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“I am only doing my job” - Caring Masculinities by
Swedish Men as Preschool Teachers

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Abstract

Caring masculinities as a theoretical framework has emphasized the rejection of dominance in traditional masculinities, and rather embraced values of care, such as interdependence, relationality, and emotions (Elliott, 2016). These values of care are central in care work, which has historically been work mainly performed by women. The number of men in caring professions such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) remain low, therefore, it makes it an interesting research topic to explore when it comes to incorporating caring values in masculine identity constructions. Previous research has focused on men and care within the family, therefore, by expanding the research to men in a caring profession contributes to developing the theory further. This study, through interviewing 12 men who work in preschools in Sweden, has found that the men can inhabit caring masculinities. However, to be considered and viewed as being part of caring masculinities, the men need to be accepted in their role by others. Therefore, caring masculinities are conditional and dependent on other persons to accept men in this gender position. Furthermore, there is a discussion on the cost and privileges men who enter a caring profession encounter and deal with at their workplace which can also influence how their identity is constructed.

Keywords: *Caring masculinities, ECEC, men preschool teachers, gender, masculinities.*

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1 Intro

The share of men in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) profession continue to be persistently low all over the world, with a range between one and three percent in most countries (Brody, 2015; Drudy, 2008; Warin, 2019). Sweden, despite being a country with a high level of gender equality (EIGE, 2021) has a relatively low percentage of men in ECEC, compared to countries such as Denmark, Norway, and Turkey who all retain over five percent of men in preschools (Peeters et al., 2015). The last couple of years Sweden has had about four percent of the ECEC workforce being men (Skolverket, 2020, 2021), positioning them above the general average in the world, however, still below the more prominent countries. Traditionally, working within ECEC have been considered “women’s work” (Cameron, 2001; Cameron et al., 1999; Nelson, 2002; Peeters, 2013) but as the general mindset about gender roles has changed in the past 50 years, and more egalitarian principles have replaced conventional ones, it has opened the door for men to get involved more in care work. However, the men in this type of profession are often held to standards associated with women and feminine behaviors (Brody, 2015), making them an interesting group to study when it comes to caring masculinities. Caring masculinities are the rejection of domination and the associated masculine traits with that, in favor of values of care, including interdependence, relationality, and being more positive regarding emotions.

The objective of this study is to explore how men in Swedish preschools construct their masculinity and how their personal experiences reflect their gender construction and identity formation, using the theoretical concept of caring masculinities as a framework (Elliott, 2016). Previous research has discussed men in caring professions but have not applied the theoretical framework of caring masculinities in Sweden, therefore, this study aims to fill that gap. Research on masculinities is constantly moving forward and by applying contemporary frameworks it can help us all understand ways to move gender equality forward. Therefore, my research questions are as follows:

- *How are the men experiencing working in early childhood education and care?*
- *How are the men constructing their identities in relation to care work and caring masculinities?*
- *What are the implications of the Swedish preschool teachers’ experiences for the theoretical framework of caring masculinities?*

The first question will allow me to garner a greater understanding of who these men are and what their work entails to be able to answer the second and the third more theoretical discussion questions. Sweden was chosen for this study because of its developments towards gender equality, however, this study shows that despite such efforts there are still gender differences in experiences in the workplaces. More caring values and attributes in the population could contribute to a more inclusive and open society, furthermore, it would be a considerable step towards gender equality efforts.

The paper includes the following chapters, a literature review which draws upon previous research on gender and masculinities, caring masculinities, and studies about men in the ECEC. The theoretical framework chapter will discuss caring masculinities and how it is conceptualized. The chapter on methodology will include the research design, as well as the sample, analytical approach, and a reflexivity discussion. There will then be a section for the analysis where the results are presented, followed by a discussion where theory and findings are connected. Lastly, the conclusionary part will summarize the findings and answer the research questions, there is also a discussion of limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

2 Previous Research

Previous research on masculinities and preschool teachers has focused on care and the role of men. However, in the Swedish context the theoretical framework of “caring masculinities” has not been utilized widely. Care and education have been discussed in relation to each other and to gender, as well as the importance of men in a female dominated workplace. I will here outline previous research on *masculinities and gender*, *caring masculinities*, and on *men as preschool teachers* connected to masculinity and identity building.

2.1 Gender and Masculinities Studies

Issues regarding gender have previously been considered as only relating to women because women are more likely to gain from society becoming more equal. This is however a misrepresentation of what measures are needed for a more equal society, and in recent decades the role of men have been highlighted as an important and necessary step forward (Scambor et al., 2014). Davies (1991; 2003) explains how a binary gender paradigm interacts with the

construction of gender, where masculinity and femininity are frequently constructed as opposites. Where, for example, men and masculinity are connected with activity, independence, as well as rationality and reason, whereas women and femininity are associated with passivity, emotion, and dependency (Davies, 1991, 2003; Hedlin et al., 2019).

Traditional research on masculinities has focused on the hierarchical order and how power forms the basis of legitimizing and reproducing male privilege (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; MacInnes, 1998). Furthermore, the concept of “multiple masculinities” (Carrigan et al., 1985) has been adopted as the leading term within the field of studying and analyzing men. The leading and groundbreaking theory developed by Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity, has shaped the research area and given great insight to how power and gender are connected.

Hegemonic masculinity is a concept defined and developed by Connell (1995) which encompasses the hierarchical gender practices that represent the prevailing patriarchal values which maintain the superior and dominant position of men over women. The concept does not explain a specific set of characteristics, but they are defined and differ depending on social conditions and are not fixed spatially or historically. Hegemonic masculinity can be considered an ideal type since many men do not embody all of its aspects, but are all subjects under this ideal and can either gain from its existence or be at a disadvantage (Connell, 2012). More men in female professions, such as preschools, is an initial advancement for men within caring professions and with that comes new values and ideal types necessary for change to occur, both for their own identities and for how they are viewed by others. McDonald (2013) finds that men working in female-dominated professions construct masculinity in essentially four ways: by distancing themselves from their female colleagues; by highlighting traditional masculine attributes and values; by redefining the practice to appear more masculine; or on the contrary, by redefining what it means to be a man and masculine so that it does not conflict with the profession. The last of Macdonald’s finds is of particular interest in this study, because of the focus on professions it can be connected to how the men who work in preschools in this study reflect on masculinities and their role at work.

Masculinities are constructed in different ways, depending on how they are produced or influenced by social and contextual aspects they are positioned within a hierarchical gender order (Carrigan et al., 1985; Scambor et al., 2014). The intersections of age, class, migration

background, sexuality, occupation, and ethnicity are some of these aspects which creates a foundation for the reproduction of gendered power between men, as well as between men and women (Crenshaw, 1990). This is an interesting aspect when analyzing men at work, because women have had to make substantial advances into some historically male-dominated sectors during the previous decade, while men have mostly remained in traditionally male-dominated occupations (Scambor et al., 2014). Preschools in Sweden have a male workforce of merely four percent, which supports the previous statement, that men have not turned toward a female dominated workplace such as caring for young children (Skolverket, 2020). Scambor et al (2014) discuss some central and important findings of the European research project *The role of men in Gender Equality*, specifically the perspective of men as a heterogenous social group and how a new type of masculinity can be seen as emerging increasingly, *Caring Masculinity*.

2.2 Caring masculinities studies

Elliott (2016) attempts to collect previous research on caring masculinities to conceptualize it theoretically, she defines the concept as the caring masculine identity rejecting specifically the domination part of traditional masculinity, and those traits associated with that. Furthermore, embracing established values of care such as interdependence, relationality, and positive emotion.

The concept of caring masculinities was initially developed by Hanlon (2012), and one of the most extensive portrayals of the concept is in his work on men's care in the home in Ireland. He identifies numerous reasons for the lack of caring in traditional constructions of masculinities. Firstly, he argues, because care is connected to femininity, the position of the one doing the care work is subordinate. Secondly, performing the task of caring means to adopt a feminized identity. Lastly, there is a notion that men are bad at caring, and to care is to surrender part of that power traditionally connected to masculinity which can be challenging to accept for some men (Hearn, 2001 in Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012). Therefore, by rejecting the part of domination and instead embracing care imply the relinquishing of the privileges and accompanying power of hegemonic masculinity. This comes with risks to the sense of self, as well as risks of social ostracism by not conforming to traditional and expected masculine roles (Hanlon, 2012). How men in ECEC are perceived by others and its consequences is a central focus in this study, and how it influences the participants in their identity construction.

Caring masculinities framework has been utilized in studies looking at male single-parent households in Sweden and Germany (Graf and Wojnicka, 2021). The study examined how both caring and protective masculinities were intricately part of practices of male care in the home. Even though the majority of fathers in the sample had shared residency models, the study found that fatherhood was experienced in a variety of ways. The connection to the mother, legal regulations, and socio-cultural norms have all been highlighted as important factors of post-separation fathering (Graf and Wojnicka, 2021). Other research on paternal care has been conducted by Suwada (2017), who examined fathers from Sweden and Poland and their practices. They observed that, in addition to cultural differences, the biological difference between fatherhood and motherhood has a significant impact on fatherhood practice in both nations. Many people exploited it as an excuse to avoid caring activities. Another study considered fathering activities in rural families, where they found that the men combine the 'tough' with the 'tender' when caring for the family (Brandth, 2019). Johansson and Klinth (2008) studied men's relation to fatherhood and caring, showing that age, social background, and religion can affect how they view men who do care. These studies show the focus has previously been on fathers and men in the home and how they relate to care, identities, and masculinities. I will bring in a different perspective where men's experiences at work could also influence their construction of self.

Björk (2015) has also conducted masculinity studies in Sweden focusing on masculinities and caring, however, with a focus on care work for aging parents. The results showed that when men oversaw the caring responsibilities the meaning of care and masculinities were renegotiated. It was done in two ways, either by redefining 'new' hegemonic masculinities, or by removing the gendered aspect in the care arrangements. Hellman (2018) focused on masculinities studies but in relation to educational care rather than within the home and the family in Sweden. She argued that even though the advancements of care in the home, it does not reflect the professional work of men in ECEC. Most of the recent previous research on men in educational care utilize Brody's (2015) study of different men globally and their experiences, however it does not utilize the theoretical framework of caring masculinities. Therefore, studying men who have a professional role in ECEC will add to previous research with less focus on familial ties to the care receiver, while showing how it still can redefine how masculinities are understood in relation to caring masculinities.

2.3 Men as preschool teachers

A study on men as preschool teachers and their attitude to play, (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005), showed that men follow traditional notions of more active and physical play than women. Furthermore, men in preschool environments are expected to act as ‘fun guys’, which is defined as someone who enjoys more physical activities, tells jokes, and play more sports games (Hedlin et al., 2019). Both physical activity and sports have been heavily connected to masculinities in different cultures (Connell, 1995), this can also be seen in a Swedish context (Fundberg, 2003; Pihl Skoog, 2017). Adhering to traditional gendered notions could influence how men perceive themselves and constrain their identity building to not go outside preconceived ideas of gender.

Research on preschool teachers as role models have shown that the men themselves believe their position in the profession is important for the children (Buschmeyer, 2013). The study showed the men approached their role in two different ways, one of upholding and reinforcing traditional hegemonic masculinities by performing complicit masculinities; the other of performing so-called *alternative masculinities*. Which means those who reject and consciously avoid being categorized as hegemonic masculinities, similar to what the newer concept of caring masculinities would now cover. Nordberg (2005) found that men who work in preschools are considered important role models for gender equality, however, the research also suggested that these preconceived ideas of what type of role model the men should be constrains them to the traditional gender order. Therefore, continuing to research how these assumed ideals affect men in their identity building is highly relevant, especially, as discussed before, more egalitarian efforts have been made in recent years.

Brody (2015) found that the men in his study initially were apprehensive of their actions and created their own rules for distancing themselves from the children in preschool to maintain professionalism. However, after more time in the line of work they were more comfortable in their masculinity, redefining it to their role and their responsibility to be themselves for the children (Brody, 2015). Men's actions of distancing themselves from children or being more cautious around them originate from their fear of being labeled as predators (Hedlin et al., 2019). Much of the international previous literature on men's presence in the ECEC environment has considered the issue of their intent as being nefarious (Cameron, 2001; Evans & Jones, 2008; Jones, 2001). Leading to implementations of so-called “no-touch” policies,

which give directions of physical contact between male educators and children (Jones, 2001; Sargent, 2000). Scrutiny and suspicion have been central themes when researching men in preschools, and how they situate themselves away from specific acts that can be misinterpreted (Sargent, 2000). In care work the interdependence is an important aspect between the care worker and caretaker, if there are then implementations of strategies or no touch policies for men it can affect how men relate to their role at work and their identity. Therefore, this perspective is still relevant to understand how men in ECEC experience work and how it relates to constructing their sense of self.

In Sweden it has historically been different, initially men were encouraged to enter ECEC and were gladly welcomed by both colleagues and parents with minimal scrutiny and suspicion (Granbom & Wernersson, 2012; Wernersson et al., 1979). This has however shifted in recent years, and mistrust has been placed on men within the profession in Sweden as well (Eidevald, 2014; Hedlin et al., 2019; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Nevertheless, Brody's (2015) research indicates differently, that the men do consider that the physical aspect is an important part in care work for young children, while remaining professional. In Sweden ECEC educators emphasize the importance of care and the significance of this in balance with education and learning for the children (Jönsson et al., 2012). These previous studies have been directed toward education, to understand and increase the need for male preschool teachers. The perspective of caring masculinities in Sweden has not been widely adopted to male preschool teachers and their gender identity building, which is why I will fill part of that gap. This study seeks to understand how men in Swedish preschools construct their masculinity and how their own experiences reflect their gender construction and identity building with the theoretical framework of caring masculinities.

3 Theoretical framework

Caring masculinities are influenced and derived from critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM) and feminist care theories. At the center of caring masculinities, as Elliott (2016) suggests, is the rejection of dominance while incorporating caring values, such as positive emotions, interdependence, and relationality. The framework of caring masculinities has formed the basis of my theoretical chapter and its central aspects of rejecting traditional forms while embracing new characteristics of masculinities was utilized as theoretical tools in the analysis.

According to Whitehead & Barrett, (2001), CSMM emerged as an area of interest to study in sociology in the 1950s, mainly from the United States. They proposed three theoretical waves of CSMM. The first wave entailed the issues and problems of male role performance and what damage it could have on men to comply with the dominant expectations of masculinity (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Whereas the second wave, emerging in the 1980s, rather centered on male power utilized by dominant performances. At this time Connell (1987) developed the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and the established gender order. In the third wave, influences from feminist post-structuralist approaches can be identified, where the focus of studying men and masculinities remained on how “ identity is validated through dominant discursive practices of self, and how identity work connects with (gender) power and resistance” (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001:15). Connell (2003) argues that for gender equality to be successful it requires men to be involved, because those who are in control of important groups in society, such as politics, culture, and economy, are spearheaded by men. Having men who work in care-related fields might be considered as contributing to gender equality by sharing the responsibility of raising and caring for the next generation. However, to do this, the men must reject hegemonic masculinity and those characteristics associated with domination. This is where caring masculinity forms its basis, as a combination and response to both hegemonic masculinities and feminist care theory (Elliott, 2016).

3.1 Hegemonic masculinities

As previously stated, Connell (1987) developed concepts of gender masculinities that ordered them hierarchically with hegemonic masculinities at the peak; all other masculinities are subordinate to that and must conform to the status quo. It locates these other masculinities, such as complicit masculinities, subordinate masculinities, and marginalized masculinities in this gender order (Wojnicka, 2021). The view of gender is therefore relational, (Connell 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), where the hierarchy is determined by societal changes and challenges and differs accordingly. Previous research has mainly focused on masculinities in relation to hegemony, and how that specific type of masculinity imposes itself in society, whereas other types of masculinities have mostly gone under the radar (Wojnicka, 2021). Complicit masculinities sustain the continuation and domination of hegemonic masculinity, by upholding their power position while not putting themselves in the line of being dominated. The complicit masculinities aid hegemonic masculinity in subordinating others, while

upholding the rules of who is considered to be within the hegemonic group (Wojnicka, 2021). Connell traditionally mainly focuses on the power dynamics between masculinities and hegemonic masculinity, which has been questioned by researchers such as Seidler (2006). He proposes that this understanding of masculinities restricts our ability to think about young men's subjective masculinities, experiences, practices, and prospects for development. Both perspectives are significant and important, according to Hanlon (2012), who claims that we cannot appreciate masculinities without recognizing relations of power and dominance, but we cannot understand power and domination without also appreciating men's emotional lives. He further argues that we cannot deconstruct male authority and power without also redesigning men's emotional lives. Hanlon demonstrates the complexity of masculinities, how it is difficult to study them completely separately when they are already intertwined. Because hegemonic masculinity is not a predetermined set of constant characteristics and behaviors that correlate globally, how masculinities are presented is instead shaped by situational specificities dependent on tradition, location, culture, and time in history (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012). The preschool teachers in this study therefore have to incorporate the values and norms that are set not only by an institution and curriculum, but also by the political and societal norms that are set in the context of Sweden. Which could influence how they associate and position themselves in relation to traditional hegemonic values, or if they reject them completely.

Decades of feminist and masculinities studies have shown that hegemonic masculinity has negative consequences for both women and men. These consequences for men include violence, both against others and against themselves, high-risk behavior, a lack of self-care, declining health, and strained relationships (Hanlon, 2012). Another consequence for men is the sense of shame they can experience when not living up to the ideal of rejecting the need for emotion and intimacy which is set by hegemonic masculinity. Although dominant and aggressive versions of hegemonic masculinity are currently culturally influential, they are failing to meet the demands and needs of men and women to live nurturing, emotive, and interrelated lives (Hanlon, 2012). Since both men and women are subordinated and limited under hegemonic masculinity, they would both benefit from diminishing its power and encourage developments of more gender equal practices and forms of masculinities (Connell, 2003; Elliott, 2016; Scambor et al., 2013). Men can benefit from a reduction in the adverse consequences of hegemonic masculinity, such as improved physical and psychological health, longer life expectancy, improved social life, better familial ties, and lower violence between

men (Elliott, 2016). By studying how men in preschools construct their identity there is a possibility to see how being specifically in a caring profession can be connected to the view the participants have on traditional hegemonic forms of masculinities. As well to see if there is a cost when relinquishing some of the power afforded to men or if they are still privileged within the gender order. The consequent paragraph will provide some insights into care, as caring masculinities do not only consist of the rejection of dominating masculinities but also the combination of practices and values of care in male identity building (Elliott, 2016).

3.2 Feminist care theory

Since the 1970s, feminist involvement with the topic of care has resulted in a plethora of research, studies, and ideas on care, policy efforts and programs on care, and caregiver advocacy groups (Fine & Glendinning, 2005; Ungerson, 2006). Previous studies considered issues of unpaid care labor and housework women performed in the home, and the essentialist view of women's natural affinity for caring and care work, to name a few (Fine & Glendinning, 2005; Ungerson, 2006). Nowadays those interests remain in the field while allowing space for other areas of care such as self-care, child care, elderly care, and care work practiced by men (Elliott, 2016). One of the largest distinctions done by feminist care researchers is the one between *caring for* and *caring about* (Lynch et al., 2009; Tronto, 1993; Ungerson, 2006). So Ungerson (2006:277) defines *caring for* as "the practical tasks of care" and *caring about* as "the affective relations of care". I expect to see distinctions of this when researching men in care work, as well as how they are intertwined. Even though caring for the children is a job assignment, the social connection between an adult and a child in need may still elicit sentiments of compassion, such as a desire for the children to succeed or get along well in school. Elliott (2016) suggests that it is not necessary for men to initially *care about* as they tend to develop the affective and emotional feelings and senses of care anyway in time. It can therefore be interesting to see whether this is something reflected upon by the men themselves.

Care, from a feminist viewpoint, can be regarded as relational, emotional, intimate, and affective as well as practical. For example, Maher et al. (2013) define relational responsibility as an affective negotiation of care practices and responsibilities in relation to the needs, desires, preferences, and individualities of the care receiver, with different levels of acceptance or opposition to dominant discourses of care. Placing the level of commitment to care and how much the caregiver should be affective in their relationship on both ends. This could be difficult

to distinguish when working with children, and where the caregiver through experience will have learned which child needs what. Another frequent theme in feminist care work is the recognition of care as a necessary and unavoidable element of human life, as well as something fundamental to human survival (Hanlon, 2012; Kittay, 2020; Lynch et al., 2009; Tronto, 1993). At some point in life everyone requires care and for that care work to be personal and positive to the receiver it has to be done by someone (Kittay, 2020). Because care work depends on it being positive and personal for the receiver, the men in preschools have an important role in the children's lives. This is important to consider when discussing the men's decisions at work and their experiences in their workplace.

3.3 Caring masculinities

Elliott (2016) has theorized the concept of caring masculinity by drawing on critical studies on men and masculinity and feminist care theory. She presents the importance of feminist analysis in understanding masculinities in a different light, focusing on identities of care rather than those based on domination. Care has traditionally been identified with women and has been coded female, albeit this is not everyone's view, Elliott (2016) in her framework proposes that it should be incorporated into masculine identities. A decision to reconfigure masculine identities to include previously considered feminine traits can be considered a tactic to not distance men who might reject a feminine characterization of their actions and beliefs. With the actions of doing more care work, Hanlon (2012) suggests, it will be integrated in men's gender identities, connected to 'doing gender'.

The concept of caring masculinities places importance on the rejection of domination, which is important to traditional hegemonic masculinity. As well as the existence of positive emotions in caring masculinities that do not have a place in the commanding hegemonic masculinity. hooks (2004) talk about the negative effect patriarchal unspoken rules and rituals of emotional stoicism have on men, and how damaging it could be for them to continue to push away and ignore their feelings under the guise of 'being manly'. Here caring masculinities is the opposite, where men have a chance of defining themselves and their identities beyond domination and experiencing their lives in a more positive way by embracing their feelings and emotions. Men who work in preschools by being in a caring profession have already started to reject traditional ideas about masculinities. Therefore, they present a special case for exploration regarding furthering research and developing the theory.

Performing care is rewarding for men, and by taking care of someone else it allows men to experience emotional intimacy which leads to personal development (Hanlon, 2012). However, men have to relinquish power awarded to them by traditional masculinities when performing care, which has been found difficult for some men to accept (Hearn, 2001). They are afraid of being ostracized for going against traditional hegemonic norms by others. Men in preschools go against the norm that care work is for “women” and therefore could be negatively viewed by others. The expectations of others, such as children’s parents, on men in preschools has a central role in how caring masculinities are constructed and available for the participants in this study.

It is believed that by doing certain types of jobs can change the perception of gender (Puchert et al., 2005) and specifically if the circumstances are right, *care* work can change gender (Scambor et al., 2005). Elliott (2016) concurs with these findings and extends it from only psychological change to a practical one as well. Because of what can be seen in Hanlon’s (2012) study, that caring emotions can be developed by *caring for* and in turn create and nurture caring masculine identities. By utilizing caring masculinities as my theoretical tool in this study I will examine how men’s identities are constructed through their experiences of *caring for* young children, which is doing care work with guided directions from an educational institution.

4 Methodology

In order to get deeper knowledge about how men in a caring profession, such as preschool teacher, experience their workplace and how they construct their identity I have chosen to design this study with a qualitative and abductive approach to collect empirical and reflective experiences from the participants. The research takes an epistemological constructivist perspective, which means that experiences and interpretations are social products that are impacted by context and are continually reproduced in society through interactions (Creswell, 2014). I collected empirical material through semi-structured interviews in order to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the participants' experiences, as well as to allow them to respond to follow-up questions and explain their ideas and feelings about the questions' substance (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Esterberg, 2002; S. Hesse-Biber, 2012; S. N. Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; May, 2002), in line with feminist qualitative interviewing.

4.1 Research Design

Twelve semi-structured interviews with men who work in Swedish preschools (with children of ages between 1-6) were conducted as part of this qualitative study. Over the course of February, March, and April in 2022, participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method, with the criteria of the participants being men, having worked at least three years in ECEC. I turned to a variety of channels, including personal connections, Facebook groups for preschool personnel, and participant acquaintances. None of the participants were people I knew personally; this was done on purpose so that I could approach the topics with an open mind and have no preconceived notions about who they were or their experiences. The interviews were done between March and April 2022, and were conducted through zoom (10), phone call (1), or in person (1), depending on the participant's desire. The participants ranged from all over Sweden, by using software such as zoom for video calls a wider geographical range was made available. The interviews were performed in Swedish, which is both mine and the participants' native language, and took between 35 to 55 minutes. The interviews were audio-only recorded and kept on a password-protected computer, and afterwards they were transcribed true to the recording to be able to code and work with the material. An overview of the interview questions in Swedish can be found in appendix C.

All participants received an information sheet (appendix A) regarding the study and their rights as participants prior to the start of the investigation. It was followed by a consent form, which they were asked to sign or orally agree to on the recording, as recommended by the Swedish Research Council's recommendations (The Swedish Research Council, 2017).

4.2 Description of Participants and Sample

The age of the participants ranged between 21 and 60 years, all the participants had worked at least three years in the field. Nine of them had decided to continue educating themselves for three and a half years at the university level and becoming preschool teachers (förskollelärare). Whereas one was a children caretaker (barnskötare), this title comes from a vocational education often as part of the latest high school years in Sweden. Furthermore, two of the men were substitute caretakers (vikarierande/outbildad barnskötare), these are men that have no official education for working with children but have worked on a part-time basis at the

preschools. I opted to include all three working groups in my sample because the number of men in preschools are quite low, making it difficult to find participants willing to take part. The sample was collected through a purposive criterion sample (Robinson, 2014), making sure that all the participants identified as men, and had at least two years of experience working in a preschool. I did not consider their level of education as of importance for the sample, because of the low number of men working in the career, as well as garnering a greater field of experiences felt more imperative.

All men were born in Sweden; eleven were heterosexual and one was bisexual; around 40 percent of the participants had children. Their salaries ranged between 28 000 and 40 000 SEK, except for one who was a student living on student grants and loans. All men had worked with a range of children in different ages between one and six, most of them having been at more than one place of work as well. Some men had different careers before joining the pre-school world, while others went straight from high school/college into the vocation. A more detailed view of the participant information can be found in appendix B with their anonymized names. This sample represents a wide range of Swedish male preschool teachers because of the differing work titles and age; however, the sample could have been more diverse in other areas. Such as sexual identity, ethnicity, and culture. For the sample to be representative of all of Sweden a wider range would have been more optimal, however, due to the difficulties with reaching participants and relying on them wanting to participate these are the ones who came forward and were willing to share their experiences and answer questions about both themselves and their work roles.

4.3 Analytical Approach

Keeping the research questions in mind and the interviews being informed by theory, the interview process and transcribing were regarded as the first phases of the analysis (Kvale, 2007; Rapley, 2007). I became actively part of the analytical process during this initial stage, by recognizing central themes that would become relevant in the analysis and discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Given, 2008). The material was read and listened to several times to not oversee any experiences and to understand the full picture. By immersing myself in the data initial themes emerged which was condensed to new codes to make them more manageable.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it is a good way of capturing the important aspects within a topic (Given, 2008). It allows for patterns to emerge or be found in the data where participants have experienced similar events and allows for descriptions of those events. It is seen as a critical framework that permits the examination of patterns within social meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Given, 2008). I proceeded abductively in the analytical process, because of my theoretical motivation as well as enabling new insights into caring masculinities to be observed.

The analysis comes from the thematic coding that was conducted in NVivo, with codes first derived from the theory and framework of caring masculinities, while allowing for new themes to emerge and be found since it is a new constellation of theory and topic. Themes such as, rejection of dominance, care-values, and (self-preservation) fear are some that come up. I generated codes before and after reading through the transcripts for the first time. The process followed with more coding and reading through the material several times to see if the themes were relevant and have some insights to the discussions of the research questions dealing with gender equality and caring masculinity. The first notations came during the interviews, and I had a notepad next to me to jot down points I found of interest, starting my analysis right away as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). I returned to these and incorporated them in my codes and reworked them in relation to the themes that came forward while working.

4.4 Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

When conducting feminist research, if not all qualitative research, it is important to remain reflexive and to question my own positionality (DeVault & Gross, 2012; S. Hesse-Biber, 2012). Especially with me being a woman in my mid-twenties interviewing men of the ages 25-52, I might be considered out of my place or there can be power dynamics to consider. These can occur as a result of age, sex, or culture, and because prior study has been done on these dynamics, I attempt to be conscious of them during the interviews. Interviews are social settings that are formed and produced by social structures as well as both mine and the participants' positionality within this social context (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Mason, 2017; Wojnicka, 2020). Therefore, I was mindful of how I presented myself during the interviews. Those conducted over the video-format zoom were a lot easier when considering presentations wise, I wore little to no makeup, no jewelry, clothes that could be considered professional but neutral, as well as a pair of glasses for all interviews. Discussion in feminist qualitative

interviewing have considered the difficulties with women interviewing men and how the participants can try and undermine the women interviewers or threaten them, especially when doing studies on masculinity (Hesse-Biber, 2012). However, this was not something I experienced during the interviews, I felt the participants to be cooperative, open, and friendly. I made a conscious decision not to share my own beliefs before the interview, so as not to skew the results by influencing them, however, I was clear in the initial stages that the study focused on caring masculinities and the questions would consider equality in workplace environments (DeVault & Gross, 2012). I also made a conscious decision to share my previous experiences as a substitute teacher but for older children, to showcase my understanding for an educational type of workplace.

While contacting possible participants I received a request on whether the interview questions and topic would discuss men in preschools in a positive manner, if not he was not interested in participating. This threw me off a little in terms of how much I can share with my participants in order to not skew the results while maintaining my professionalism and remain open and critical. The matter was resolved easily by explaining to the participant prior to the interview that I had no malicious intentions with my research and questions, mainly that I wanted to hear his experiences of how working in a female dominated workplace is and the issues or rewards that come with it. He seemed pleased with my answer, and we proceeded with the interview. I will not lie and say this did not stay with me for this interview, the unease of overstepping or not being respectful. I asked the same questions and followed up as usual, but I cannot help and think that I was still somewhat influenced before the interview to maybe not dig as deep as I had in some of the other interviews.

The study adheres to the Swedish Research Council's ethical criteria, which state that participants' involvement is voluntary, that they are free to withdraw at any time, and that they will stay anonymous during the procedure and thereafter (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). The participants were also advised in the presentation of the study, that they would be given anonymous fictitious identities and that no distinguishing qualities of them or their colleagues would be included. The anonymity is of importance when discussing personal lives and experiences which can bring up sensitive topics, therefore I made a point of asking the participants if they wanted to add or felt that they wanted to go back to any questions that we had covered. Most of the time the participants felt they had nothing to add.

5 Analysis

Utilizing a thematic analysis approach several themes emerged: *why these men entered the vocation, what activities they preferred with the children, the expectations and treatment of others*, and finally *how they defined being a man and caring masculinities*. Care was a matter that came up in all themes, as a sort of underlying thread connecting the different parts.

5.1 Entering and Staying in the Profession

Many of the men told me in the interviews that they happened upon the job by mere chance, they had either just finished high school and needed a job or were unemployed and in need of work. The trend indicated the relative ease the men had with changing vocation or finding their place in care work. Another shared sentiment was the desire for more genuine connections that could occur in a caring profession compared to where the men had been before.

Vilhelm, who worked in the vocation for three years as a substitute, said that he was at a “beer tasting at the local pub, and there was someone there from the preschool who said they needed substitutes, because I had said at first, I was in need of a job”. Karl, educated himself to become a preschool teacher after substituting for some time, mentioned something similar, saying it was a coincidence he ended up in the vocation, having recently finished the training for being an electrician in college and found himself out of a job. Harry, a now educated preschool teacher, got an internship by chance when he was 14 to work at a preschool as part of his own school’s vocation initiative; “I was there for a week and found it nice, interesting, and exciting”. Because of this he decided to focus his studies on childcare in high school and to further educate himself at university. These experiences indicate that entering the caring profession for these men had little to no hurdles, as the profession is open for substitute teachers to not have any previous knowledge of ECEC.

Several of the participants had different careers before going into ECEC, they also said they made it to the profession by chance. Thomas, who worked as a truck driver before choosing to become a preschool teacher, said that he was between jobs and decided to try working with young children. “I realised quite quickly, maybe after only 2 months, that I really enjoyed and thrived in the workplace”. Elias had worked in many professions before, in theatre, and in sales, but found that “I didn’t get to those types of conversations that I wished for. I always felt that

need to get to the sales, there was always something lying under the conversations”. He wanted more meaning and social interaction without any pressure on the recipient to buy something. This can be interpreted as searching for deeper connections and more interdependence at the workplace, furthermore, by staying for seven and five years respectively, both these men shared that they had found it.

Jacob moved for a different career, but after burnout he decided change was necessary, opting for a more social job. He ended up signing up for a substitute role at the local preschool after seeing a job posting, because of the nice feedback and encouraging words from his colleagues he enrolled in the preschool teacher university degree. Initially he thought it was not for him, but decided to at least try and see if his grades were good enough to get in. He did and had since worked for seven years, focusing on building meaningful relationships with the children.

Being a high school teacher was Gabriel’s initial idea and he applied to university for that. In the end he decided it was not the right time and rather took seasonal jobs as a ski-instructor for a few years. When the time came, he said “I decided to move back home [...] and got a half-time job at a preschool”. Because of the value he felt the children added to his life, and the genuine joy expressed by the children when they learn something new, he felt he had to stay and go through with the preschool teacher education to learn better tools for education.

There is general agreement from many of the men in the study that once in the vocation the benefit of working with children gives joy and excitement, a wish to go to work every day, as well as a personal development. For example, Thomas shared that an acquaintance told him “You have completely changed”, after he changed careers, he believed this was because he had become more sociable and being more comfortable in social situations since starting in ECEC. Vilhelm shares a similar experience of maturing a lot during his four years in the career, “I developed as a human being, being more responsible and such, I wasn’t very social before either, but I learned how to talk to the parents and such”. The social aspect of the job seems to be one of the integral parts of why the different men enjoy their work and as to why they stay in the vocation.

The participants did not initially see preschool teaching as a career for them, many ended up there by chance or because they sought something completely different from their previous profession. Even though the career was not in the cards at first the men have thrived and many

of them have stayed for a long time in ECEC, indicating that they feel that they are in the right place. The men can be considered to go against gendered orders by entering this job and going against the status quo can have its consequences as can be seen further down in the analysis. The men did highlight the social connections and relations built with the children as a central reason to remain in the profession. Displaying parts of caring masculinity clearly, the interdependence in the relationship between the caretaker and the children is important for these men and their time at work. Even though many of them happened upon the job by chance these are the most central parts as to why they stayed.

5.2 Activities with Children

What could be seen in the interviews was the determination of the men saying that both pedagogy and care are important to the job, and that they all tried to not gender any of the activities. Specifically, to make sure any child that wanted to do an activity should be able to join in or do it without judgement from neither the educator nor the other children. With that being said, one of the most frequently occurring favourite activity for the men was to be outside with the children. Similar to what previous research showed, men often drift towards sporty or active exercises when interacting with the children, in line with traditional masculine values (Connell, 1995; Fundberg, 2003).

Karl, with eight years of experience in the profession, said “most often I pick something with science or digitalization, I don’t really have that creative side”. Continuing with that he can still do the more creative sides of activities and follow the curriculum, but it is not what he prefers to do. Gabriel said something similar referring to his role:

“As an educator it is in my responsibility to cover all the parts of the curriculums. But you are also allowed to show yourself and bring in parts of you in your professional role. And sure, I like stereotypical male activities such as physical sports, and that probably shines through in my work. [...] but I think there is also an element of who is the most competent at the activity”.

Karl also said, “for better or worse, you are drawn to the things you know and are comfortable with and I view it as an increase in the quality of education the children get”. Reiterating the point that “it has nothing to do with gender or what’s feminine or masculine, merely the quality”. Karl through his interview displays an understanding for his stereotypical interests while being aware of the gender differences in activities. At Peter’s place of work, where he

has worked for almost 19 years, he mostly enjoys the educational parts to do with movement, and to develop those skills with the children outside through climbing or playing football. He also said, “I could also sit down and create with the children, but it is not my preferred interest”. Peter pointed out that the children can often sense when an educator is not comfortable with the activity and that the energy can then reflect in the kids. The more excited he was for a project or activity the easier it was to have control of the group and make sure the goals were met for the children.

On the other hand, almost half of the men shared that they enjoyed and preferred the more creative side when doing activities with the children. David said “most often for me it is something creative or being outside. It could be painting and sketching, working with clay, [...] or we listen to music and dance. I like to play them Lordi, they love that stuff”. Elias had some experience working with theatre and brought improvisation games and dancing into his workplace, because he believed that that is a great way to understand how feelings work. By playing sad or happy music and having the children mimic what the music made them feel he was able to in a pedagogical way introduce such a complex concept and help them express how they feel.

Harry stated clearly that he was ambivalent when it came to the activities, partly because of his interest in digitalization while not wanting to end up in the stereotypical “IT-guy” box. He therefore said that he tries to “challenge myself and show the children I can do more typically women-coded activities. Also, so it doesn’t look like I’m trying to get out of certain parts of the job”. He said that he attempts to take on those assignments that might be undervalued, such as sitting with the children, washing up, and what he called “a softer approach”. He finishes his answer by saying that he does it to show the children there is no difference between the colleagues, everyone can do the same chores and tasks. Harry, David, and Elias all display here some type of rejection of what has traditionally been considered masculine activities, instead choosing to utilize their time with the children doing more creative play.

5.3 Treatment and Expectations by Others

There are two different categories in this theme, firstly it is the expectations and treatment of the participants’ colleagues, where there are both negative and positive encounters. Secondly, it is the treatment and expectations from the parents of the children that is the focus. All of the

participants brought up the discussion of predators and fear of men who assault children within the vocation from the parents' point of view. None of the participants themselves had encountered being reported for this, however, they still felt uneasy about the possibility of being wrongfully accused. The general expectation is that men in the vocation are suspicious, however, the actual treatment of the parents were of a positive nature, often praising the men and telling them how important they are for their children. The expectations are rooted in traditional masculine values, that men caring for children have ulterior motives otherwise a caring profession would not be for them (Hedlin et al., 2019). What the men here share, and experience is that there is a change, while parents and colleagues are more positive and welcoming, the old fears are still present. The same fears and insecurities are not applied to the women who work in the vocation, according to the participants, which continues to perpetuate gender differences at work for the men.

5.3.1 *Colleagues*

Because of discussions surrounding paedophilia around the workplace with his colleagues, Gustav was approached by one principal who commented that “but you as a guy might experience that it is more difficult for you [men] in this line of work because of this”. These preconceived ideas about him just because he is a man did not sit well with Gabriel. However, he still shared in the interview that the fear and insecurity of what his colleagues thought of him was still present. Most of the men reported that usually their colleagues were very supportive of them, and not treating them any differently from other women colleagues. There could be minor differences, such as Peter said, “whenever something needs to be carried, they come and ask me, as a man, to carry the heavy stuff, they just expect me to do it because I am a man”. He usually helps, he said, but makes sure to point out that this is not part of his work assignments, and that there are those who are hired by the municipality, janitors, and caretakers, to do this job. Peter continued and said, “I think women offer to help more, like sweeping the yard, but we men are better at speaking up and saying when something is not part of our job”. He is indicating that men are better at speaking up, which can be connected to the traditional thought that men are more assertive than women (Connell, 1995). The colleagues could sometimes comment positively how good it was with more men at their place of work, especially to the young men who started out as substitute teachers, such as Gustav and Vilhelm. The parents most often shared those same sentiments.

5.3.2 *Children's Parents*

Gustav shared that “I always had positive feedback from the parents”, and Karl was told that “they always looked forward to when he was at work” and “when you are here it is always good”. Benjamin, with 25 years of experience in ECEC, had a funny experience when he was approached by one of the dads who said, “My wife has started to put on make-up before dropping off the kids in the morning since you started here”. Peter said, “it always feels great when they have spoken about me positively at home, it really strengthens you”.

Even though these participants have mainly been met with positive feedback from the parents, what stands out are those few times there are suspicions or a parent who is questioning the men as preschool teachers, those times stay with the men. Elias had experiences of parents not wanting him to change their child's diapers, and he said he does not always take the fight or discussion of him just being there doing his job. Feeling that he should not have to explain himself and his role at work since none of his women colleagues have to.

Thomas prepared himself during his studies and thinking “almost once a year I will probably have to endure the suspicions of a parent, them being vigilant. [...] They sort of ask questions about my previous workplaces, and I just know that they will go home and google and look for if there have been suspicions at previous workplaces”. The constant scrutiny and questioning are some things Thomas finds difficult and burdensome. He comments “it makes me pissed off, it is one of the most hideous crimes, molesting children”. Thomas continues to say that this is something that guys who work in this profession meet and that these wrongful suspicions won't disappear within one generation.

Some of the men have strategies for not being viewed as suspicious, for example, Thomas again shared that when changing diapers, he keeps the door open, and that it is something all the educators should do. Gustav shared “I have always been restrictive with giving out hugs to the children. [...] I never initiated the hugs, but if they came up to me and asked for one, of course they got one”. He shared that he does not feel that his women colleagues had the same restrictions and could more freely give out hugs and care in that sense. John said, “in the beginning I just felt that I wanted to do the caring parts of the job with other adults present, because I thought that if they saw what I always did then there can be no false accusations”. He also shared that this fear of being falsely accused were more pressing in the start of his

career, and with time he has become more comfortable in his role and what type of work he is doing. “I am just doing my job” he said, in answer to when the parents come and ask questions. The men all reported that they wanted to be seen and treated the same as their women colleagues, they are there to do the same job, and have the same assignments and expectations in the workplace.

5.4 Distancing from Traditional Masculinities

To garner a greater understanding for how the men themselves position themselves and view gender roles and masculinity I asked them how they would define what a man is. It gave me scattered answers, some turned to biology, others talked about masculinity and traditional norms, while some shared how they want it to be. Most of them denounced the traditional masculinity and the macho culture it brings. They all however concurred that it was a difficult question and took their time thinking before answering. The men did agree on one specific aspect regarding what they wished should be more okay for men, which is to show more feelings and emotions and to not be judged for it. One central part of caring masculinities is the rejection of dominance, and the responses from the men showed signs of this, if not outright disapproval.

John mentions how there is a classical trap that many men fall into where they make it difficult for themselves to be vulnerable. He wishes that masculinity would be more forgiving in that sense and “what you can talk about”. Gustav also brings up this notion of being “more open as a man” that allows for feelings and vulnerability to have a place and not have to be seen as that non-emotional macho guy. He also said that:

“The stereotypical view of masculinity is not always so positive, often it’s a person who takes a lot of space, is closed off, and shows their emotions in like the wrong way. For example, they get angry instead of sad, or aggressive instead of sad maybe”.

He pinpoints the stereotypical traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, while also rejecting them and how he would see it change to be more rounded.

Karl shares that he believes that “it is always better with a mix in all places of work, to remove the whole part that men fight and are that type of masculine, I am not like that really”. He continued to reflect on “many men don’t believe it is their job to take care of children. [...]

they think it is the woman's job, because they still have those old values, and don't believe in equality". He would rather move away from the categorizations, and let people just be, not only rejecting masculinity but the whole idea of dividing based on gender.

Elias defines what being a man and masculinity is by referring to himself:

"It is a person who listens, and I think it is masculine when you show respect to others, and that you stand up for things that are right or wrong. [...] we need to get away from all of that being macho and big and strong, and not showing emotions, I really don't believe in that behavior".

Jacob and Harry shared similar thoughts with Elias, about what they would say really is masculine compared to the more traditional concept. Jacob said, "I think it is more masculine to show that you can cry or that you care about other people". Gabriel's answer was "be yourself, be confident and secure in who you are", also sharing sentiments with Karl, that there is no specific thing that is masculine or feminine.

Many of the participants when discussing masculinity and their role at work brought up the notion of role models. There were different feelings and opinions on what this meant, some rejected the idea of it having to do with them being men, saying it rather had to do with being a good and rounded person. While others believed it was an important and integral part of being a man in preschools to be able to show how men can do different things and be someone to look up to, especially for the young boys to recognize themselves in. The men wanted to be good role models, even those who distanced themselves from traditional notions of masculinity. It shows ambivalence in the role, the rejection of there being no different roles or activities to have at the workplace while still feeling that they have a different purpose and function as a man in preschools. In the lives of these men both things can co-exist, the rejection and distancing of the oppressive masculine stereotypes as well as wanting to be a role model for young boys how to be a good man.

Peter answered the question if he thinks it is important to embrace the part of being a role model when being a man in this profession as:

"Yes absolutely! [...] I think it is important for the children to be able to identify themselves. [...] and by taking that role for them you feel you have taken on a critical and legitimate responsibility for these children".

Harry said “I feel as a man who does caring I can function as a good role model to show that men can do this too. I see that as quite important”. Benjamin was also positively inclined to the notion of role models but had a different take:

“It is extremely important in the society we live in today [...] being a positive influence for these children. But I see it as it is more about the person rather than gender. At my last workplace there was a woman in her 40s, short and tiny, but she was more manly than me. So, I think it is more about personality rather than if it is a man or a woman.”.

Gustav was also ambivalent to the gendered aspect of being a role model:

“You often heard how great it was with a guy in the workplace because it’s so good with male role models. Yeah, it’s great, but it got me thinking what are good role models to have? There are many who can be role models, it’s not specifically about being a man”.

John heard similar comments but reacted differently:

“No but I realize right away it’s only about my gender. They have never seen me at work, they don’t know if I’m bad at my job, so why can they say I’m so good? I can get irritated because I feel it is unfair to my women colleagues”.

6 Discussion

In line with previous research I found that men in ECEC are thought of as suspicious and are mistrusted by parents of the children while performing care related actions (Hedlin et al., 2019; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). It shows the ambivalence of having more men in the vocation as good role models for the children while being apprehensive about the physical aspects of care work. The men in this study had different experiences with suspicion from the parents, some had experienced it themselves while others had only heard about it from others, however, they had all still encountered the circumstance. It is as if the men had to prove their intention and their caring side, rendering caring masculinities as conditional. It seemed as it was not enough for the men to have worked for several years, or educating themselves further as preschool teachers, they regardless had to justify and establish themselves in the caring vocation and be accepted by others. The same conditionality applies to hegemonic masculinities, which needs

to be confirmed by other men and constantly validated (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinities conditionality is widely discussed in the literature, while caring masculinities conditionality has not been seen as such so far. Therefore, women could have easier access to a caring profession, because it is more in line with what is considered feminine (Hanlon, 2012), than the men, creating a space which can be harder for men to access and thrive in since it depends on the acceptance of others.

Another important finding can be connected to Hanlon's (2012) argument that men who perform care work must relinquish some of the power that traditionally comes with other more dominant masculinities. That there is a cost for men who enter this profession and perform caring activities, but the men in the study also shared that there are many rewards for them in this vocation. By being able to adapt the pedagogical aspects with their own personal interest in what activities they do with the children, the men are awarded the privilege to bring in their own self to the workplace. Many of the men shared that being outside was what they preferred when working with children, moving around, performing more physical activities of climbing and playing sports, as well as more science directed exercises. These decisions are still gendered (Connell, 1995; Hedlin et al., 2019), and by taking the chances to be outside working many of the other care directed practices in ECEC could be missed that occur inside. These choices do not seem intentional, since many of the men share that they enjoy all parts of their work. However, the results still show that the majority of participants unconsciously follow the traditional stereotypes that men enjoy being outside, playing sports and moving around. Nevertheless, many of the men still emphasized their preferences for more creative activities, displaying a change towards the possible redefining of masculinities and the activities connected to it. It can especially be seen by the creative use by the participants of improvisation games and music where the children are taught ways to understand emotions and how to express them in a healthy way.

Research participants in this study happened upon the job practically by chance, displaying another type of male privilege based on ambition (Pease, 2010). The idea that this profession was not in their initial plan for a vocation shows a privilege in being able to choose any type of job. It is to say, if a woman decided to switch careers, the possibility for her to just happen upon a job as a construction worker or working in a coal mine which have traditionally been more reserved for men, as can be understood from the low numbers of women in these professions (Bengtsson, 2021; Matthis, 2019), is probably not as high. The possibility to change

career haphazardly with not much thought behind can represent the freedom men have in patriarchal society compared to women. It furthermore exhibits the idea that men could have higher 'ambitions' for their career choices. By men not considering preschool and other caring vocations as their first choice and dream jobs it again demonstrates how care work is devalued and subordinated in relation to other types of non-care related careers (Hanlon, 2012). Women are not afforded the same privilege. By having the privilege of changing vocation randomly with no preconceived idea as well as bring in your own personal preferences and interests it allows for men to develop their gender identity in an unrestricted way. Or it would have been unrestricted if it were not for the suspicions and expectations of both colleagues and the children's parents.

Previous research argues that gender can be changed by doing care work (Elliott, 2016; Puchert et al., 2005; C. Scambor et al., 2005), and especially that a more caring identity can be developed through *caring for* others (Hanlon, 2012; Tronto, 1993). The participants shared that they had become more social and open by interacting with the children and their parents, and how important these social connections were. Showing signs of the interdependence between caretaker and those they give care to, as well as the relationality between them. Indicating developing caring masculinities in their identity building.

The men distanced themselves from traditional forms and distinctions of masculinity not only by answering the questions regarding masculinity but in their everyday actions at work as well. The men made conscious decisions at work to do all types of care work when needed and embraced teaching the children how to deal with their emotions in a constructive way. Men taking on previously feminized actions of care will then consequently alter their gender towards more caring masculinities through their everyday efforts. However, the men did bring up the notion that they had many of these values before entering the vocation. Opening up for the reflection that there could be a certain type of man with more open and inclusive values that stays in this type of career. Men who cannot see themselves performing care would perhaps not bother applying for a job in ECEC. The men in this study had to all be open and interested even though they randomly happened upon the vocation. Therefore, *caring for* in this instance needs to be preceded by openness and some values of care for the men to maybe even consider the vocation (Tronto, 1993). I will say this carefully, because more research would be needed to compare men who do work in the vocation with those who could never consider themselves in ECEC to get more conclusive results. However, regarding Hanlon's (2012) argument that

caring for can create more caring masculine identities, this study shows that it is partly accurate, in the sense that there might be other preconceived ideas or influences for this to happen.

7 Conclusion

This qualitative study collected data from twelve interviews with men who work in preschools in Sweden to garner a greater understanding of their experiences as well as furthering the understandings of identity building and caring masculinities. In line with previous research, I found support for the challenges men meet in a women dominated workplace, as well as the different privileges the men are afforded. Working in a women dominated career men face specific challenges due to their gender, meeting suspicions of their intentions and apprehensions from the parents of the children they are taking care of. The aim of this study was to further develop the theoretical framework of caring masculinities. The analysis showed that caring masculinities are conditional, where men have to perform certain acts or have certain characteristics in order to be accepted and viewed as possessing caring masculinities. The results were thematically analyzed using themes of, *why entering the vocation, activities with children, treatment and expectation of others*, as well as *distancing from traditional masculinities*. Finally, a discussion regarding previous research as well as the new contributions to the field of critical studies on men and masculinities took place in the discussion chapter above.

To therefore answer the question of *how are the men experiencing working in early childhood education and care?* The men shared many experiences in their workplaces, there were central themes which emerged clearly from the material, showcasing many similarities. Especially when it came to the different activities the men preferred, what types of expectations were on them and how they were approached by parents of the children they worked with. It was necessary to include this question in the research to garner a greater understanding of what the men experience in order to discuss their identity building and how their experiences can be utilized in furthering the theory of caring masculinities.

How are the men building their identities in relation to care work and caring masculinities? The men built their identities on rejecting traditional notions of masculinity of dominance and of not showing emotion. Embracing what they brought into their careers with open minds and the social interactions with the children every day. They said that working with children is very

giving, connecting, and creating interdependence between the care worker and the dependent, by both garnering something from the interactions each day. There is also the notion that this line of work is not for everyone, as the participants shared, many of them had their views on equality and a good hand with children before they entered the vocation. Resulting in men who do not share those sentiments might not even attempt to join the career, and therefore could miss out on creating these genuine and giving relations.

What are the implications of the Swedish preschool teachers' experiences for the theoretical framework of caring masculinities? The findings of this study fit in well with the theoretical framework of caring masculinities, showing that men who work in ECEC reject dominance as well as embrace emotions, interdependence, and relationality and how central it is for their identity building. This study further the theoretical discussion of caring masculinities by finding that it is conditional, men can therefore be dependent on others acceptance to be considered part of caring masculinities. It has not been seen in the discussions of caring masculinities before, therefore this is the contribution I bring into the framework. As well as the discussion of cost and privilege that men in this vocation are afforded, it is not so easy to say that men only have privileges granted from their gendered power positions in a more female dominated career. It is rather that they are not as easily accepted as it could have been believed. The privileges they are granted allow them to develop their own identity in line with a more caring approach, a more open and versatile man, however, the cost is the loss of power position as well as the personal internal discussions and fears that can arise by not being readily accepted in the workplace.

This study was limited by a restricted sample, having a purposive sampling method with specific criteria, while remaining open to those who were willing to participate resulted in the men contacting me to participate. Therefore, the men who did engage in the interviews knew from my information and participation form some of the central themes that would be discussed. This could have discouraged those who might not consider gender equality or a more equal workplace from participating. Furthermore, one of the participants raised concerns about being portrayed in a negative manner, this could have been a reason for why other men did not participate, due to the preconceived ideas and suspicions that have been discussed previously in this paper. Another limitation of this study is the set time frame, because this is part of an examination for a master program a limited amount of time was available. With more time

more participants could have been contacted, however, I do feel I reached saturation for this specific research, having many of the participants discuss similar experiences and reflections.

Due to the restricted sample of men respondents, future studies should consider bringing in more voices of women who work with men in preschools. This could help regarding questions of others' expectations from the actual source rather than only how the men perceive the expectations. Furthermore, if having access and considering the ethics of such a decision, talking with children in preschools and how they interact with their teachers could be a different angle to view the topic. Here the discussion of if the men and women in the workforce is perceived differently could be addressed, as well as who the children approach regarding the issues or questions that they encounter each day. The participants brought up not exactly knowing what the parents always thought, when they just gave hostile looks, so a different approach could be to interview parents of children who have men as preschool teachers. Here I propose discussions on stereotypes and fears could be central, aiding in the development of research on the conditional side of caring masculinities, and develop that avenue further.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Consent form and Information Sheet in Swedish

Information till forskningspersoner

I det här dokumentet får du information om studentprojektet ”An examination of masculinity in care directed workplaces” för en masteruppsats och vad det innebär att delta i projektet. Master projektet genomförs av Annie Bertilsson med ansvarig handledare Katarzyna Wojnicka docent i sociologi på Institutionen för Sociologi och Arbetsvetenskap vid Göteborgs universitet. Kontaktuppgifter hittar ni längre ner i dokumentet.

Vad är det för projekt och varför vill ni att jag ska delta?

Projektet ”An examination of masculinity in care directed workplaces” handlar om hur män inom förskolan upplever sin arbetsplats och roll på arbetsplatsen. Syftet är att bidra till tidigare forskning med ett nytt perspektiv av omhändertagande maskulinitet. Detta kan komma att vara ett bidrag till samhällets förståelse av människor och för yrket som förskolepedagog, samt för att förstå och hjälpa till med utvecklingen på området. Jag kontaktar dig för att jag är intresserad av dina erfarenheter och din expertis om att vara förskollärare och arbeta inom en sektor där det framförallt är kvinnliga arbetare.

Hur går studien till?

Om du vill delta blir du intervjuad på plats i Göteborg eller Borås med omnejd, i uppskattningsvis 45-75 minuter. Intervjun kan även ske per telefon eller via digital plattform som till exempel Zoom.

Ditt namn och dina personliga detaljer är konfidentiella och kommer inte att användas muntligt eller skriftligt i någon text som studien leder till och obehöriga har inte tillgång till dina uppgifter. Jag kommer att spela in intervjun för att ha möjlighet att lyssna på den och transkribera den efteråt. Intervju-filen kommer förvaras på en lösenordsskyddad dator. Ditt namn kommer inte att synas på någon av dessa filer – bara en kod som döljer din identitet. Att bli inspelad är frivilligt och både skriftligt och muntligt samtycke kommer att samlas in.

Om du ångrar dig kan du välja att avsluta ditt deltagande. Du kan också kontakta mig i upp till två veckor efter intervjutillfället för att be mig ta bort specifika uttalanden eller hela din medverkan. När studiens resultat presenteras/publiceras kommer alla deltagares identitet skyddas med hjälp av en pseudonym.

Vad händer med mina uppgifter?

Det insamlade materialet kommer att användas för att skriva en masteruppsats kan komma att användas i en akademisk tidskrift eller rapport som är riktad till användargrupper samt att resultatet kommer diskuteras på seminarium. Informationen hålls i säkert förvar och är endast tillgänglig för relevant forskare. Dina svar kommer att pseudonymiseras så att inte obehöriga kan ta del av dem. Materialet kan eventuellt senare bli publicerat i någon rapport eller artikel i en akademisk tidskrift. Materialet kommer att förvaras på en dator med lösenord, samt en extern hårddisk som också är lösenordsskyddad. Materialet kommer efter användning till potentiella framtida rapporter att raderas senast efter 10 år.

Hur får jag information om resultatet av studien?

Resultaten kommer publiceras i en masteruppsats som blir färdig i början av juni. Deltagare kan ladda ner uppsatsen via GUPEA när den är färdigställd [<https://gupea.ub.gu.se/>]. Deltagare är välkomna till presentationer om de vill 7e juni när projektet kommer att presenteras, mer information kan fås om det är av intresse.

Deltagandet är frivilligt

Ditt deltagande är frivilligt och samtycke ges muntligt och skriftligt. Du har möjlighet att ställa frågor om projektet innan du signerar ett 'samtyckesformulär'. Om du ångrar dig kan du när som helst välja att avsluta ditt deltagande under pågående intervju och du behöver inte uppge varför du inte längre vill delta. Du har också rättighet att radera uppgifter i efterhand.

Kontakt detaljer

Masterstudent: Annie Bertilsson
E-mail: Gusberaniz@student.gu.se

Ansvarig Handledare: Katarzyna Wojnicka
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Samtycke till att delta i studien

Jag har fått muntlig och skriftlig informationen om studien och har haft möjlighet att ställa frågor. Jag får behålla den skriftliga informationen.

- Jag samtycker till att delta i studien.
- Jag samtycker till att uppgifter om mig behandlas på det sätt som beskrivs ovan

Plats och datum	Namnförtydligande och Underskrift (medverkande)
Plats och datum	Namnförtydligande och Underskrift (student)

Appendix B. Participants

Participants	Randomized Name	Age	Own Children	Education for preschool	Sexuality	Salary monthly gross income SEK	Years of experience
Participant 1	<i>Gustav</i>	25	no	no	Bisexual	Student bursary + loan	3
Participant 2	<i>Gabriel</i>	29	no	Preschool teacher	Heterosexual	33 000	6
Participant 3	<i>John</i>	41	no	Preschool teacher	Heterosexual	33 000	14
Participant 4	<i>Vilhelm</i>	26	no	no	Heterosexual	28 000	4
Participant 5	<i>Thomas</i>	40	no	preschool teacher	Heterosexual	35 000	7
Participant 6	<i>Benjamin</i>	52	yes	Preschool teacher	Heterosexual	38 000	25
Participant 7	<i>Peter</i>	37	yes	Child care taker (barnskötare)	Heterosexual	28 000	19
Participant 8	<i>Harry</i>	26	no	Preschool teacher	Heterosexual	32 000	3
Participant 9	<i>David</i>	42	yes	Preschool teacher	Heterosexual	34 000	5
Participant 10	<i>Karl</i>	28	no	preschool teacher	Heterosexual	33 500	8
Participant 11	<i>Elias</i>	38	yes	Preschool teacher	Heterosexual	40 000	5
Participant 12	<i>Jacob</i>	35	yes	preschool teacher	Heterosexual	32 200	10

Appendix C. Interview Guide in Swedish

Temat	Huvudfråga	Detaljerade Frågor
Workplace	Hur länge har du arbetat inom förskolan? // hur länge jobbade du inom förskolan innan du slutade?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Har du haft olika roller på arbetsplatsen? • Har du genomgått en utbildning för ditt yrke? • Har du jobbat på fler/olika avdelningar? • Vilken ålder är det på de barnen du undervisar/ tar hand om.
	Hur kommer det sig att du valde att arbeta inom förskolan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Var det ett yrkesval du tänkte på när du var yngre? • har du utvecklats under din tid på din arbetsplats? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hur? Kan du utveckla?
	Kan du berätta om en vanlig dag på jobbet för dig, vad brukar du göra?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationen till barnen? • Vad får du ut mest av ditt jobb? • Vad får dig att gilla ditt jobb, om du nu gör det?
	Hur är din relation till dina kollegor?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hur samarbetar ni? • Finns det några andra män på din avdelning eller förskola? • Upplever du att ni har samma möjligheter för utveckling på arbetsplatsen? • Finns det samma förväntningar på dig som dina kvinnliga kollegor?
	Hur upplever du fördelningen av arbetsuppgifter mellan pedagogerna på din arbetsplats?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Har du samma arbetsuppgifter som dina kollegor? • skiljer uppgifterna sig mellan manliga och kvinnliga pedagoger? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vad tycker du om det? positivt eller negativt? • (om ja) Har ni valt dom uppdelningarna själva?

	Har du upplevt eller sett en skillnad i sättet manliga pedagoger bemöts i förskolan jämfört med kvinnliga pedagoger?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vad tycker du om det? • Hur är bemötandet från föräldrarna? • Har det alltid varit bra/mindre bra bemötande? • Känner du en press från föräldrarna till barnen och din arbetsroll/uppgifter? • Hur upplever du andras åsikter om ditt jobb?
	Hur jobbar ni med genus och jämställdhet på din arbetsplats?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Är det något som ni också lär barnen? • Hur ser sån pedagogik ut? praktiskt?
	Upplever du att barnen reagerar olika på en manlig eller kvinnlig pedagog?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • är det olika aktiviteter? • vänder barnen sig till specifika pedagoger när det handlar om oroliga känslor?
	Tror du manliga pedagoger har en annan roll än kvinnliga?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Om ja, vilken roll är det och varför tror du att det är så?
	Vill du se mer manliga pedagoger inom förskolan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varför/varför inte? • Vad behövs för att det ska hända tror du?
Masculinities		
	Hur stor vikt lägger du vid undervisning respektive omhändertagande I din roll på förskolan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finns det olika situationer där de olika sätten visar sig eller är mer lämpade? • Kan du utveckla mer om varför det är så?
	Hur påverkar din roll på jobbet ditt privatliv?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • är dom helt uppdelade? • Finns det en gräns mellan dig privat och på jobbet på något annat sätt? • Vad tycker dina vänner om ditt yrke? • vad tycker din familj om ditt yrke?

	<p>Hur skulle du definiera manlighet och maskulinitet?</p> <p>Vad är din syn på manlighet?</p> <p>Hur skulle du beskriva vad en man är?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kan du beskriva hur en man ska va? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personliga egenskaper, fysiska attribut? • Tror du att din syn på detta har förändrats sen du började jobba på förskola? • (Det här med att ha någon att se upp till, är det något som följer dig i ditt jobb?) – förebilder) 	
Personligt	Vilken typ av utbildning har du?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • var gick du i skolan? • hur länge? • har du annan utbildning? 	
	Var bor du?		
	Hur gammal är du?		
	Har du egna barn?		
	Vad är din medborgarstatus?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Var är du född? 	
	Sexuell identitet, samt könsidentitet?		
	Vad är din lön/vad tjänar du?		