know what you are dressed up as". I said, "what do you mean?". "You are a daddy". I understood what he meant, well the father goes to work with a white shirt and a tie. This is the father. This is the work.

(Karl - a German participant – My translation)



Societal expectations

Back in the day, there was this picture that no longer exists today. It was about that "a man in a kindergarten is a good addition for mothers who raise their children alone. That the children will experience: There is also a man". But I don't think that's the right idea. Because I'm not the substitute for [the father in] families. Well, honestly, that became clear to me only later. I lived it well and played this role for many years, when I agreed if somebody said to me: "Yes, that is important". And if there are families where the men aren't there, then the children learn that also men can take part in raising children. But this is actually nonsense ([orig. "ist ja eigentlich Quatsch"]. Children do not need me to learn that there are men out there. So, I had to detach myself from this 'father's role'. That's not possible. That's not allowed.

(Karl - a German participant – My translation)



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Statements from other participants suggest the opposite!



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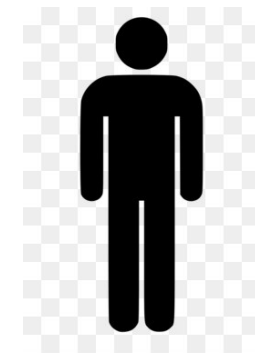
1 Introduction ✓

2 Results ✓

3 Questions for discussion 

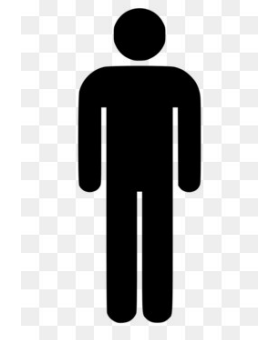
Similar results?

Do you have similar experiences, data, from your research?



Questions for discussion

- Do you have similar experiences, data, from your research?
- Do we know enough?
- Do we have to rethink dominant discourses on more men in ECEC?
- What can be done for the men...
... and what is the role of research?



Do we know enough?

Do we know enough about children's perceptions about their male and female educators, in relation to their roles, jobs?



Discourses

1. Do discourses of 'the absent fathers' and 'the single mother's' (while advocating more men in ECE field) move the ECE profession back to be a semi-profession? Should dominant discourses of involving men in the ECE Field be revised?
2. Is the construction of the professional identity of the male ECE educator a challenge within the dominant discourses of involving more men in ECE field?



What can be done?

What can be done to help male ECE educators reflect about their roles and rethink them, revise them, develop them – in reasonable time (compared to the case of Erik – 40 years)?

And finally: what is the role of research...
...for connecting research and practice, in regard to professionalism discourses and the perceived roles of male ECE educators?



Thank You!



Halah Elkarif
halahgaber@gmail.com

- Prof. Tim Rohrmann
- tim.rohrmann@hawk.de

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