

SUSPICION, COMPETENCE, AND COPING IN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS'
IDENTITY WORK

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DEDICATION

For my wife, son, parents, and grandmother for believing in me before I gave them good reason to do so.

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This dissertation is the product of work done by myself and especially by those around me. I am indebted to a number of people including, but not limited to, Amanda Pruit, Julian Pruit, Dan Johnson, Jay Gubrium, Wayne Brekhus, Jason Rodriquez, Candace Kuby, Ed Brent, Carol Rambo, Gummi Oddsson, Brittany Presson, and Andrew Hutchinson. I write your names with gratitude and admiration.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of a preschool I call Ellis Montessori Preschool. Ellis Montessori Preschool is in a medium sized Midwestern city dominated by colleges and hospitals. Ellis uses the Montessori method (Montessori 1964) as its pedagogical philosophy. This is a specialized teaching and learning philosophy developed by Maria Montessori aiming at a “child-centered” education. As the name of the school suggests, the Montessori method provides a unique pedagogical backdrop for the school.

In this dissertation I identify discourses in early childhood education and then analyze preschool teachers’ talk and interaction and behavior in relation to those discourses. I find preschool teaching involves two broad expectations: teaching and caring. The dual demands of teaching and caring provide an interpretive backdrop for understanding preschool teacher identity. However, the matter of preschool teacher identity is more complex than simply teaching and caring for young children. A closer look at the everyday work of preschool teaching reveals a complicated array of practices and strategies aiming at constructing institutional identities.

In this introduction I will briefly touch upon some of the more influential sociology of education literature to help locate where this dissertation fits. I argue there is a gap in the sociology literature in early childhood education, and this research begins filling that gap. I then talk about the Montessori method and Ellis Montessori Preschool. Last, I explain my research project, theoretical perspective, and analytic strategy.

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Sociology of education is a broad field spanning two disciplines, education and sociology. There is both quantitative and qualitative research, which can be applied to shape and reform policy (educational sociology), or as an objective science (sociology of education). Much contemporary sociology of education research builds on Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim's theoretical frameworks.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1908) did not write extensively on the topic of education, however, they did advocate for the free education of all children, not just the children of the bourgeoisie. Their work is reflected in the neo-Marxist research using class to understand how education institutions help reproduce inequality. Max Weber's (1946:240) discussion of the rationalization of education and training gives rise to the bureaucratic tendencies of education institutions. Colleges and universities, for instance, have the monopoly on certifying the expertise of a person in a specific field. Emile Durkheim proposed a method for conceiving of the "man in his totality throughout time" (1977:12), rather than in the moment to better understand the evolution of education. This is to say, the needs of the situation tend to dominate the utility and educational aspirations of those within the context. But rather than seeing it as an evolutionary development, it is perceived as if it is the way things have always been (tradition). Durkheim proposed an historical view of what led up to the present moral order to understand the current system of meaning and its needs. Durkheim's view of the evolution of educational thought is a changing process and developing over time, rather than a deterministic phenomenon interpreted as the only possible outcome.

Contemporary Literature

Contemporary sociology of education research reflects the broader social structure in which it is embedded. Much of the ethnographic research focuses on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality as it plays out in and around educational contexts. These social forces contribute much to social inequality in the American educational experience as it relates to privilege, status, and power. The authors below locate individual experience within broader social contexts giving their work a distinctively sociological sense of the social worlds embedded in each context.

There are a few distinctions to consider – level of analysis, context, and focus. The level of analysis varies from societal, institutional, organizational, to individual. The context in which the research takes place also varies (colleges, high schools, elementary schools, preschools). Although the goals of the institutions are to educate, what is being taught and learned often varies from preschools to colleges (i.e. the hidden curriculum). The participants in each study are also a point of departure. Ethnographic research in the sociology of education often turns to students' talk and interaction in peer groups, for example (Adler and Adler 1998). This provides an overlap with sociology of childhood literature. My intent here is not to provide an exhaustive review, but to illustrate some dimensions of the literature.

Two influential perspectives are worth discussing first, because they are important for how research is analytically framed in sociology of education. One is Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of "field," and the other is Howard Becker's conceptualization of "world." Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) explain education as a "field" in which the reproduction of power is a consummate project. In

universities, for instance, students with similar values and can speak a similar language as teachers, are rewarded in the education system for their background knowledge, and so on. It is likely these students' parents attended college, read the same materials, and were able to pass it along. In this manner, power (in the form of educational capital) is passed from one generation to the next reproducing itself time and again.

Howard Becker, Blanche Geer, Everett Hughes, and Anselm Strauss (1961) articulate a different view of education in *The Boys In White* – an ethnographic study of the world of medical students at the University of Kansas. Instead of conceptualizing education as a field, Becker et al. view it as a world in which individuals are doing things, rather than the somewhat deterministic forces from Bourdieu's field. From this perspective, which draws on Mead's (1938) *Philosophy of the Act*, medical students are socialized into the world of medical school. Medical students must learn what is expected from them, for example, to please their professors. These are matters of situational concern with people doing things, rather than forces sweeping through a field seemingly absent of individuals.

Jenny Stuber (2011) argues colleges and universities are sites for the production and reproduction of social inequality. Students are able to distinguish themselves through the opportunities they pursue, such as becoming a member of Greek organizations or participating in study abroad programs. However, these opportunities are linked with privilege, and are markers of class and culture at colleges and universities. There is also a distinction between college students and college student-athletes. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (1985) chronicle the socialization of college athletes and argue the process of becoming a college athlete, from recruitment to completion, engulf student-athletes. That

is, the role of college basketball player becomes the primary role for these college students. “Role engulfment” occurs to such an extent college athletes have difficulty viewing themselves as non-college athletes, and struggle to transition after graduation (or leaving college) to their role as former college basketball players. In part, Adler and Adler shed light on the manipulative and exploitative practices college athletes endure on their way to the top. As with Stuber’s work, Adler and Adler direct our attention to the hierarchical structure of collegiate athletics, inequality, and how those at the bottom of the class structure have limited agency.

While college is a site for the production and reproduction of inequality, it begins earlier in the education process. Peter Demerath (2006) explains how high school students attempt to maximize their potential through grade point average, extracurricular activities, and so on. He finds there is a significant amount of stress for the students in which they interpret success as a zero sum game. Winning means being accepted into the “right” college and continuing down the “right” track. Losing means going to a less prestigious college and having a potentially mediocre life. Some students consider themselves failures if they do not make it into the college of their choice. In other words, interpretations of success in the high school mirror that of the broader society, and have consequences for personal identity.

C. J. Pascoe’s (2007) research in a high school also has consequences for individuals and the broader society. In it, she shows how high school students construct and reify discourses about sexuality and masculinity. Pascoe demonstrates, for example, how differential interpretations of the intersection of race, masculinity, and sexuality combine to problematize racial minorities by comparing white and Black high school

boys' skits. On one hand, white students' skits were interpreted as light-hearted and harmless. On the other hand, Black students' skits were interpreted (by administration) as overly sexualized and threatening. Pascoe's work, like Stuber, Adler and Adler, and Demerath, shows how the school is a microcosm of the broader society. Dominant discourses about race, gender, and sexuality are used as used to maintain the social order of the high school and the broader social context.

Moving toward elementary education, Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (1998) also examined the peer cultures. Adler and Adler show how the existing framework of preadolescent peer culture is something into which children are socialized, but also something children are able to modify and change. Adler and Adler's presentation of preadolescent culture shows the surprising complexity most of us forget about after years of adulthood. Adler and Adler's research is more about socialization and the sociology of childhood, though much of it takes place in education contexts.

Barrie Thorne's (1993) work, *Gender Play*, again turns to peer culture to unpack gender as a socializing agent. Thorne's work points us to the fact gender socialization and segregation is the result of deliberate ongoing activity. This deliberate activity extends to adulthood and occupations. Paul Sargent (2000, 2001, 2004, 2005) analyzed gender in the context of primary (elementary) school teaching. In particular, he is concerned with interpretations of masculinity and elementary school teaching. He finds many men elementary school teachers are viewed as problematic because they are men working with younger children. Their masculinity and sexuality is the object of scrutiny, marginalizing them. Sargent concludes men elementary school teachers compensate in various ways, such as going above and beyond to prove their qualifications for the job. The men

working in elementary schools, then, understand elementary schools as “gendered organizations” (Acker 1991) and perform compensatory behavior to overcome the stigma attached to men performing “women’s work” (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999; Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998; Skelton 2012).

By the time we get to the lowest age group in education, the sociological literature begins thinning out, but there are several noteworthy studies. Much of the literature focuses on children, and can be classified as the “sociology of childhood” (Cahill 1992). It uses the concept of socialization to make sense of early childhood education. Sally Lubeck (1985) gives a broad overview of two preschools as she documents the use of time, space, activities, and patterns of interaction. William Corsaro (1985) addresses the social worlds of preschool children using ideas such as role and status to identify patterns of peer culture. Nancy Mandell (1988) developed a way to do research among young children she called the “least-adult role.” Mandell earned the trust of the children she studied by presenting herself as a non-authoritarian playmate. Earning the trust of the preschoolers allowed her to get closer to the action, so to speak, and better understand the children. Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin (2001) demonstrated how young children learn and use race and ethnicity to identify, define, include, and exclude others.

From top to bottom, or bottom to top, there is hierarchical structure, power, and inequality, and so forth in education institutions. Race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality do not simply exist *apart from* educational contexts, outside the school halls as it were (even at its earliest levels). Instead, they are always already *a part of* education contexts because of the interplay of individuals, organizations, institutions, and society. The organizational positioning of, say, a preschool, makes it just as susceptible to social

and cultural currents as the university. The gender order, for instance, provides broad contours for how high school boys talk about sex (Pascoe 2007) and how men teach young children (King 1998), or even move within a preschool (Pruit forthcoming). That is, broader social structures influence individual practice, even as individual practice reifies social structures.

MARIA MONTESSORI

Over the course of her life, Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) authored several articles and books, founded a progressive educational movement, and was nominated for two Nobel Peace Prizes. Montessori was born to a middleclass family in Serravalle, Italy. When she was young her family moved to Rome, where she grew up and studied. In 1890 she enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Rome. Montessori is considered a pioneer. She is attributed with being the first woman to graduate from the University of Rome with a Doctorate of Medicine (Adams 1969). She received her medical degree in 1896 and began working in the public medical clinics, editing reviews for the first Italian journal advancing psychology, as well as promoting policies benefiting the Italian feminist movement. Montessori's work during this time is contradictory. When writing for a scientific audience she used the evolutionary perspective popular at the time – women, children, criminals, prostitutes, and the poor were evolutionarily inferior. When writing for a political audience, she was more progressive promoting liberal and feminist ideals (Foschi 2008).

In 1900, Montessori returned to the University of Rome to study philosophy and experimental psychology. Montessori closely studied Jean Itard and his student Edouard Seguin's work with persons with disabilities, which introduced her to the field of

education. By this time she had distanced herself from evolutionary deterministic views arguing instead for reeducation of criminals. By 1907, she was well known as a pedagogical expert and directress of the Casa dei Bambini (Children's House), with other such Children's Houses opening following soon after. The Montessori method began taking shape in her work with "normal" children from lower classes over the course of six years. Then, in 1908 other Children's Houses opened around Rome and Montessori wrote her book on pedagogical method (1964). She began training teachers in this method nationally and internationally by 1913.

During the period of 1913-1915, her method came under fire from the Catholic Church, which, along with her wealthy benefactors, removed support for the Children's Houses because of its views of autonomous children (Foschi 2008:250). This came about as part of an antimodernist movement to discover those who were not working within the confines of the Catholic Church (Foschi 2008). Yet, her international popularity grew for a time despite waning support in Rome. Criticism of Montessori's method included it was not backed by data, unscientific, costly, and outdated (Foschi 2008). Eventually, criticism of Montessori and her method relegated it to a peripheral position in education despite its advancement of a child-centered curriculum and goal of synthesizing individual freedom backed by scientific legitimacy.

ELLIS MONTESSORI PRESCHOOL

Ellis Montessori Preschool was established in 1967 by a group of parents seeking an alternative to traditional preschools in the area. It serves approximately eighty-five families. The school is housed in a former church and is a nonprofit organization relying on tuition, small grants, and charitable donations usually drawn from the parent

population. For example, the school hosts an annual trivia night to raise funds for building improvements, new “work” (learning materials) for the classrooms, or teacher training. In recent years, the aging building has required more attention for general upkeep. For instance, the gutters needed repair because rainwater leaked into one of the classrooms, and new firewalls and doors were installed to meet city codes.

In many ways, Ellis Montessori Preschool is like any other early childhood education facility. There is a routine and rhythm to the days as the children move from one activity to the next. The children are taught academic and social skills, make friends, get and give hugs, and so on. However, Ellis Montessori Preschool is unique in a number of ways. Its teachers use the Montessori philosophy of teaching and learning. This creates a distinction between the preschool and other preschools. Indeed, the teachers distinguish between Ellis and others on the basis of being a Montessori preschool, despite the fact that the majority of teachers are not Montessori certified. This distinction runs deeper and defines Ellis as a special type of school. That is, academics at Ellis Montessori Preschool are as important as cultivating social skills. This draws a line between preschools and daycares in which some Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers interpret daycares as primarily focusing on social skills, while Ellis teachers meet academic and emotional needs of their students.

The Preschool

Ellis Montessori Preschool has six classrooms divided into “upper” and “lower” schools, a full kitchen, and two playgrounds for upper and lower school children. The lower school classrooms are the infant room (infants), the toddler room (toddlers), and the preprimary room (preprimary or PP). The infant room serves friends from four weeks

to twelve months and the toddler room serves friends from twelve months to twenty-four months. The transition from the infant room to the toddler room is fluid and based on the child's age, skill acquisition, and available space. The preprimary room serves friends from twenty-four months to three years of age. Again, the transition from preprimary to a "primary" room is somewhat fluid. Children can transition out of the preprimary room early, for example, such as when the child is potty trained and has appropriate verbal and social skills to move up. The transition to the upper school usually takes place when the child is close to three years old. Additionally, the preprimary lead teacher observes each primary room to suggest the best fit for the child to the head of school, the primary lead, and the child's parents. Furthermore, the primary lead teachers observe the child in the preprimary classroom also making suggestions. Last, the child's parents are able to request the room they prefer. The upper school has three primary rooms serving children from ages three through six. These rooms are called Primary One (P1), Primary Two (P2), and Primary Three (P3). P3 also has a kindergarten program with a state certified teacher.

The Preschool Teachers

The school has about thirty-five full and part time employees, including administration, kitchen staff, and substitute teachers. Each room has a lead teacher, an assistant lead, and support staff members. The role of the lead teacher is to organize the teaching and learning activities of the room including the activities of other teachers. For example, if the room needs a substitute teacher the lead will choose from a list of available substitutes. The lead also prepares lesson plans and performs "line time" (group learning lessons). The assistant lead has similar duties as the lead and covers for the lead

teacher in their absence. Support staff, both full and part time employees, perform various tasks including caring for children, answering their questions, cleaning and other related tasks. All of the teachers interact with parents on some level, but the lead teachers are the face of the classroom, so to speak.

Most of the preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool were not certified Montessori teachers; however, all of the lead teachers had bachelorette degrees. Two factors lending to non-certification are the transitory teaching population (high turnover) and funding. Many Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers were college students working part-time. At the beginning and end of the fall and spring semesters the part-time teaching staff would often turn over. This posed interesting problems relating to training for the fulltime staff. As the head of school put it, “You can tell someone how to swim. Explain the mechanics, form, and rhythm, but until you are in the water it’s hard to know what it’s really like.” That is, the staff tried to train the new employees to the best of their ability, but often had to let them experience preschool teaching for themselves. The second factor was funding. The school is a not-for-profit entity surviving solely on tuition, small grants, and fundraising. In short, money was almost always tight. Priority was always given to keeping the preschool open. Much of the extra money went to items like building repairs to meet fire code, heating and air conditioning repairs, and so on. Lastly, the extra money went to purchasing classroom materials.

Work and “Work”

At Ellis Montessori Preschool, “work” takes on a different meaning. Hearing a preschool teacher tell a two year old, “You may choose work,” can be jarring to our sensibilities about how to speak to young children. It conjures images of the daily grind,

child labor, or a nine-to-five job. However, on its face, work is not what it may seem (for more see Cossentino 2006). At the pedagogically philosophical level, work “constitutes the central act of Montessori practice, which entails intellectual, social, and moral/spiritual development” (Cossentino 2006:69). In a Montessori classroom work is not only the available learning materials, but also a deeper level of focus. As Jacqueline M. Cossentino (2006:68) explains, it is “effortful activity focused on ‘real things’ that has the power to bring about ‘mental concentration.’” Further, this concentration is visible to those observing.

Work also is the materials in the subject areas children may choose. There are four main learning areas at Ellis Montessori Preschool: practical life, sensorial, math, and language. The Ellis Montessori Preschool staff handbook provides an organizational interpretation of the main types of work. The practical life area involves the basics of everyday life such as tying shoes, buttoning clothes, folding towels, pouring liquids, and cleaning. The sensorial area features work with different colors, textures, sounds, and sizes. The math and language areas include work in which a child may trace letters and numbers, learn multiplication using beads, and so on. Together, these areas and the work within them are the cornerstones of the Ellis Montessori Preschool learning environment.

THE DISSERTATION

Preschools are worthy venues for sociological research in their own right. Early childhood education as an institution cannot help but to reflect many of the norms of the broader society. However, it is a mistake to view it strictly in terms of socialization. Instead, by problematizing what “everyone knows” we can better understand the work taking place within early childhood education settings. The aim of this dissertation is to

identify prevalent discourses in ECE and then analyze the interplay between discourse and preschool teachers' identity work.

This dissertation is an ethnography of a preschool I call Ellis Montessori Preschool. In it, I identify and analyze discourses in early childhood education using Ellis Montessori as a case study. More specifically, I address preschool teacher identity work in the context of discourses as it relates to suspicion, competence, and coping. I spent two years doing fieldwork at the school. I was a participant observer, and was given a great deal of latitude to work with the children at the school. I also conducted twenty-three interviews with Ellis Montessori teachers lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. The interview questions emerged from field experiences and observations. In part, the aim of this dissertation is to locate individuals in the broader social institution of early childhood education. I do this by analyzing the talk and interaction of those in the preschool. I find preschool teacher identity work is tethered to cultural, institutional, and organizational expectations grounded in teaching and caring for young children.

As the title of this dissertation suggests, what makes this research special relates to its empirical and conceptual focus – preschool teachers and identity. The preschool is a neglected setting in the sociology of education literature, and focusing on preschool teachers teaching and caring practices is similarly overlooked. The preschool teacher as a social role along with the preschool teacher identity are culturally, institutionally, organizationally, and individually important in relation to young children. That is, identities and performances in the preschool occur within the moral contours of contextual embeddedness. Hence, preschool teachers “work” is empirically and

analytically interesting because it has consequences for how we understand taken for granted organizations and occupations, and the individuals within them.

The Research

I spent two years at Ellis Montessori Preschool doing fieldwork as a participant observer. I arrived at the preschool between 8:30 am and 9:00 am and stayed until naptime around 1:00 pm two to three days per week. I also observed during the afternoons from naptime until children were picked up, usually from around 2:00 pm until 4:30 pm. My fieldnotes include standard information about the date, time in the field, and the day's eventfulness. I took more fieldnotes during first days in a room when everything seemed fresh and different (Goffman 1989). After a few weeks I began participating more in the day-to-day activities of the classrooms, returning to my notes at opportune moments, such as when the class transitioned from the classroom to the playground. I typed my fieldnotes as soon as possible after leaving the preschool while simultaneously making analytic notes in the margins in markup (Charmaz 2006). If something were particularly interesting I would make a note of it and come back to it later. I let analytic categories emerge from the field and then continued observations to confirm its presence. Often, I asked the teachers about my interpretations to validate, discard, and/or modify them. This practice allowed me to develop and refine analytic categories early on, narrowing my focus and shaping my view of the field while still in it. I pursued emergent themes and broadly categorized talk and interaction as types of identity work. Fieldnotes also became a resource to review others' and my actions, and to adjust and prepare for future interactions (Pruit 2014). In this manner I was able to sketch the analytic contours of my project and generate interview questions from fieldwork.

I conducted twenty-three interviews with Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers, three males and twenty females, lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. Interviews focused on the work of being a preschool teacher including teaching and learning practices, emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), gender, and discipline as part of their identity work. My interview guide included multiple themes developed from fieldwork and allowed me to move through the questions conversationally as themes emerged from the interview context (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

Interview participants were given pseudonyms, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Interviews were initially coded using the broad themes from observations and interview questions. Using fieldwork observations and personal experiences as a guide for understanding the preschool teacher interviews, I then identified emergent themes for further analysis. I documented themes considering it forms of “interpretive practice” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

The discourses and practices identified and analyzed here are not matters of speculation. Instead, I experienced it throughout my fieldwork. I was on both sides of suspicion, competence, and coping at various points in Ellis Montessori Preschool. As a parent, I remember feeling suspicion (and soon after ashamed) toward a male preschool teacher beginning work at the school. Conversely, I experienced the similarly suspicious looks from people touring the school noticing a man in the classroom.

Likewise, I performed tasks to prove I was good with children, which involved displaying competence and performing emotional labor. My competence displays exhibited what the teachers would later discuss as the positive male role model. I would

work with the children, display affection, sort problems, and so on. This was especially important during stressful times, such as when a child refused to perform a routine task, such as putting work away. In these instances, the expectation is for preschool teachers to suppress their feelings of anger and/or frustration and handle the situation calmly and the child with care. I had several experiences with children “testing boundaries” and in each case I suppressed any negative feelings and instead pursued what I believed were the organizational norms for such situations. In turn, demonstrating I could work with children allowed me greater access to the social worlds of teachers and a better understanding of their experiences.

Interpretive practice

I draw on James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium’s (2000) framework of interpretive practice to understand the interplay between discourses-in-practice and discursive practice. Discourses-in-practice refers to the “broad configurations of meaningful action...[that] set the conditions of possibility” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:93), while discursive practice refers to how language is used to construct contextual reality. Interpretive practice has foundations in ethnomethodology and discourse analysis and seeks to understand what Holstein and Gubrium call the *whats* of discourses-in-practice and the *hows* of discursive practice. The *whats* refer to the repertoire of available discourses, and the *hows* to the work people “do” to accomplish goals, such as identity construction. Another aspect of interpretive practice relates to institutional contexts. For example, a person might speak “as a father” and call on discourses of family to signal an identity (Gubrium 1988). In turn, institutional discourses are embedded in specific

locales. Writing in relation to constituting subjectivity, Holstein and Gubrium (2000:95) explain,

Selves are themselves institutional projects in the sense that institutional discourses provide the conditions of possibility and institutionalized discursive practice supplies the mode of production for putting into effect our identities as part of accomplishing matters of ongoing local interest.

The institutional context matters because it conditions individual's resources.

Contextual resources are matters of situational concern aiming at accomplishing situated goals. Such situated concerns influence, often subtly, individuals' meaning making activities in which broader understandings shape local interpretations, and local practices reify social structures. Thus, individuals are able to draw upon cultural, institutional, and organizational understandings of the preschool, for example, and then apply it to the situation at hand. Interpretive practice, then, is a way of analyzing the interplay between broader systems of meaning and meaning making activities. Here, I apply it to Ellis Montessori Preschool.

Identity work

Everyday life does not just happen. It takes "work." This is especially true when talking about identity. Identity is worked up, or constructed, through talk and interaction. This work marks the positions we take toward our selves, others, and the broader social and cultural contexts in which individuals interact. Identity work, then, uses interpretation to make meaning of individuals within situations, in which interpretation emerges from experience and context. Analyzing everyday sites of talk and interaction renders the practical matter of identity construction visible.

There are multiple views of what constitutes identity work. Here, I view identity as constituted in the institution in which individuals are embedded, and talk and

interaction as the work of strategically accomplishing situated goals. Conceptualizing identity work as a situational accomplishment attunes us to the local context and how individuals negotiate the often ambiguous terrain of local settings. We are able to analyze practical matters, such as teaching and caring in the preschool, as situational performances of identity construction – which are acted out in the context of the preschool, but guided by broader social structures. In this sense, teaching and caring become resources for how preschool teachers “do” (Garfinkel 1967) preschool teacher identity.

The Articles

The body of this dissertation is comprised of three articles analyzing the interplay of discourse and preschool teachers’ everyday work. In general, the articles revolve around preschool teacher identity work as it relates to themes of suspicion, competence, and coping in the preschool.

The first article, “Preschool Teachers and the Discourse of Suspicion,” was accepted for publication in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. In it, I identify a discourse of suspicion relating to men working in preschools. Individuals use the discourse of suspicion to characterize men as threats to the gender order of the preschool. Men working in preschools are broadly construed as pedophiles, homosexuals, violent, and/or effeminate. I then move on to preschool teachers suspicion minimizing strategies. Preschool teachers, and especially men preschool teachers, employ strategies to remain beyond reproach such as by being visible to other employees at all times and setting boundaries for affection with preschool children. This article shifts the focus from the issue of too few men in ECE to interpretations of men in ECE.

The second article, “Gender and Preschool Teacher Competence” also analyzes gender in the preschool. Here, I show how preschool teachers use the gender order to construct competent identities. More specifically, preschool teachers draw on the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model to construct three types of competence: de facto competence, token competence, and behavioral competence. De facto competence draws on the discourse of mothering and characterizes men as incompetent because they lack maternal instincts. Token competence draws on the discourse of the positive male role model and characterizes men as competent because they are mostly absent from preschools (making them a commodity). Behavioral competence draws upon and resists the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model to construct competence. This article demonstrates how the gender order is not only a broad social structure, but also a complexly organized resource used strategically during talk and interaction.

The final article is titled “Preschool Teachers and the Discourse of Caring.” In it, I first identify a discourse of caring prevalent in early childhood education settings. The discourse of caring broadly characterizes preschools as happy, safe places for children; and preschool teachers as loving, pleasant, compassionate people trustworthy to care for young children. The discourse of caring conceals the work of being a preschool teacher, especially emotional labor. The second half of the article analyzes preschool teachers coping strategies I call “identity preservers.” Identity preservers preserve conceptualizations of Ellis Montessori Preschool and its teachers as safe and caring by allowing preschool teachers to negotiate or even escape stressful situations. In large part,

coping strategies are performed because of the discourse of caring and turn on the interplay of cultural and institutional expectations.

I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of my findings and why they are theoretically important for sociological inquiry, the implications of research relating to gender and early childhood education, and then suggest a way to think about sociological research in early childhood education.

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CHAPTER TWO: PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND THE DISCOURSE OF SUSPICION

Abstract

This article addresses gender practices in a preschool context. The data is from ethnographic participant observation in a Montessori preschool and interviews with preschool teachers. I identify a discourse of suspicion surrounding male preschool teachers and preconstructing them as threats. The dimensions of the discourse of suspicion in early childhood education I identify characterize male preschool teachers as pedophiles, homosexual, effeminate, and/or violent. I also identify several strategies preschool teachers use to minimize suspicion. Minimizing suspicion is a discursive and self-presentation strategy with the goal of avoiding and/or limiting suspicion. Although the discourse of suspicion in ECE primarily applies to males, female preschool teachers also use suspicion minimizing strategies. I find the discourse of suspicion and preschool teachers' suspicion minimizing strategies emerge from hegemonic representations and practices relating to the gendered order.

Keywords

masculinity, suspicion, early childhood education, Montessori, preschool

Preschools are often a child's introduction to the world of education. We expect preschools to be happy places and socially and academically prepare children for elementary school. We anticipate fun, laughter, singing, coloring, ABC's and 123's, a few bumps and bruises, rule learning, and maybe a few tears. We also expect preschool teachers to be kind, caring, nurturing, knowledgeable, and mothering. That is, we expect preschool teachers to be women. Men are usually not part of the preschool (or elementary school) gender order.

Several scholars address the dearth of men in early childhood education (ECE), especially in primary school education, and its consequences (Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998, 2009; Sargent 2000, 2001, 2004; Skelton 2003). Policymakers' response to having too few men teachers has been conceptualized as recuperative masculinity politics against the feminization of education (Skelton 2012) resulting in a push to hire more men, believing boys do not have appropriate role models (Martino 2008). Yet, men teaching in ECE are met with suspicion about being a "real man" (Sargent 2000, 2001). As Paul Sargent (2001:80) and James R. King (1998) point out, men are openly recruited to teach, but also subjected to scrutiny if they are unmarried or "act funny," which threatens the gender order.

Policymakers and researchers agree there is a problem. However, is it really that there are too few male role models in ECE? Or, is it a problem of how male teachers are interpreted in these settings? The latter suggests reconceptualizing the problem from recruiting men to the underlying tensions relating to social constructions of gender, and its significance in everyday interpretations relating to ECE.

MASCULINITIES AND SUSPICION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Masculinities are complex constructions relating to the gender order and emerge in various forms such as hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized (Connell 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is the currently acceptable pattern of practices allowing men's dominance to continue over women achieving ascendancy through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Subordinate masculinities are less valued forms of masculinity symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, such as gay masculinities (Connell 1995). Complicit masculinities are those "constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy" (Connell 1995:79). It results in men receiving benefits of hegemony through the subordination of women without using a strong version of masculine dominance (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Marginalized masculinities refer to the interplay of gender with other social forces such as race, ethnicity, and class, and are "always relative to the authorization of hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (Connell 1995:81). Racial and ethnic minority professional athletes, for example, are cheered and revered on the playing fields, but this admiration does not transfer to the political sphere.

Within the gender order, then, hegemonic masculinity overarches other forms, with subordinate, complicit, and marginalized masculinities working below and within its dominant frame. This is not to say hegemonic masculinity is unchallengeable, or that it is completely negative, because representations of masculinity (and femininity) change over time. There are positive outcomes, and many individuals challenge hegemonic domination. Everyday resistance, challenges, collaboration and/or cooperation with the

gender order occur when men undertake professions in female dominated organizations and women undertake professions in male dominated organizations.

Teaching in ECE, and childcare in general, is traditionally considered “women’s work” (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999; Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998; Skelton 2012). Women comprise ninety-seven percent of preschool and elementary school teachers (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2012: Table 616). Preschools are sites in which women are not only the numerical majority, but also the cultural ideal for the occupational role – mother-teacher (Sargent 2005; Skelton 2012). Sargent (2005) uses Joan Acker’s (1991) criteria for gendered organizations and finds ECE is “gendered in terms of the symbols in frequent use, the differential structural location of women and men, the internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their understandings of the organization’s gendered structure, and the interactions among individuals” (Sargent 2005:258). In such settings a “discourse of suspicion” often encircles males.

With few men in ECE they are targets of the discourse of suspicion framing males as “high status tokens” (Sargent 2004:174) or as threats. Complimentary interpretations legitimize males in ECE as working toward administration (Sargent 2004). More often suspicion delegitimizes men in ECE. A man working in a preschool is often framed as unnatural and labeled a homosexual, a pedophile, or feminine (Gosse, Parr, and Allison 2008; King 1998; Oyler, Jennings, and Lozada 2001; Skelton 2012). There is close monitoring of males’ sexuality (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999), time spent alone with children (King 2009; Sargent 2001), and affection and touching (Johnson 2000; Jones 2001; Sargent 2001; Skelton 1991).

The discourse of suspicion has various dimensions. Here, I focus on the dimensions of the discourse of suspicion of male preschool teachers being labeled pedophiles, effeminate, homosexual, and/or potentially violent. The discourse of suspicion legitimates hegemonic masculinity and its associated practices, such as sexism and homophobia. It alienates men from being teachers, nurturers, and caretakers of young children. Often, the male preschool teacher is the recipient of cultural and contextual discipline, which affects interactions (Weaver-Hightower 2011). The goal of this article is to describe dimensions of the discourse of suspicion in ECE, and then articulate preschool teachers' strategies for "minimizing suspicion."

Strategies for minimizing suspicion are discursive constructions relating to self-presentation with the goal of avoiding and/or limiting suspicion. It is undoubtedly applicable to several contexts such as when race, age, gender, and sexuality are disproportionately undervalued. Here, minimizing suspicion is a self-presentation strategy for "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) that diminishes suspicion in ECE. The aim is for preschool teachers to present themselves as non-threatening. Minimizing suspicion emerges from explicit and/or implicit understandings of the discourse of suspicion.

Candace West and Don Zimmerman's (1987) well-known theory of "doing gender" builds on Erving Goffman's (1977) "gender displays" and Harold Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological "doing" showing how gender is interactionally embedded. Numerous studies also argue workplace practices of inequality are organizationally embedded (Acker 1991, 2006; Williams, Muller, and Kilanski 2012). Adding to this tradition, Patricia Yancey Martin (2003, 2006) distinguishes between gender practices

and practicing gender. The former is part of the repertoire of culturally available practices to enact in a social situation (Martin 2003:354). Practicing gender comprises the “literal activities of gender” constituting the gender order (Martin 2003:354). Martin uses a third concept called gender reflexivity, which is thinking about actions and effects related to gender *a priori* (Martin 2003, 2006). Martin (2006) points out practicing gender reflexively “requires awareness and intention relative to a particular purpose” (2006:260). Strategies for minimizing suspicion are often explicit, but in some cases are implicit understandings of the discourse of suspicion demonstrating the “seen but unnoticed” power of discourse (Garfinkel 1967:36).

In the following sections I describe my research setting, data, and analytic strategy. I then analyze the dimensions of the discourse of suspicion as part of the ECE context. Last, I analyze Ellis Montessori Preschool and its preschool teachers’ suspicion minimizing strategies.

THE SETTING AND THE PROJECT

In 1967 a group of parents founded Ellis Montessori Preschool, a pseudonym, as an alternative to traditional preschools in the area. Ellis Montessori is a non-profit preschool housed in a former church in a Midwestern college town in the United States. It serves approximately eighty-five families with children ages four weeks to six years. The building has two floors, a full kitchen, offices, and six classrooms conceptually divided into “upper” and “lower” schools. The upper school has three “primary” classrooms with “friends” (the preschool’s vernacular is gender neutral when referring to children) between the ages of three and six years. The lower school also has three classrooms: “preprimary,” “toddlers,” and “infants.” The preprimary room serves children from ages

two to three years. The toddler room serves children between the ages of one and two years, and the infant room serves children between the ages of four weeks and one year.

The preschool, like most ECE sites, is a female-dominated workplace. There are approximately thirty-five employees at the school, including the head of school, assistant head of school, kitchen manager, six lead teachers, and about twenty-five assistant lead teachers, support staff, and substitute teachers. When I began my research the head of school, one lead teacher, and two fulltime support staff employees were the only men. However, one male lead teacher moved away shortly after my research began and another male support staff employee moved away approximately six months later. At the time of this writing there were two male support staff employees working at the school and the head of school.

I followed Patricia Adler and Peter Adler's (1987, 2012) suggestion to study a familiar setting by doing ethnographic research in the preschool my son had previously attended, and in which I was previously a member on its board of directors. Although I participated in the field prior to formal fieldwork (Fine 2002), I did not formally begin research until over a month after my son left Ellis Montessori and I was no longer on its board of directors. This timeframe coincided with the beginning of the college semester in which many employees left and new employees were hired. Limiting my research to Ellis Montessori allowed me to build relationships with the preschool teachers, children, and many of the parents. I experienced similar situations, feelings, and tensions as the teachers, giving me insight into their occupational realities at Ellis Montessori, particularly being a man spending a significant amount of time in a preschool. Last, it helped me understand organizational norms and practices at Ellis Montessori.

My preexisting relationship made gaining access relatively straightforward. However, building trust and rapport in each classroom was not as easy as it was when I was a parent. I realized early on my background knowledge was not enough to help me navigate the social worlds outside of my son's former classroom. I had to build trust and rapport in each classroom, with multiple children, teachers, and parents. By the time I left the first room in which I observed, I was generally known around the school as a volunteer, rather than a room parent or board member. I attribute this to the high turnover rate at the beginning and ends of each college semester. Although the long-term employees from my son's classroom remembered my previous roles, this too changed within two months with only one teacher remaining from my days as a parent and board member. Eventually, my researcher identity became more prominent as I began interviewing the teachers. Whether the children, teachers, and parents knew of me or not, I had to prove I could work with the children in each room as a first step to building rapport.

It took considerable work to improvise my way through the field. I did it mostly by taking an apprentice role to the lead and assistant teachers and using the best of what they had to offer regarding talk and interaction with the children. I learned about the behavior model many teachers used, *Positive Discipline* (Nelsen 2006), and familiarized myself with the Montessori method as much as possible (Montessori 1964). I intently observed practices and participated, but deferred decisions regarding disputes to teachers until I felt confident I could sort through the issues independently.

Following teachers' examples allowed me to experience what it was like to be a preschool teacher for brief periods of time. Yet there was distance. The teachers in the

first room trusted me with the children, but not enough to let me into the inner workings of the room. When they would discuss classroom matters, for example, they would first glance in my direction and then walk out of my range of hearing. I soon began developing strategies to build stronger trust and rapport with the teachers. My goal, like most ethnographers, was to “unmark” my identity (Pruit 2012) and be taken for granted fixture in the school and privy to insider information. For example, when a need arose in the room, like going to the kitchen to get utensils or milk, I would volunteer. There was also a side to doing research in a preschool making me accountable to parents. I had to blend in enough for parents to believe I was either a legitimate researcher or a teacher. I dressed similar to the teachers, but also had the symbols of my researcher identity with me. Thus, like other preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori, I developed strategies for minimizing suspicion.

Data

This article was written following two years of fieldwork in which I spent two to three days per week at Ellis Montessori Preschool as a participant observer. My fieldnotes include standard information about the date, time in the field, and the day’s eventfulness. I took more fieldnotes during first days in a room when everything seemed fresh and different (Goffman 1989). After a few weeks I began participating more in the day-to-day activities of the classrooms, returning to my notes at opportune moments, such as when the class transitioned from the classroom to the playground. I typed my fieldnotes as soon as possible after leaving the preschool while simultaneously making analytic notes in the margins in markup (Charmaz 2006). If something were particularly interesting I would make a note of it and come back to it later. I let analytic categories

emerge from the field and then continued observations to confirm its presence. Often, I asked the teachers about my interpretations to validate, discard, and/or modify them. This practice allowed me to develop and refine analytic categories early on, shaping my view of the field while still in it. I pursued emergent themes and broadly categorized talk and interaction as types of identity work. Fieldnotes also became a tool for to review others' and my actions, and to adjust and prepare for future interactions. In this manner I was able to sketch the analytic contours of my project and generate interview questions from fieldwork.

I conducted twenty-three interviews with preschool teachers, three males and twenty females, lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. Interviews focused on the work of being a preschool teacher including teaching and learning, emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), and gender work as part of their identity work. My interview guide included different themes developed from fieldwork and allowed me to move through the questions conversationally as themes emerged from the interview context (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

Interview participants were given pseudonyms, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Interviews were initially coded using the broad themes from observations and interview questions. I then identified emergent themes for further analysis. I documented themes considering it forms of “interpretive practice” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Regarding gender, I asked participants about males working in preschools. Questions about gender came from initial observations that no males worked in the lower school. I was later told of a rule about males not being able to escort children, namely female children, to the restroom unless

accompanied by another female employee. I also asked questions about themes arising from the interview context itself, such as about the fairness of organizational gender practices.

Analytic Strategy

I draw on James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium's (2000) "interpretive practice" to understand the interplay between discourses-in-practice and discursive practice. Interpretive practice has foundations in ethnomethodology and discourse analysis and seeks to understand what Holstein and Gubrium call the *whats* and the *hows*. The *whats* refer to the repertoire of available discourses, and the *hows* to the work people "do" to accomplish goals, such as identity construction. Another aspect of interpretive practice relates to institutional contexts. For example, a person might speak "as a father" and call on discourses of family to signal an identity. In turn, the institutional discourses are embedded in specific locales. Writing in relation to constituting subjectivity, Holstein and Gubrium (2000:95) explain,

Selves are themselves institutional projects in the sense that institutional discourses provide the conditions of possibility and institutionalized discursive practice supplies the mode of production for putting into effect our identities as part of accomplishing matters of ongoing local interest.

Context matters because it conditions the resources individuals use, or choose not to use, during talk and interaction. Contextual resources are matters of situational concern aiming at accomplishing situated goals. Such situated concerns influence, often subtly, individuals' meaning making activities in which broader understandings shape local interpretations, though not deterministically. Thus individuals are able to draw upon cultural, institutional, and organizational understandings of gender and education, for example, and then apply it to the situation at hand. Interpretive practice, then, is a way of

analyzing the interplay between broader structures of meaning and meaning making activities.

Focusing on preschool teachers is a potentially rich source of data increasing our knowledge of how discourses-in-practice, such as the discourse of suspicion, affect preschool teachers' discursive practice. By concentrating on a single preschool I am able to couple preschool teachers' discursive constructions with organizational practices and cultural (hegemonic) discourses, which lends insight into the social worlds of Ellis Montessori and demonstrates interplay between culture, the organization, and individuals.

THE DISCOURSE OF SUSPICION

If suspicion makes the rules of masculinity visible (Sargent 2005:258), then unpacking the dimensions of the discourse of suspicion is one way to make visible the unnaturalness in naturalized practices. The discourse of suspicion preconstructs males as threats to the purity of ECE. This threat is the fear males are pedophiles, effeminate, homosexual, and/or violent. Thus, suspicion is directed at males characterizing them as predatory, having questionable motives, and/or having subordinate statuses. As with many discourses, the discourse of suspicion has several sources, such as the media or cultural views of occupational prestige. It is some thing "out there" beyond the grasp of individuals, and yet individuals use it in the everyday context of ECE. My goal is to explicate the dimensions of the discourse of suspicion in ECE by examining how preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool discursively construct it. I identify several dimensions including society and suspicion, women's work, questioning motives and masculinity, and "the look."

Suspicion and Society

As with much of our taken for granted knowledge, where the discourse of suspicion in ECE originates is difficult to locate. As Judith Butler (1990) points out, there need not be a doer behind the deed. Practicing suspicion and providing the grounds for it is a complicated matter, and often mutually exclusive. When asked, many of the female preschool teachers referred generally to “society” as the reason for suspecting males. Although female teachers trust male teachers at the school, they believe males in ECE are generally stigmatized. The presence of a male preschool teacher implies a potential threat to the safety of children. Here, Jennifer, an upper school support staff member, broadly construes the discourse of suspicion as a fear of male preschool teachers as pedophiles.

I think there's, society has an opinion that men teachers, that's why you don't see very many male preschool teachers, or teachers in general, just because there is that whole stigma in society that men are more predators and can't be trusted around younger females.

Stereotypes of male preschool teachers are not grounded in practical experience, but rely on collective representations (Durkheim 1912/2001) of “society” that men cannot be trusted with young children because they are potentially predators. Below, Samantha, an upper school assistant lead teacher, takes the perspective of parents as she explains the rule about men not taking children to the restroom.

I think we made this rule, and I'm not sure why it came about, but I think it is that men can't take a girl potty by themselves. I think it's just for peace of mind in the parents. Nothing happened to make that rule, nothing happened to create that rule, but I think it's just looks, you know? People don't want an adult man taking their child potty alone... I can understand. I don't have any kids, but I could understand, you know, and we, it would make parents uncomfortable. Because we have such a high turnover anyway, you know? There's a new man taking your kid potty alone and you don't know who they are.

Samantha illustrates Butler's (1990) point there need not be an actual person or event bringing about a particular disposition. She attributes the rule to "looks," in this case, parents' perception and giving them "peace of mind." In doing so, Samantha takes the view of a suspicious parent and empathizes with how they may feel about a male preschool teacher caring for their child. Her reasoning is the unfamiliarity with males a parent might have, which preconstructs males as suspicious.

The discourse of suspicion preconstructs a discredited identity (Goffman 1963) prior to ever meeting a male preschool teacher. It is a way to question, categorize, and otherwise police the actions, bodies, and minds of men in ECE. It is present, but lacks experiential grounding. This allows individuals to use the discourse of suspicion while distancing themselves from it.

Women's Work

Views of gender roles also contribute to the discourse of suspicion. In particular, the binary of "women's work" and "men's work" contributes to ideas of hegemony appropriate to one's biological sex and occupation, among other things. I asked Ceana about why more men do not work in ECE. Her response is preschool teaching is broadly considered "women's work." Although Ceana, an upper school support staff member, discusses the positive aspects of ECE as women's work, it can be pejorative for women and also stigmatize men doing women's work. Both interpretations contribute to the discourse of suspicion in ECE and attribute a subordinate masculinity to male preschool teachers, while also subordinating women in general.

I guess I haven't really seen that many men interviewing either, so I don't think it's on the part of administration's hiring. But, I mean, this job is quite attractive to young females like myself who are needing steady work that they can do. Doesn't require, you know, I mean I have a high school diploma but I haven't

graduated college yet. Um, so it's a good job for girls like me. I mean, it'd be a great job for men too. I think they might just have a bias about it...Like, you know, dealing with children is women's work.

The discourse of suspicion emerges in individual interpretations of ECE as women's work. Preschool teaching as women's work allows for its occupational devaluation through low pay and low prestige, among other things. As Ceana points out, it is open to women without hegemonically valued skills, such as a college education. Hence, men working in ECE have a subordinate masculinity (Connell 1995). Men are not *men* if they are doing women's work (King 1998; Sargent 2001; Skelton 2003). As a dimension of the discourse of suspicion, women's work problematizes subordinated masculinities and might be enough to dissuade men from pursuing careers in ECE. If a dearth of men teaching preschool is problematic, then Ceana rightly locates it within the broader social construction of women's work.

Questioning Motives and Masculinity

Because preschool teaching is considered women's work there is a view men doing it are not the right type of masculine, in addition to being a pedophilic threat . The discourse of suspicion is not only about males being sexual predators, but also about males not displaying hegemonic masculinity. As with women's work, subordinate (gay) masculinities and pedophilia are conflated in the context of ECE (King 1998; Sargent 2001; Skelton 2009) revealing the compounding embeddedness of the discourse of suspicion. Bethany, an upper school support staff member, explains how male preschool teachers' motives are questioned, and how they are often understood as having subordinate masculinities, such as gay or effeminate masculinities.

Some people, I think. Some people I think might assume that, well they might question, "Why does this guy want to be around children? What's up with him?"

Why does he like children so much?” Like it’s completely unexpected for some reason. I think also they might view the man as being really effeminate, and might see him negatively. Like he’s not masculine enough. Or, yeah, not masculine enough to find a *real* job [her emphasis]. Especially because education, of young children at least, is predominantly, women are educators. And it’s seen as a profession, in our culture at least, that is not highly valued. And so if a man goes into a profession like that then I think that, men who would go into the profession are, um, seen in a negative light. Or they’re questioned in a way that people wonder if they’re some kind of pervert or predator in some way. Yeah, if that makes sense. Well just that his character is questioned, and what his intentions are, are questioned.

The discourse of suspicion provides grounds to challenge the character of males in ECE. Males’ motives and masculinity are often questioned for working with young children and construct a chain of conflation. Questioning men in ECE conflates the workplace with an effeminate masculinity, effeminacy with sexuality, and sexuality with sexual perversion and child predation. Hegemonic masculinity underscores these confluences. Because ECE is women’s work, men doing it have subordinate masculine and occupational statuses. The underlying meaning is teaching preschool is not a job for a man, and so a real man would not work in a preschool. However, as occupationally undervalued members of the workforce it is permissible for women to work in professions broadly considered unskilled. Again, women’s work, especially caring for young children, is overtly undervalued work limited to women.

“The Look”

The discourse of suspicion is something preschool teachers experience as scrutiny (King 2001). Bob, an upper school support staff member, describes his experiences with the discourse of suspicion as receiving “the look.” “The look” is the belief one is under intense scrutiny. It is the surveillance and gendering of the body, along with perceived subordination and marginalization, experienced through the gaze of another. “The look”

is important because it demonstrates awareness of the gender order, prejudice of males in ECE, and cultural preferences for female preschool teachers. Below, Bob describes “the look” in the context of parents touring the school or first noticing their child will have a male preschool teacher.

Now that said, since I’ve worked there I’ve gotten “the look” [uses fingers to symbolize quotation marks]. The look you get from some parents when they walk in and they’re like, “So this is the school my kid’s going to. Oh there’s a *man* [his emphasis] working here?” I’m like, yeah, I’m the one that’s gonna be the first line of defense if any psychos try to come into the building. You should be thankful I’m here. I’m six foot tall. I’m slightly more physically intimidating than the five foot tall pregnant woman over there in the kitchen. But I’ve gotten that look. I’ve gotten the look from parents where they’re very apprehensive about having a man working in the classroom.

Bob’s experience with what he calls “the look” acknowledges his perception of others’ suspicion. His knowledge of gendered occupations is a way of understanding his presence as culturally problematic, or at the very least non-normative. Rather than viewing himself as problematic, Bob positions himself using hegemonic masculinity and labels himself positively as a token. In this case, he claims a protective status as the “first line of defense” between “psychos” and the children justifying his value to the preschool. Discursively positioning himself as protective makes claims toward hegemonic masculinity while subordinating a female teacher as incapable of protecting the children (King 1998, 2009).

The above data begin to illustrate the complexity of the discourse of suspicion and how it applies to men in ECE. It influences beliefs about appropriateness relating to context, gender, and work indicating who should be included and excluded from certain places and practices. Although one might say male exclusion is harmful, naturalizing females as caretakers is also harmful. On one hand it normalizes an increased distance

between males and nurturing roles, forcing males to prove their ability before trusting them. On the other hand, it implicitly naturalizes females as caretakers regardless of individual preference.

Having sketched the dimensions of the discourse of suspicion at Ellis Montessori, I will next analyze organizational and individual strategies for minimizing suspicion.

MINIMIZING SUSPICION

Although it is a practice, the discourse of suspicion has seemingly nebulous origins. The Ellis Montessori teachers did not have a concrete example of a male threat, but instead generally referred to collective representations – society, looks, and perceptions – as to why suspicion occurs. In the following sections I discuss strategies for minimizing suspicion. Here, strategies for minimizing suspicion exist at the organizational and individual levels. Suspicion minimizing strategies allow male preschool teachers to pass, and, at times, trouble the discourse of suspicion. It also has dividends and deductions associated with the gender order. The suspicion minimizing strategies I identify include limiting suspicion, being complicit, setting boundaries, being visible, building trust, distancing from threat, and using family.

Limiting Suspicion

Social stigma underlies certain formal and informal organizational practices. Limiting suspicion is an organizational practice to protect the preschool and its employees from suspicion. During my research project, for example, males did not work in the lower school (with children ages three and below), change diapers, or help children change their clothes. Although I found nothing about these gendered practices in the employee handbook, it was a part of the school's working code. The account below is of

a conversation with the head of school in which we discussed males in ECE. He discusses organizational strategies brought about by parent concerns, rather than concrete events.

While speaking with the head of school I brought up the issue of being a male in ECE. We spoke about how he cannot hire a male employee for the infants' room because the parents would be "up in arms" as he put it. "They simply wouldn't allow it." I asked if it would be problematic for me spending time in there, but he did not believe it would be ("Absolutely not. You already know most of the parents in there."). We then spoke about the school's seemingly unwritten policy of males being accompanied when escorting friends to the restroom. He told me about how men cannot change a friend's [child's] clothes that has had an accident (urinated in her/his pants) because of the perception. He confessed that many of the gendered practices of the school were to avoid misperceptions. The conversation seemed to have a "my hands are tied" feel to it.

Hiring and placement practices and rules about contact and visibility with children are an administrative concern to avoid misperception. The school's administration takes preventative measures to limit suspicion of its male employees. Although prevention is an organizational strategy aiming at protecting employees, it also aligns with the discourse of suspicion implicitly perpetuating the idea men in ECE are potential threats. While this may limit suspicion, it also limits where men can be, who they can be with, and what actions they can perform. Organizational gendered practices such as this reinforce gender roles, hierarchy, and stratification in relationships among employees, children, and parents, and demonstrate interplay between discourse and gendered organizational practices.

Proposing Subordination

Proposing subordination suggests submitting to organizational constraints relating to the gender order for the benefit of the individual and organization. Men are expected (and believed) to accept organizational constraints as beneficial to them. Gender constraints are coercive and limit agency, but still leave men open to questions about

there masculinity, sexuality, and competence. Some preschool teachers believe the rules should apply to everyone, not just men. Women sometimes accept subordination, but do not have the same set of constraints. In this sense, women accepting subordination is largely symbolic, since they are not preconstructed as threats. However, it could result in losing some matriarchal dividends, such as being considered less nurturing.

Employees generally understand organizational practices limiting suspicion as a form of protection. Although attributing the problem of suspicion to collective representations of society and claiming to trust the males at Ellis Montessori, some preschool teachers nonetheless offered explanations justifying organizational practices of subordination. Below, Alicia, a lower school assistant lead teacher, discusses why the rule about men not escorting children to the restroom is beneficial and protective.

I don't even feel like the guys that work here feel like it's an unnecessary rule. The fact is that regardless of whether or not abuse is more prevalent among men is not even the question. It's the fact that I think society perceives it to be that way. And in order to protect our male teachers and to, you know, to ease the suspicions, or whatever that a parent may believe, that we've already covered those bases. Like leaving them [males] above reproach so that they don't even have to find themselves in a situation where a parent would misunderstand their intentions.

Alicia proposes men accept subordination as part of their job. She defends organizational practices as necessary by reifying views of males as suspicious, although she states this is not why the rule is necessary. It is necessary to ease parents' suspicions and insulate male preschool teachers from potentially questionable situations. Alicia believes men approve of the rules for their benefit, but I will show it is coercive and mostly to avoid suspicion. The potential for parent suspicions represent collective representations about male preschool teachers as suspicious and threatening. But, as Alicia explains, organizational practices protect men from being misunderstood.

Like the organizational strategy of limiting suspicion, proposing subordination minimizes suspicion within Ellis Montessori by constraining men. Because it aligns with hegemonic gender norms, accepting subordination has a “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 1995) because men do not have to perform the same tasks as women. Not working in the lower school means men do not have to do “dirty” work, like changing diapers. Thus, while men are constrained in their workplace practices, there is a payoff associated with this constraint.

Setting Boundaries

Setting boundaries is part of the everyday practices preschool teachers do to minimize suspicion. Boundaries are personal rules, rather than organizational rules, implemented on the part of the individual. Bill, an upper school lead teacher, limits the types of affection he displays toward children (King 1998; Sargent 2001). However, his motives for doing this are not completely obvious to him.

The only thing I ever really set for myself as a boundary, and I still to this day am not even sure why, I always said that, and maybe I heard it somewhere in Montessori, I don't know, but you know I'd tell the kids whether they were wanting to kind of kiss each other, or whoever, but that was kind of for at home with your parents. And if they say you can kiss other people that's ok, you know? Hugs are ok, but I wouldn't let the kids kiss me or I wouldn't kiss them. I would see other, female, people at school being really affectionate at school and giving them kisses all the time, and I don't know, I guess that's just more of a social thing that that's just more accepted.

Bill minimizes suspicion by setting affection boundaries. His response illustrates resistance to the idea he could be the object of suspicion, but ultimately the discourse works through him implicitly. Not being bothered by others' perceptions does not mean he is free from suspicion, or from suspicion minimizing strategies. This is evident when he admits affection boundaries with the children, while also pointing out women are able

to show affection without suspicion. At first, he is unsure why he has rules about displaying affection, believing it may be part of the Montessori teaching philosophy, which suggests observational distance between teachers and students, but later attributes women being able to display affection to social circumstances. Not fully considering why he established his affection rules shows how the discourse of suspicion can influence talk and interaction in a taken for granted manner (Weaver-Hightower 2011).

Being Visible

Being visible to others is a one of the most popular suspicion minimizing strategies preschool teachers use. Using visibility is a way to be accountable to administration, other employees, and parents. It is also a way to be subordinated by and complicit to the discourse of suspicion by conceding the need to place oneself under constant surveillance. Being visible is a strategy male and female teachers use. That is, trying to be visible at all times explicitly acknowledges the discourse of suspicion and is a strategy for minimizing suspicion. Below, Bob discusses the importance of being visible in relation to taking children to the restroom.

So, me as a male taking these female three, four, five-year-old girls to go to the bathroom is as far as me going, walking through the hallway and saying, "There's the bathroom. Wash your hands and come out when you're done." So I'm basically just sitting on a bench in the hallway. So I don't really worry about any of that because I'm fully within the view of multiple other teachers. If it ever comes up I've got witnesses that'll say I was just sitting in the hallway.

While there may be some stigma attached to males taking children to the restroom, there is considerably more stigma attached to not being visible during the process. Always being in the view of others represents subordination and complicity with the discourse of suspicion. Bob is subordinate and complicit with the discourse of suspicion by sitting in the hallway waiting for the children to finish in the restroom and

not helping them perform restroom tasks such as hand washing. It allows men to trouble the border between complicit and subordinate masculinities. Taking children to the restroom disrupts the taken for granted, while remaining outside the restroom ensures a form of the patriarchal dividend because there is no interaction with the child in the restroom. An added benefit of being visible is the strengthening of a subordinate masculine identity. A man willing to be a preschool teacher can reap rewards of organizational tokenism, regardless of competency. Many female preschool teachers, for example, referred to the male preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori as “safe” and “positive” role models (Martino 2008).

Although teachers agree gender rules apply to men, some of the female employees expressed gender rules should apply to everyone at the school. In this sense, some female employees also accept the burden of suspicion by adhering to gender rules normally aiming at men. Alison, an upper school assistant lead teacher, explains her understanding of the rules and how she limits suspicion by being visible.

Ah, we were told that that is the policy and we try to adhere to that, but sometimes that's not possible. But we try to encourage all of our teachers to not be somewhere alone private in the school with a friend, whether they're male or female. If the child has to go to the bathroom take them to the bathroom in the hallway where everybody can see you all of the time. Don't take them up to the classroom and be the only one in the classroom with a friend.

Being visible is a strategy some female teachers use because they believe it is important to protect themselves and male preschool teachers. Alison believes the rules should apply to everyone, rather than males, and being visible is a strategy all teachers should use. In her account, Alison encourages other employees to take children to the hallway restroom, which is most visible to others. Being visible is a display strategy male and female teachers use to minimize suspicion. However, unlike men, women practice

visibility symbolically. Women may not receive any type of dividend from not helping a child with restroom related activities, and may even lose interpretations of feminine competence (being nurturing/mothering) as a result.

Building Trust

One of the ways preschool teachers spoke about building trust was when the children would ask them for help, talk to them, and/or show them affection. For the teachers, this represented trust between the child and themselves. Although he has affection boundaries, Bill is an affectionate person and enjoys being in the type of atmosphere where he can show his affection. He uses it as a resource for building and displaying trust.

And I just never wanted to kind of, I don't know, I never really had too much of a complex, or perception about how parents saw me with kids. I have never had anything except love for the kids in the most teacher/friend way. I never had anything placed on me where I felt I can't hug this kid it might seem like I'm a predator or something like that. And, I've always been, like I said, a physical, affectionate person and have always wanted this kind of outlet to kind of show my affection for people. And I could see right from the bat how most kids really, that's how you can build trust with them.

Bill discursively justifies his displays of affection toward the children. For him and many of the other teachers, a child's willingness and desire to seek him out is a sign of trust. Although he has not had sanctions for showing affection (being interpreted as a predator) and believes it helps build trust with children, he still includes the caveat he has "never had anything except love for the kids in the most teacher/friend way." This statement betrays the power of the discourse of suspicion to exert control over males' discursive justification for displays of affection. Although he had never felt like he could not show affection, he still felt it necessary to make clear the type of affection and his motive, which hints at the considerable work males do to minimize pedophilic suspicion.

Distancing from Threat

Distancing from threat minimizes suspicion by positioning oneself away from a discrediting status. In this discursive moment Bob distances himself from suspicion by using subordinate masculinity (Connell 1995), which is quite different than “being the first line of defense” representing hegemonic masculinity he used when talking about “the look.” Here, Bob draws on the idea males in preschools are threats, and then uses representations from subordinate masculinities to distance himself from suspicion.

Where do I start on this? The whole issue of being a male in a preschool is just a, just a hotbed of discussion. I think it’s ridiculous and asinine on pretty much every front. I wasn’t born with a football player’s physique. I’m not gonna be a manly, manly man, type man. I’m the kind of guy who gets along with kids. I still watch cartoons. I read comic books. There’s nothing weird about it. I have no desire to whatever they’re worried I would do as a man. Are there child molesters in the world? Yes, of course there are. But why do I have to be one to be a preschool teacher? I just, I don’t get that. I mean, I get along with kids. That’s all there is to it. I play video games, I like comic books, I like cartoons, I wear Star Wars t-shirts every day of the week and I’m a grown man. And clearly, I did not grow up so much, but it just means I get and get along with kids.

Bob is frustrated with the suspicion of men in ECE. He uses elements from subordinate masculinities to distance himself from the discourse of suspicion and hegemonic masculinity (Wetherell and Edley 1999). Using a subordinate masculinity as a resource speaks to the suspicion males are violent and/or sexual predators. Bob constructs a contrast structure (Smith 1978) in which he positively foregrounds his subordinate masculinity as a non-threat while simultaneously backgrounding hegemonic masculinity as a violent threat. He uses his physical characteristics, choice of clothing, personal entertainment preferences, and interactional strategies with children as resources to distance himself from being a threat and from hegemonic masculinity.

Using Family

Using family refers to Ellis preschool teachers using collective representations of family (Gubrium 1988) as discursive resources during talk and interaction to make claims toward hegemonic masculinity using a heteronormatively complicit form of masculinity (Connell 1995). Preschool teachers use family to challenge, resist, align, and make sense of the discourse of suspicion. Indeed, I found myself using my heterosexual credentials by talking about “my wife” or “my son” with preschool teachers. Often, using family signals the heteronormative order (Kitzinger 2005), which tacitly legitimates hegemonic masculinity while disregarding subordinate masculinities, such as gay masculinity. Male preschool teachers displaying symbols such as a wedding band can signal commitment to a partner and counter pedophilic fears. Below, Bob uses family as a resource to minimize suspicion.

I have a daughter who is beautiful and well adjusted, who loves me very much, and has no reason or will ever have any reason to fear me for any reason. Violent, or, any, any, anything else anyone would ever worry about me being a male in a preschool. . . . So, now that’s just my personal feelings. I’ve got a daughter. I’ve proven time and time again I’m no danger to these kids. Kids trust me and seek me out. So clearly if I was hurting them in any way I would assume they wouldn’t be doing that. I mean, I don’t know. I don’t have a lot of experience with what it’s like to be a child molester. [laughs] Because I’m not.

If the discourse of suspicion in ECE turns on fear of males as pedophiles, homosexuals, and/or potentially violent persons, then Bob uses family as a resource to minimize it. Bob uses family to emphasize two points. First, he is a good father, heterosexual, and by extension a good preschool teacher. Second, he is not a threat to the safety of children. He talks about family and uses the language of being good parent to explain he is not violent. In this sense, the discourse of suspicion includes males being potentially violent with children, and so he discusses non-violence as a sign of his

trustworthiness. Bob's repetition ("any, any, anything") emphasizes his resistance to the suspicion of violence. Similar to Bill (above), he closes his response with an explicit resistance to the discourse of suspicion by clarifying he is not a child molester.

Constantly reinforcing one is not a sexual threat indicates the work of minimizing suspicion is an ongoing task for men in ECE.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I address the complexities of gender in Ellis Montessori Preschool by identifying and analyzing the discourse of suspicion and preschool teachers' suspicion minimizing strategies. In early childhood education the discourse of suspicion almost exclusively applies to males categorizing them as homosexual, effeminate, violent, and/or pedophiles. It provides a context in which males must prove themselves to be trustworthy to administration, other teachers, and parents prior to being accepted at the school. Although the discourse of suspicion in ECE predominantly focuses on males, females also respond to the discourse of suspicion, such as by being visible. Minimizing suspicion involves discursive and self-presentation strategies with the goal of avoiding and/or limiting suspicion, and implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the discourse of suspicion.

Identifying the discourse of suspicion and analyzing minimizing strategies shows the interplay of local interpretations of broader issues and organizational and individual practice regarding those issues. I found, in part, minimizing suspicion draws on personal resources reinforcing hegemonic expectations of masculinity. In other instances, self-presentation strategies appear to trouble hegemony and the discourse of suspicion by bordering complicit and subordinate masculinities, as when men escort children to the restroom but do not enter it. However, minimizing suspicion is not so much resistance to

the discourse of suspicion as it is the internalization of it. Although varying masculinities are discursively appropriated, it is only done so as needed. Males develop affection boundaries, build trust, stay visible, distance themselves from threat, and use family to minimize suspicion. In many cases, minimizing suspicion reaps patriarchal dividends, such as when using family. The tacit acknowledgment of the discourse of suspicion reifies, and in some ways validates the gender order. In short, the discourse of suspicion in the context of ECE conditions possibilities for minimizing strategies from which preschool teachers may never truly break.

The discourse of suspicion is a form of surveillance shaping self-presentation strategies, which evolved from the need to circumvent fears males are threats to the purity of ECE. The main difficulty in practicing minimizing suspicion, or any self-presentation strategy, is our bodies always trap us. Self-presentation strategies are preceded by others' interpretations, in this case interpretation based on gender roles, occupations, motives, and so on. Preconstructing suspicion reinforces Judith Butler's (1990) argument "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler 1990:195). Although none of the teachers could recall any specific instances of a male acting inappropriately with children, the organizational rules still existed. Thus, the discourse of suspicion perpetuates gender inequality in ECE.

At first blush, gender inequality in ECE appears to reverse itself from hegemonic norms dominating females. It is true the males at Ellis Montessori were limited in some of their work practices because only females were supposed to change diapers, help children change their clothes, and so on. However, when asked, many female teachers

admitted this type of “dirty” work was the least enjoyable part of their job. Rather than the rules being exclusionary, it excuses men from the least enjoyable part of the job and provides a patriarchal dividend. This ultimately reinforces gender inequality toward women because they are expected to do more work that is less personally rewarding than males. In this sense, gender inequality masks itself as organizational protection of employees.

If the discourse of suspicion constrains men in ECE, then strategies for minimizing suspicion allow men to pass and/or trouble the gender order. Minimizing strategies evolve from implicit and explicit understandings of the discourse of suspicion. As the data shows, the discourse of suspicion shapes how preschool teachers talk and interact in the context of ECE, and how it shapes self-presentation strategies. Bill, for example, limited how he showed affection, but still justified his motives for showing affection when talking about building trust. This troubles hegemony while also being constrained by it. Bob positioned himself against the women of the school to claim a hegemonic protector identity. He also used collective representations of family to make claims toward hegemonic and subordinate masculinities showing how discursive resources variably position preschool teacher identities. However, both Bill and Bob felt it necessary to make clear their sexuality and motives for working with preschoolers indicating the work of minimizing suspicion is an ongoing reflexive practice.

Suspicion minimizing strategies also hint at preschool teachers’ varying dividends and deductions relating to the gender order. Alison, and many other female teachers, believed all teachers should use visibility. However, a female being visible is not the same as a male being visible. There is a payoff for a man taking a child to the restroom

because he is troubling the gender order while still protecting his masculinity by being visible outside the restroom. A woman does not receive this benefit because she is expected to be a natural caretaker. A man does not actually have to help the child to reap this reward. Whereas a woman not helping a child runs the risk of losing interpretive competencies associated with nurturing, caring, and mothering. This undermines the idea a preschool is woman's domain, since a woman's competency is tethered to naturalized interpretations of femininity, and her femininity is always subordinate to hegemonic masculinity.

This research has limitations, strengths, and implications for future research and those working in ECE. One limitation is that it is a study of one preschool, Ellis Montessori Preschool. As Christine Skelton (2003:196) rightly notes, there is a danger in essentializing in small-scale studies. She suggests larger studies would be useful for comparing within and between men and women. Next, and related, of the twenty-three interviews with preschool teachers, only three were with men, further limiting the generalizability of my findings. However, others interviewing teachers from primary school settings (King 1998; Sargent 2000, 2001) and preschool settings (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999) report similar findings, providing confidence my findings are not isolated to Ellis Montessori Preschool.

If there is a dearth of men in ECE it may relate to the dearth of women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ persons, and persons with disabilities crafting education policy. This suggests structural changes for *who* is involved in policy making. Rather than constructing competency through hegemonic traditions of exclusion, a pronounced effort to disrupt the politics of exclusion should be made by capitalizing on our

differences at every level of the education policy process. In other words, the implications for policymakers are similar to that of administrators and teachers. Changing the perception of men in ECE is as much about education as it is sensitizing individuals to the social construction of gender.

Training is especially important for administrators and teachers in preschools in which the standards for competency vary from one preschool to the next. Local level training programs specifically bringing administrators and preschool teachers together to focus on gender related issues would benefit pre-K programs. Skelton (2007:688) explains teacher training programs are largely silent regarding interpretations of men as sexual predators. She suggests recognizing how “gender intersects with discourses around both primary teaching and primary schooling” (Skelton 2012:12-13) is important for teacher recruiting. This article is a step in that direction. Acknowledging the reality of the discourse of suspicion will prepare policymakers, administrators, and teachers for challenges associated with gender and ECE. This will shift the focus from the dearth of men in ECE to the underlying tensions at the intersection of the social construction of gender and early childhood education.

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CHAPTER THREE: GENDER AND PRESCHOOL TEACHER COMPETENCE

Abstract

This article deals with the use of gender to construct teacher competence in the preschool context. The data are comprised of ethnographic participant observation at a Montessori preschool and interviews with twenty-three of its preschool teachers. Here, the discussion of competence turns on men in the preschool using the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model. More specifically, I use social marking to analyze how preschool teachers use the absence of stereotypically gendered characteristics associated with femininity, and the general absence of men from early childhood education to construct competence. I identify three dimensions preschool teachers use to construct competent identities: de facto competence, token competence, and behavioral competence. This shifts the focus from the gender order as a broad social construct to a complexly organized resource used strategically during talk and interaction.

Keywords: Montessori, preschool, competence, gender, discourse

The preschool teacher is an identity as much as it is an occupation. Preschool teachers draw on cultural and institutional conceptualizations to talk their occupational identities into existence. Competent preschool teaching evokes images of nurturing, patience, understanding, knowledge about children, and femininity. These characteristics emphasize preschool teachers are educators and caregivers (Einarsdóttir 2003; Leavitt 1994; Puriola 2002). It also emphasizes preschool teachers' competence is tied to gender, and more precisely, forms of "emphasized femininity" (Connell 1987). This suggests teaching, caring, and gender competencies are dimensions of a preschool teacher's professional identity.

Although preschool teachers' identity work aims at constructing professional competence, identities turn on the gender order. Identity construction resources rely on the practical transformation of social and biological products (Connell 1987:79) to convey gender stereotypes as natural. Preschool teacher identity work, then, may not be as important for understanding the specifics of the preschool teacher identity, as much as it is for understanding how individuals use the gender order as a resource. This shifts the focus from the gender order as a broad social construct to a complexly organized resource used during talk and interaction.

In this article, I argue preschool teachers construct competent preschool teacher identities by social marking (Brekhus 1996, 1998; Mullaney 2006; Pietila, Ojala, King, and Calasanti 2013; Pruitt 2012) gender in relation to teaching and caring for young children. By directing attention to what "everyone knows" about gender and preschools, I am able to analyze how individuals use the gender order as a discursive resource. I call the discursive strategies preschool teachers use "de facto competence," "token

competence,” and “behavioral competence.” De facto competence refers to cultural level knowledge that women are competent teachers and nurturers of young children *because* they are women. Here, it occurs when women preschool teachers use the gender order to attribute competence to themselves by socially marking men as incompetent. Token competence refutes cultural level beliefs men are incompetent teachers and nurturers of young children. It occurs when preschool teachers socially mark men as beneficial to preschool classrooms *because* they are men, though they are mostly absent. Behavioral competence is the behavior men use to display their competence as preschool teachers. Behavioral competence uses and resists sentiments from de facto and token competence. In the preschool, de facto competence socially marks what is absent in others as incompetence, while token competence marks others’ absence as the reason for their competence, and behavioral competence socially marks personal practices as evidence of competence. De facto, token, and behavioral competence turn on preschool teachers’ interpretation and use of the gender order in the preschool. In this sense, there is something quite remarkable taking place during preschool teachers’ everyday work.

SOCIAL MARKING AND GENDER

I analyze how preschool teachers construct competent identities by socially marking self/others as competent and/or incompetent. Marking originates in linguistics research and represents the “asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between the two poles of any opposition” (Waugh 1982:299). Linda R. Waugh (1982) traced marking to the 1930s when Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson used it to describe the unequal relationship between phoneme pairs. One half of the pair is marked, emphasized, or highlighted, the other side of the pair acquires its meaning through the absence of the

quality. The unmarked side of the contrast is unaccented and therefore considered normal, while the marked side is accented and abnormal. However, the distinctions between normal and abnormal are often tethered to marked and unmarked contexts.

Wayne Brekhus (1996, 1998) shows how normally unmarked categories can become marked in certain contexts. Brekhus (2003) adeptly shifts the focus to the taken for granted aspects of social reality from the typically marked categories studied by sociologists. In her research about abstaining identities, Jamie Mullaney (2006) addresses how individuals are able to construct identities around not-doings. This distinction is important in that it illuminates how identity is constructed around absent characteristics. Someone in a bar who does not drink alcohol, for instance, is marked because of the absence of this act. Not drinking alcohol, then, becomes part of the identity of that individual (designated driver, sober alcoholic, straightedge) and used to make sense of the absence.

Carol Rambo and Rebecca Cross (1998) turns to a marked context to discuss how erotic dancers draw distinctions between themselves and others using the strategy of “narrative resistance.” Narrative resistance is a way to construct a respectable identity in an otherwise disrespected profession by pointing out what other dancers do, and what the speaker will not do. Dancers expressions of narrative resistance may charge that others perform sexual acts for money, but they would never do it. Here, again, identity work takes place around not-doings. John C. Pruitt (2012) outlines a similar process of identity construction in which peak oil bloggers use “identity unmarkers” to normalize otherwise abnormal identities. In these instances, markedness precedes individuals prompting them to construct unmarked (normal) identities.

Gender is also an identity marker/unmarker and is tethered to context. Preschool teachers use the preschool context, which is a gendered organization (Acker 1991, 2006; Sargent 2005; Williams, Muller, and Kilanski 2012), to fashion their identities. Women are unmarked in the preschool. Men, however, are variously marked as problematic and/or sought-after. Masculinity in the preschool relates to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) outside the preschool and characterizes men as incompetent nurturers of young children. Men are also constructed as valuable “high status tokens” (Sargent 2004:174) bringing an important perspective to the classroom. Individuals use the gender order as a resource to accommodate or resist cultural and contextual expectations.

In the remainder of this article I will discuss Ellis Montessori Preschool, the setting in which my research took place, as well as my data and analytic strategy. I will then analyze how preschool teachers use the gender order as a resource to socially mark and unmark competence or incompetence.

ELLIS MONTESSORI PRESCHOOL

Ellis Montessori Preschool is the pseudonym for the non-profit preschool that was the site of the study. Ellis is housed in a former church in a college town in the Midwest of the United States. In 1967 a group of parents founded Ellis Montessori Preschool as an alternative to traditional preschools in the area. It serves approximately eighty-five families with children ages four weeks to six years. The building has two floors, a full kitchen, offices, and six classrooms conceptually divided into “upper” and “lower” schools. The upper school has three “primary” classrooms with “friends” (the preschool’s vernacular is gender neutral when referring to children) between the ages of three and six

years. The lower school also has three classrooms: “preprimary,” “toddlers,” and “infants.” The preprimary room serves children from ages two to three years. The toddler room serves children between the ages of one and two years, and the infant room serves children between the ages of four weeks and one year.

The preschool, like most early childhood education (ECE) sites, is a female-dominated workplace. There are approximately thirty-five employees at the school, including the head of school, assistant head of school, kitchen manager, six lead teachers, and about twenty-five assistant lead teachers, support staff, and substitute teachers. When I began my research the head of school, one lead teacher, and two fulltime support staff employees were the only men working at Ellis Montessori Preschool. However, the male lead teacher moved away shortly after my research began and another male support staff employee moved away approximately six months later.

Aside from gendered cultural understandings that preschool teaching is “women’s work” (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999; Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998; Skelton 2012), two unwritten rules contributed to the gendered context at Ellis Montessori Preschool. The first controlled the movement of men throughout Ellis Montessori Preschool. Men were not allowed to be alone in the school with a child. For example, a man could not take a child to the restroom without being accompanied by a female employee. The second was men did not work in the lower school. Each of these was explained to me as matters of controlling perception. These unwritten rules led to interview questions relating to gender and work.

Data

This article stems from two years of fieldwork in which I spent two to three days per week at Ellis Montessori Preschool as a participant observer. My fieldnotes include standard information about the date, time in the field, and the day's eventfulness. I took more fieldnotes during first days in a room when everything seemed fresh and different (Goffman 1989). After a few weeks I began participating more in the day-to-day activities of the classrooms, returning to my notes at opportune moments, such as when the class transitioned from the classroom to the playground. I typed my fieldnotes as soon as possible after leaving the preschool while simultaneously making analytic notes in the margins in markup (Charmaz 2006). If something were particularly interesting I would make a note of it and come back to it later. I let analytic categories emerge from the field and then continued observations to confirm its presence. Often, I asked the teachers about my interpretations to validate, discard, and/or modify them. This practice allowed me to develop and refine analytic categories early on, shaping my view of the field while still in it. I pursued emergent themes and broadly categorized talk and interaction as types of identity work. Fieldnotes also became a tool to review others' and my actions, and to adjust and prepare for future interactions (Pruit 2014). In this manner I was able to sketch the analytic contours of my project and generate interview questions from fieldwork.

I conducted twenty-three interviews with Ellis Montessori preschool teachers, three men and twenty women, lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. Interviews focused on the work of being a preschool teacher including discipline, emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), and gender as part of their preschool teacher identity. My interview guide included different themes developed from fieldwork and allowed me to move

through the questions conversationally as themes emerged from the interview context (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

Interview participants were given pseudonyms, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Interviews were initially coded using the broad themes from observations and interview questions. I then identified emergent themes for further analysis. I documented themes as forms of “interpretive practice” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Regarding gender, I asked participants about men working in preschools, the rule about men not escorting children to the restroom unless accompanied by a female employee, and about men not working in the lower school. I also asked questions about themes arising from the interview context itself, such as about the fairness of organizational gender practices.

Analytic Strategy

I draw on James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium’s (2000) “interpretive practice” to understand the interplay between discourses-in-practice and discursive practice. Discourses-in-practice refers to the “broad configurations of meaningful action...[that] set the conditions of possibility” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:93), while discursive practice refers to how language is used to construct contextual reality. Interpretive practice has foundations in ethnomethodology and discourse analysis and seeks to understand what Holstein and Gubrium call the *whats* of discourses-in-practice and the *hows* of discursive practice. The *whats* refer to the repertoire of available discourses, and the *hows* to the work people “do” to accomplish goals, such as identity construction. Another aspect of interpretive practice relates to institutional contexts. For example, a person might speak “as a father” and call on discourses from the family to

signal an identity (Gubrium 1988). In turn, institutional discourses are embedded in specific locales. Writing in relation to constituting subjectivity, Holstein and Gubrium (2000:95) explain,

Selves are themselves institutional projects in the sense that institutional discourses provide the conditions of possibility and institutionalized discursive practice supplies the mode of production for putting into effect our identities as part of accomplishing matters of ongoing local interest.

Institutional context matters because it conditions the resources individuals use or do not to use during talk and interaction. Contextual resources are matters of situational concern aiming at accomplishing situated goals. Such situated concerns influence, often subtly, individuals' meaning making activities in which broader understandings shape local interpretations, and local practices reify broader social structures. Thus individuals are able to draw upon cultural, institutional, and organizational understandings of gender and education, for example, and then apply it to the situation at hand. Interpretive practice, then, is a way of analyzing the interplay between broader systems of meaning and meaning making activities.

Focusing on preschool teachers' discursive strategies is a rich source of data increasing our knowledge of how discourses-in-practice, such as hegemonic discourses, relate to preschool teachers' discursive practice. By concentrating on a single preschool and its teachers I am able to link preschool teachers' discursive constructions of gender with hegemonic discourses, such as the "discourse of mothering" and the "discourse of the positive male role model." Hegemonic discourses conceal socially constructed phenomena like gender during discursive constructions of competence even while openly using it. More specifically, I demonstrate how men and women preschool teachers use the gender order to socially mark competence in the preschool.

Men and women preschool teachers' identity work expresses special expertise for their role (Goffman 1959:41). I identify three forms of competence from interviews with preschool teachers: de facto competence, token competence, and behavioral competence, which, in part, draw upon the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model.

THE DISCOURSE OF MOTHERING

Preschool teachers using the discourse of mothering in ECE rely on linkages between early childhood education and the family to construct competence. The cultural ideal for a preschool teacher is a woman with characteristics of "emphasized femininity" (Connell 1987) relating to the nurturing children. In fact, ECE is often framed using motherhood as a metaphor (Sargent 2005), leading some to claim practicing early childhood education is the "pedagogy of love" (Sugg 1978). In the broadest of cultural terms, preschool teachers are women representing love, kindness, caring, gentleness, and understanding (Oyler, Jennings and Lozada 2001). Claire Cameron explains "childcare recruitment campaigns emphasise a knowledge base for working with children derived from personal characteristics such as patience, enthusiasm, a sense of responsibility and a sense of fun" (Cameron 2006:70).

Conceptualizing preschool teachers as "mother-teacher" (Sugg 1978), using metaphors of motherhood (Sargent 2005), beliefs ECE is women's work, and a type of mothering work (Singer 1993) requiring an "ethic of maternal care" (Oyler, Jennings, and Lozada 2001:375) deterministically constructs women as the cultural ideal for ECE. Rather than considering this a gender order problem, I argue it is better understood as an everyday response to the "backlash" of the "feminization of education" (Martino 2008;

Skelton 2012). As Christine Skelton points out, “‘feminisation’ is used in an evaluative sense and carries the implicit message that the greater the female presence, the greater the likelihood of a ‘feminine’ ethos and culture, and the more likely it is to discriminate against males” (Skelton 2012:6). However, reframing women preschool teachers’ responses as protecting their occupations by using taken for granted gender stereotypes as a resource shifts the focus from the dearth of men/feminization of education debate toward the politics of identity construction in institutional settings. De facto competence for women preschool teachers emerges against the backdrop of the discourse of mothering.

De Facto Competence

If there is a cultural level of competence in the preschool then it relates to gender. The gendered aspect of competence is something of which Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers are aware. Women preschool teachers have de facto competence in the context of ECE. That is, they are able to claim competence as something “everyone knows.” One reason is women do not threaten the gender order. Women are unmarked in the preschool context. Women preschool teachers use de facto competence as a discursive resource to explain why they are well suited for their occupation, and ideas of emphasized femininity (Connell 1987) to exclude men from caring work. In a real sense, women preschool teachers claim competence by marking men as incompetent. Below, I present interview data in which women preschool teachers use the discourse of mothering to mark men as inept with children, emotionally deficient, and potentially threatening.

Maternalizing care

Maternalizing care refers to using gendered stereotypes to construct competent caring identities, in this case preschool teacher identities. It uses the ideas men are not interested in ECE and not natural caretakers of children to convey women are competent preschool teachers. In short, men are intimidated by childcare. While maternalizing care aims at constructing a competent preschool teacher identity for women, it does so by marking men as incompetent and reinforcing the gender stereotypes and division of labor.

As lower school assistant lead teacher, Alicia, explains:

Well my opinion is that it's just not a job setting that I think is associated with men's work, regardless of how modern. Stereotypes maybe, um, there are still some jobs that society will just think "Oh, a woman preschool teacher." They usually don't think a male preschool teacher. Most men are geared towards more, you know, different jobs. Just, and also one could say that that maternal instinct isn't always common in guys. And while some guys may be very good with working with children, the majority of guys that I've met are like, "You want me to hold this baby? This is terrifying!" They're terrified by the prospect of working with children. Most of them are not sure that they'll ever be good fathers, much less going into, you know, working with young kids.

Alicia constructs a competent preschool teacher identity by emphasizing the gender resources women have and the gender resources men lack. She marks men as incompetent preschool teachers, thereby unmarking women as competent preschool teachers, through her use of maternal instincts. The maternal instinct is uncommon in men, as she puts it. Practically speaking, maternal instincts are unavailable to men. Maternal instincts are only for women to use as a resource for constructing competence. Alicia's characterizations of men as terrified to hold babies, work with young children, and doubtful of themselves as potential fathers also marks men as incompetent nurturers. When contrasted with the de facto competence of maternal instincts, men are always already marked as incompetent in the institutions of family and education.

Universalizing emotional competence

Preschool teachers are not only teachers, but also caregivers. Caregiving involves attending to the emotional needs of children. Universalizing emotional competence refers to characteristics, such as having patience and understanding with children, available to *all* women. It points to the idea women are emotionally predisposed to working with young children *because* they are women and naturally have more patience than men. It also marks men as not being as emotionally well equipped to work with young children *because* they are men. In this sense, men's potential emotional incompetence is a threat to children. Below Jennifer, an upper school support staff member, responds to a question about whether men are as adept at caretaking as women.

Um, I think a lot of times that women have more patience. I've noticed men get a little more irritated and short with the friends [children] than the females do. So I think that in some areas they're better, but in some areas women do a better job. I think part of that is just part of the maternal instincts that all women have that men don't have as strongly.

Jennifer marks men as emotionally incompetent, and thus incompetent preschool teachers, by asserting women are better suited emotionally for the occupation. She cites observing men acting irritated toward preschool children as part of her rationale for her views. This is not to say women do not get irritated, but they manage their emotions better than men. In marking men as having a lack of patience, Jennifer is able to unmark women's patience as a maternal instinct. This problematizes men in the preschool because they do not have the "maternal instincts that all women have." Although men and women have the ability to do surface and deep acting (Hochschild 1983), women are better adept at doing the deep acting required of preschool teachers because they have

maternal instincts. Again, maternal instincts are a de facto resource women use to mark and unmark emotional competence in the preschool.

Using suspicion

Using suspicion is the idea men are out of place in the preschool context to mark them as incompetent. Here, preschool teachers mark incompetence by applying the “discourse of suspicion,” which characterizes men as potential threats (Pruit *forthcoming*). If men are marked as suspicious in the preschool context, then women represent the unmarked side of the gender binary. Below, upper school lead teacher Marissa responds to a question about the origin of Ellis Montessori Preschool’s gendered rules.

The only thing, well, there’s a couple of things I can think of. Stereotypically, who do you think of when you think of a child molester? More often than not, a male figure comes to mind. Is that correct? I don’t know. I don’t know enough about the studies to know if that’s true or not. Is it fair? I don’t know, again, but that’s stereotypical. So there is that. And then the second thing I have noticed is that male or female children respond better when it comes to more personal things to a female figure. I think because, and is this right or wrong? I don’t know, but it’s an observation that I’ve made. I think females tend to be a little more nurturing, more mothering, more soft and gentle in their ways, and more helpful. And so I think they feel more comfortable exposing themselves, or asking for help, or, you know, I mean I’m not just performing general bathroom duties. Because I think they get that help a lot from their mothers and they see females kind of being somebody they can trust and they can count on to help them. I mean really that’s all I can think of.

Marissa uses a contrast structure (Smith 1978) to construct an incompetent and threatening identity for men and a competent identity for herself. As with maternalizing care and universalizing emotional competence, using suspicion relies on what “everyone knows” to problematize men in the preschool context. On one hand, Marissa uses the discourse of suspicion to mark men as incompetent because men on preschools are potential child molesters. On the other hand, Marissa marks her competence by

explaining, “females tend to be a little more nurturing, more mothering, more soft and gentle in their ways, and more helpful.” These mark women as competent rather than threatening. Suspicion also takes shape in the family, where Marissa believes men are less likely to be involved with caring for children than women. She uses suspicion about the family to purport children are more trusting of women preschool teachers. That is, she asserts children also mark men as suspicious. While Marissa marks women as competent in the preschool, she also does so for women in the family in which the cultural expectation is for women to accept the childcare role.

De facto competence turns on the discourse of mothering. More to the point, it turns on the maternal instincts men lack. By marking what is absent in the gender binary, women preschool teachers are able to construct competent preschool teacher identities. In the following section women preschool teachers construct men a competent in their absence from Ellis Montessori Preschool.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE POSITIVE MALE ROLE MODEL

The discourse of the positive male role model in ECE comes from various sources relating to research, policy, and media, in which the media seemingly spurs policymakers into action over a moral panic. One point of departure is fear there are too few men in elementary school teaching, a “death of men” (Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998, 2009; Sargent 2000, 2001, 2004; Skelton 2003) as it were, and women teachers are feminizing boys (Hoff Sommers 2000). Sandy Pepperell and Sue Smedley (1998) point out men are portrayed as “endangered” by the media, simultaneously constructing the problem as the lack of male role models in the school and the home, compounding the feminization of boys. Policymakers’ solution involves what has been termed “re-

masculinization” (Martino 2008), which aims at restoring masculine qualities to elementary school teaching by recruiting more men to be role models for boys. However, being a male role model in ECE is not a straightforward matter.

As Martino (2008) puts it, “being a role model becomes synonymous with being a ‘real man’” (2008:193). Christine Skelton (2012) found men’s performances included typically masculine interests in sports. Presenting hegemonic masculine selves is how men in ECE can claim non-threatening sexual identities and deny marginalized identities such as being gay (King 1998). Gendered performances of masculinity and femininity are part of the institutional context of education (Skelton 2003). As role models, men in ECE are precariously positioned between performances of subordinate masculinity and complicit masculinity in which the former benefits teaching and the latter benefits the institution (Sargent 2005, 2013).

The discourse of the positive male role model regulates men teachers’ race, gender, and sexuality. The call for more male role models is located in the need to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality, hegemonic masculine values, and gender normalization (Martino 2008). Meaning the discourse of the positive male role model privileges males, and especially white, heterosexual men and renders hegemonic values such as homophobia unmarked. Similarly, it marks transgender persons while simultaneously leaving them out of the conversation for acceptable role models. Here, I focus on the boundaries for positive male role models in the preschool as it relates to preschool teacher competence. Token competence for men preschool teachers is made visible when viewed against the backdrop of the discourse of the positive male role model.

Token Competence

Marking in the preschool is not always about what is personally lacking or negative. Marking can also apply to those who are above average, or different in a positive way. In the case of gender and preschools, men can also be marked as “high status tokens” (Sargent 2004:174). Token competence in the preschool refers to how men preschool teachers are positively regarded and valuable. Men are marked as tokens because there are few men working in preschools and because they are viewed as able disciplinarians (Martino 2008; Rury 1989). Unlike de facto competence, which marks men for perceptions of what they lack, token competence marks men *because* they are absent, but viewed as beneficial for preschool children. Similar to de facto competence, token competence marks men as competent because they are men and can be role models in the classroom. Being a positive role model emerged as a discursive priority for men.

A priori competence

A priori competence is competence given to individuals based on ideas of their abilities and skills. A priori competence relies on interpretations of an attribute and the context in which the individual will be interacting. At Ellis Montessori Preschool, for example, men have a priori competence based on gender and the lack of men at the school. This point was reified by many of the Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers when discussing men in the preschool. Many believed it would be better if the school hired more men, but acknowledged it was difficult to hire men if they did not apply. Mindy, a lead teacher in the upper school, illustrates the idea men willing to work in preschools have token competence.

Yeah, we've got a university service male that's coming through this time too. It's funny because we all fight to have the men come into our room because it's nice

to have a male influence in the classrooms. We like having that... I told Jamie I was gonna beat her up to take him, [laughs] but I lost so I changed my mind. I picked a different battle and let her have him. So I lost. And then I knew Bob was coming back to my room so I'd have a male.

Mindy marks the male service student from a local university as a token prior to meeting him. She emphasizes his value in the preschool setting when discussing the competition for male service students. When resources are scarce there is competition for what is available. In the preschool men are scarce, which leads to competition for them as valuable resources, even if they are not the best person for the job. In marking a service student as a commodity Mindy shows how the value of a man in the classroom precedes his skills and knowledge in relation to ECE.

Positive male influence

As Mindy (above) states, women preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool want a “positive male influence” in their classrooms. However, the prevailing belief at Ellis Montessori Preschool is a man working in the preschool needs to be the “right” kind of man. That is, he needs to be kind, gentle, understanding, and have patience – qualities typically associated with femininity. Alison, an assistant lead teacher in the upper school, believes a positive male influence benefits all children.

I think it's really important that the friends [children] get to see males and females and anybody in between work together. I think that there's certain situations where it's nice for young female friends to see males that are positive and kind, and males to see that too.

Alison believes it is good for the children to see all types of people working together. She marks men that are positive and kind as being beneficial to Ellis Montessori Preschool children. Similarly, Ashley, a lead teacher in the lower school, believes some

parents choose one of the upper school classrooms, at least in part, because a man works in it.

When I've had friends transition up in P1 I've had a lot of people be like "Hey, I love that Bob's in P1. This is why we're picking this room." Not only for Bob, but because of the room. And, "We just want our child to have a positive male influence in their life." And I wish, I wish that was accepted more, you know? Here at least.

The positive male influence, then, marks men preschool teachers as having token competence prior to having experience in the classroom. It is taken for granted that a man is able to socialize children, especially preschool boys, on how to be a boy. Similarly, the man preschool teacher serves the purpose of being a positive role model for preschool girls. The positive male influence is a discursive resource attributing competence to the right type of man: one that is able to care for children, and as I will show below, one that is able to be a role model.

Teaching gender competence

Teaching gender competence is the belief teachers of one gender are best at teaching children of the same gender. At Ellis Montessori Preschool a prevalent belief is having a male influence in the classroom somehow garners the respect of children in a way that is different from women teachers (Sargent 2005). This marks men as tokens in the preschool because the perception children, especially boys, respond to men differently than women. The leading idea is boys need a male role model to teach them how to be boys. Ceana, an upper school support staff member, explains her beliefs about gender socialization in the preschool.

Well, first of all, our room, for example, has all female teachers. If we had one or two male teachers then our male friends would have a role model. Because I know they can look to us, but as a girl growing up I would look to other women to see how to act. Boys will probably look to other men. But if all they see is women

then maybe they're not really getting a clear idea of what it's like to grow up and become a man. So I do wish that each room, at least, had male and female adults present to work with the friends [children]. And when it comes to things like bathrooms and toilets and naked boy bodies, maybe they might feel a little weird with a female teacher there. Maybe they might prefer a man to be there, you know? That might keep it comfortable for them.

Ceana marks men as tokens because of their absence from the classroom in which she works, and with her belief they are better able to socialize boys in the classroom. She also provides a counter narrative to de facto competence (“using suspicion” above) when discussing comfort in the restroom. Rather than portraying men as potential threats or referring to maternal instincts such as being naturally gentle, Ceana believes young boys may be more comfortable with men preschool teachers in the restroom than women preschool teachers. In part, teaching gender competence removes part of the patriarchal dividend, in which men preschool teachers would be expected to respond to the needs of children in the restroom.

Token competence turns on the discourse of the positive male role model. Here, men are tokens because they are mostly absent from Ellis Montessori Preschool. By marking men as absent, but evoking the discourse of the positive male role model, women preschool teachers are able to construct token competence for men in the preschool. In the final analytic section I turn to the voices of two men preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool.

Behavioral Competence

The voices of men preschool teachers resist and use sentiments from de facto competence and token competence to discuss behaviors they use that mark personal competence as preschool teachers. Men explain different behavioral strategies in which they demonstrate special expertise for their role (Goffman 1959:41) and present

alternative masculinities. These behavioral strategies help men construct competent preschool teacher identities.

Deemphasizing femininity

Deemphasizing femininity is a resource for men to construct competent preschool teacher identities and subordinate women. Below, deemphasizing femininity refers to a man being “better” at women’s work than a woman. Deemphasizing femininity is a way of competing for competence by claiming expertise. Here, it refers to claims of a man being better at women’s work than a woman. James R. King (1998:88) discusses men “competing” with women in the context of primary school teaching as a way to prove they are good teachers. Here, competing for competence is a way to mark competence and is interpretable as resistance to de facto competence and token competence. Below, Bob’s account illustrates one way in which he competes for competence at Ellis Montessori Preschool.

I spent quite a bit of time in Preprimary, too. I am great with a two year old. And like I said, I don’t like changing diapers, but I can. [snaps fingers] And I can do it quick. Better than a lot of the girls there, actually, because I don’t like being down in the trenches too long. I’m like, let’s get this job done.

Bob resists de facto competence associated with hegemonic masculinity in two manners. First, by claiming to be “great” with two year olds, and second, being better at changing diapers than “a lot of the girls.” While this marks Bob as competent, it also marks him as having a subordinate masculinity. Bob also resists token competence by doing the work expected of women preschool teachers. The comparison between men and women using the example of diaper changing discursively subordinates femininity in the preschool. Bob subordinates women preschool teachers by diminishing their caretaking skills, and by calling them “girls.” If a woman cannot change a diaper as fast

as a man, then she is not a “real” woman. He changes diapers quickly because he does not enjoy doing it. However, this statement betrays the social construction of gender in what is left unsaid. Specifically, women enjoy, or at the very least do not mind, changing diapers. Next, the “girls” are not women, at least not in the face of hegemonic masculinity. Bob’s use of the word “girls” emphasizes the subordinate position women occupy in and out of the context of women’s work. In turn, this maintains the hegemonic relationship in and out of the preschool by naturalizing women as caretakers that enjoy, or at least do not mind, taking care of children (changing diapers). In this case, deemphasizing femininity reifies the gender order.

Presenting alternative masculinities

One expectation for men preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool is to present an alternative to hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the currently acceptable pattern of practices allowing men’s dominance to continue over women achieving ascendancy through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The alternative to hegemonic masculinity is some form of subordinate masculinity in which men preschool teachers display what are typically considered feminine characteristics in the context of preschool teaching. Being a man preschool teacher, as expected, carries a subordinate masculine status outside the preschool, as well. Below, Brandon, a gay man working as support staff in the upper school, discusses how he presents an alternative masculinity in the preschool.

I think it’s really important because then people get, like I grew up around a lot of women and I just, sometimes men, I don’t understand the ways that they behave sometimes because I’m an expressive, emotional, empathetic person. And a lot of guys aren’t that. So I think it’s good to, I think it’s good to have them [preschool children] exposed to just a male in general. Without, like, I don’t try to come in

with any masculine pretenses. Like, boys can wear pink. Boys can wear, you know what I mean?

Brandon resists de facto competence when contrasting some unspoken characteristics of hegemonic masculinity with characteristics of his subordinate masculinity. However, while subordinate forms of masculinity are desired in the preschool, they are also socially marked in the preschool and the broader social context. At Ellis Montessori Preschool, these are marked as characteristics of the positive male role model. In practice, it is important for Brandon not to have gendered pretenses with the children in his classroom. In this sense he tries to deemphasize gender norms during his interactions with children. In the context of the preschool, the sensibilities of hegemonic masculinity outside the preschool are not always desirable. By marking the differences between subordinate and hegemonic masculinity, Brandon constructs his identity as the positive male role model.

CONCLUSION

In this article I use social marking to flesh out and analyze some of the taken for granted views of gender and competence at Ellis Montessori Preschool. I identify two competing discourses in ECE, the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model. In relation to these discourses, preschool teachers' competence turns on the absence of feminine characteristics in men, or the absence of men from the preschool. Likewise, men preschool teachers explaining some of their behavioral strategies provide a counter narrative to cultural expectations about men working in the preschool. The discursive strategies demonstrate the interplay between the gender order, organizations, and individual interpretations and interactional strategies. In this sense, the

gender order precedes and often structures interpretations of preschool teachers' identities, even while preschool teachers reify the structures they draw upon.

Social marking presents an opportunity to document longstanding cultural expectations, the taken for granted aspects of social life, and then problematize it. Preschools are interpreted as feminine, and preschool teaching as women's work. In identifying preschool teaching as women's work, we are able to draw common, but not commonsense, distinctions as to whom should work with young children. In part, this brings up an important analytic point in relation to the asymmetrical relationship marking proposes when referring to preschool teachers. The terms "woman preschool teacher" and "man preschool teacher" draw attention to the conflation of gender and the supposed natural proclivities associated with biological sex, even as they reproduce the gender binary. When we think of preschool teachers, we do not think of men, and so when someone refers to *women* preschool teachers it sounds odd because women are unmarked within this context. Simply put, the cultural expectation is for preschool teachers to be women, which marks men preschool teachers as out-of-place.

De facto competence is a discursive strategy marking men as incompetent. The discursive productions presented here turn on the discourse of mothering, and how maternal instincts provide special expertise for the work of being a preschool teacher mostly related to caring for young children. In part, the women preschool teachers above construct competence by marking what men lack (maternal instincts, patience, cultural approval). However, using de facto competence is not without drawbacks. Because it relies on idealized constructions of femininity (see "emphasized femininity" in Connell 1987), de facto competence tends to narrow the scope of what it means to be a woman to

a caretaker of children. It especially narrows what it means to be a preschool teacher to something *any* woman can do *because* she is a woman. Furthermore, men receive a “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 1995) because they are excused (or excluded) from some of dirty work required of women preschool teachers, such as changing a child’s clothing.

Token competence marks men as competent in the preschool because they are mostly absent. Men’s absence from the preschool benefits them in that they are attributed competence a priori, and competed for as valuable assets for the preschool classroom. The discourse of the positive male role model shapes discursive productions of token competence at Ellis Montessori Preschool. In some ways token competence provides a counter narrative to de facto competence in that it supports men’s competence as preschool teachers, although it is still based on gender. A second manner in which it is a counter narrative to de facto competence is it removes part of the patriarchal dividend in proposing men be available for helping boys in the restroom. However, token competence is also problematic. Attributing competence to men because they are underrepresented in the preschool hierarchically ranks the potential positive male role model over preschool teaching skills and knowledge. Token competence also potentially represents a hegemonic situation in which men could be overvalued and promoted ahead of better-qualified women.

Behavioral competence is a strategy men preschool teachers use to mark personal competence in a setting in which they are broadly questioned as out-of-place. Men preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool receive some of the patriarchal dividend, such as not working in the lower school or taking children to the restroom, through unwritten organizational rules. However, men preschool teachers have a different set of

constraints than women preschool teachers culturally, organizationally, and behaviorally. In some situations, men must demonstrate their qualifications for their role as preschool teacher. While men do not necessarily go above and beyond, so to speak, some believe they must be better at their job than women to compete for competence (King 1998). Although men preschool teachers must be available to do heavy lifting (Sargent 2005), they must also present a subordinate masculinity and be a positive male role model in the classroom.

Analyzing preschool teachers' identity work is a way to better understand the social constraints and allowances through the institutional construction of the gender order. In the context of Ellis Montessori Preschool the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model are not problematic, but rather something for preschool teachers to use as resources. Rather than understanding what a competent preschool teacher is, in some cases we get a better understanding of what a competent preschool teacher is not – masculine and in the classroom. However, by socially marking absence, Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers compel others to fill in unmarked competencies. The most obvious competency is the pervasive belief women are optimum and naturally predisposed for working with young children represented in the discourse of mothering. This shifts the focus from the gender order as a broad social construct to a complexly organized resource used during preschool teacher identity work.

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CHAPTER FOUR: PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND THE DISCOURSE OF CARING

Abstract

In this article, I address the social construction of care in the preschool. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and twenty-three interviews with preschool teachers, I identify a discourse of caring in early childhood education in which preschools are expected to be calm, happy places for children to learn and play; and preschool teachers are expected to be the loving, patient, cheerful, and compassionate people we trust to care for our children. The discourse of caring conceals the everyday work in preschools, especially that teaching preschool children can be stressful. I identify preschool teachers' hidden practices for coping with stress, considering them as "identity preservers." Identity preservers are impression management resources preschool teachers use to manage their identity. I argue the discourse of caring conceals more about the practice of preschool teaching than it reveals about preschool teacher identity.

Keywords: caring, coping, identity preservation, preschool, Montessori

Attending preschool or daycare is often the first educational experience a child has away from the home. It marks the beginning of a child's education career. We expect preschools to be cheerful, safe places for teaching and learning. We also expect preschool teachers to live up to a certain standard of care. In a real sense, preschool teachers are interpreted as teachers and caretakers.

Most parents interact with the preschool and its teachers briefly at drop off and pick up, when things appear to be harmonious. Harmony, however, takes a great deal of work. There is a bit of "mystification" (Goffman 1959:67) occurring given the social distance between preschool teachers and parents in which preschool teachers tend to foster the impression of having special expertise, and parents tend to interpret preschool teachers as naturally caring. Preschool teachers must think on their feet, so to speak, and handle situations arising in an instant. In part, preschool teachers must put how they are feeling aside to care for the children in their classroom. Much of the work preschool teachers do, then, relates to "emotional labor," which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 1983:7). During especially stressful situations, preschool teachers use coping strategies to manage the impression they are ideal for their role (Goffman 1959).

The cultural expectations associated with preschool teaching include being teachers and caregivers – to nurture children intellectually and emotionally. Preschool teachers have a dual responsibility and we expect them to be kind, pleasant, patient, understanding, and knowledgeable about children. Cultural expectations provide a

backdrop for understanding the work of being a preschool teacher. I call this cultural backdrop the “discourse of caring.”

Although commonplace beliefs about preschool teachers assert they have a natural proclivity toward childcare, I argue preschool teacher identity is an accomplishment increasingly complicated by everyday practice. That is, preschool teachers use coping strategies I call “identity preservers” to live by the discourse of caring. Identity preservers are resources preschool teachers use to manage impressions of their preschool teacher identity. Expressing frustration toward a child in a preschool, for instance, could quickly “discredit” (Goffman 1963) the identity of both the teacher and the preschool. Hence, preschool teachers use identity preservers during talk and interaction to work through, or escape from, a stressful situation with a credible identity.

Early childhood education (ECE) is underrepresented in the sociological literature (Delamont 2002) and preschool teachers emotional labor is mostly taken for granted in the broader social context. In this article, I problematize the taken for granted conceptualization of the preschool teacher as a *natural* caregiver by identifying the discourse of caring demonstrating how it relates to organizational expectations and practice. I then turn to the coping strategies preschool teachers use to preserve credible identities. Identity preservers shift the focus from the preschool teachers as natural caretakers to how the preschool teacher identity is an institutional accomplishment. I argue the discourse of caring conceals preschool teacher’s emotional labor; however, analyzing preschool teachers identity preservation strategies complicates the matter.

STRESS, COPING, AND CARE IN THE PRESCHOOL

Stressful occupations carry risks of burnout (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1999; Scheid 1999; Wharton 1993), especially those with more intense emotional labor, such as rape crisis workers (Clemans 2004), occupations having little autonomy and/or little control over the emotional demands of work, and requiring inauthentic displays (Erickson and Ritter 2001). The negative effects of occupational type, suppressing negative emotions, and differences between surface and deep acting can also lead to occupational burnout (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002). However, there are positive effects of emotional labor indicating the conditions under which emotion work takes place may be more important for meeting the needs of the self and job (Wolkomir and Powers 2007). In some instances the personal investment in work makes emotional labor rewarding and can even alleviate some work related stress (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Erickson 2004; Karabanow 1999; Rodriquez 2011). Scholars find valuing one's occupation, identifying with it, and developing coping strategies are important defenses against emotional distress (Lewis 2005; Wolkomir and Powers 2007).

Coping with stress is an important aspect of social life across several situations. Research from a variety of fields demonstrates how individuals understand and cope with stressful situations using resources such as suppression, humor, and past experience. Many occupations have formal and informal scripts for dealing with difficult customers (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1991). The neonatal nurses in Patricia Lewis's (2005) project were expected to use emotion suppression to maintain professional norms. The nurses developed coping communities in backstage settings for emotional support (Lewis 2005:577). Teela Sanders (2004) found British female prostitutes used humor as a coping

strategy to distance themselves from the role of prostitute, the clients, and stigma. Toni Calasanti and Neal King (2007) found men caring for spouses with Alzheimer's disease developed several strategies to cope linked with skills learned in occupational roles. In her study of spouse's accounts cancer diagnosis, Rebecca Eileen Olson (2011) finds that what appears to be denial may be a temporal disruption.

At first blush, preschool teaching does not seem stressful. ABCs and 123s, singing, hugs, and playing are common conceptualizations of preschool teaching. However, consistent structural issues such as high turnover rates and low wages (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999; Whitebook 1999) characterize preschool teaching. It is also a low prestige occupation commonly believed to be something anyone, and most often any woman, can do. Hence, most forms of childcare are considered unskilled and undervalued positions (Adkins and Lury 1999; Guy and Newman 2004) lacking the professional identity those in higher prestige occupations enjoy, which is not altogether hidden from preschool teachers. Preschool teachers also negotiate gendered assumptions associated with their work, such as the naturalization of females as caretakers (Williams 2003) and men preschool teachers as potential threats (Pruit 2014, forthcoming). Not to mention the everyday practicalities of interacting with parents, children, other teachers, and administration; all having stakes and interests within an institutional context dominated by the dual enterprises of teaching and caring.

Preschools are gendered organizations (Acker 1991; Sargent 2005), and preschool teaching is broadly considered "women's work" (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999; Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998; Skelton 2012). Women make up 97 percent of preschool and elementary school teachers (Statistical Abstract of the United States 2012,

table 616), and are the cultural ideal for the role. The ideal preschool teacher is equivalent to mother-teacher (Sargent 2005; Skelton 2012) in which the preschool teacher cares for children in a stereotypically motherly manner while teaching them academic and social basics.

Preschool teachers interpret their work using similar understandings of mother-teacher. Robin Leavitt (1994) characterizes the relationship between preschool teachers and children as responsive caregiving, which involves understanding and appreciating the child, reciprocity, and demonstrating empathy. Similarly, Johanna Einarsdóttir (2003) found Icelandic preschool teachers viewed themselves as caregivers and knowledge transmitters from a traditional standpoint, and as “a constructor of knowledge, provider of resources, assistant, observer, and reflective practitioner” (Einarsdóttir 2003:115). Anna-Maija Puriola (2002) found early childhood education practitioners in Finland interpreted their work through different frames including the “caring” frame relating to the emotional labor of preschool teachers, and the “educational” frame relating to teaching and preparing children for elementary school. The caring frame orients to physical health, emotional safety, and other social factors. The underlying theme of the caring frame is preschool teachers are expected to meet the physical and emotional needs of children. The educational frame relates to teaching and learning, readiness for school, curriculum, and so on. Preschool teachers are expected to prepare children for elementary school, while at the same time meeting their emotional needs.

In the remainder of this article I will describe my research setting, data, and analytic strategy. I will then move on to how preschool teachers construct identities

around the discourse of caring. Last, I will analyze the discourse of caring and identity preservation strategies in Ellis Montessori Preschool.

ELLIS MONTESSORI PRESCHOOL

Ellis Montessori Preschool is the pseudonym for the non-profit preschool that was the site of the study. Ellis is housed in a former church in a college town in the Midwest of the United States. A group of parents founded Ellis Montessori as an alternative to traditional preschools in the area in 1967. It serves approximately eighty-five families with children ages four weeks to six years. The building has two floors, a full kitchen, offices, and six classrooms conceptually divided into “upper” and “lower” schools. The upper school has three “primary” classrooms with “friends” (the preschool’s vernacular is gender neutral when referring to children) between the ages of three and six years. The lower school also has three classrooms: “preprimary,” “toddlers,” and “infants.” The preprimary room serves children from ages two to three years. The toddler room serves children between the ages of one and two years, and the infant room serves children between the ages of four weeks and one year.

The preschool, like most ECE sites, is a female-dominated workplace (Skelton 2012). There are approximately thirty-five employees at the school, including the head of school, assistant head of school, kitchen manager, six lead teachers, and about twenty-five assistant lead teachers, support staff, and substitute teachers. When I began my research the head of school, one lead teacher, and two fulltime support staff employees were the only men working at Ellis Montessori Preschool. However, the male lead teacher moved away shortly after my research began and another male support staff employee moved away approximately six months later.

Data

This article stems from two years of fieldwork in which I spent two to three days per week at Ellis Montessori Preschool as a participant observer. My fieldnotes include standard information about the date, time in the field, and the day's eventfulness. I took more fieldnotes during first days in a room when everything seemed fresh and different (Goffman 1989). After a few weeks I began participating more in the day-to-day activities of the classrooms, returning to my notes at opportune moments, such as when the class transitioned from the classroom to the playground. I typed my fieldnotes as soon as possible after leaving the preschool while simultaneously making analytic notes in the margins in markup (Charmaz 2006). If something were particularly interesting I would make a note of it and come back to it later. I let analytic categories emerge from the field and then continued observations to confirm its presence. Often, I asked the teachers about my interpretations to validate, discard, and/or modify them. This practice allowed me to develop and refine analytic categories early on, shaping my view of the field while still in it. I pursued emergent themes and broadly categorized talk and interaction as types of identity work. Fieldnotes also became a tool to review others' and my actions, and to adjust and prepare for future interactions. In this manner I was able to sketch the analytic contours of my project and generate interview questions from fieldwork.

I conducted twenty-three interviews with Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers, three men and twenty women, lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. Interviews focused on the work of being a preschool teacher including discipline, emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), and gender work as part of their preschool teacher identity. My interview guide included different themes developed from fieldwork and allowed me to

move through the questions conversationally as themes emerged from the interview context (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

Interview participants were given pseudonyms, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Interviews were initially coded using broad themes from observations and interview questions. I then identified emergent themes for further analysis. I documented themes as forms of “interpretive practice” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Regarding caregiving, I asked participants about parent expectations, “good” teachers, and about emotional labor in the classroom. I also asked questions about themes arising from the interview context itself, such as about how they deal with stressful situations.

Analytic Strategy

I draw on James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium’s (2000) idea of “interpretive practice” to understand the interplay between discourses-in-practice and discursive practice. Discourses-in-practice refers to the “broad configurations of meaningful action...[that] set the conditions of possibility” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:93), while discursive practice refers to how language is used to construct contextual reality. Interpretive practice has foundations in ethnomethodology and discourse analysis and seeks to understand what Holstein and Gubrium call the *whats* of discourses-in-practice and the *hows* of discursive practice. The *whats* refer to the repertoire of available discourses, and the *hows* to the work people “do” to accomplish goals, such as identity construction. Another aspect of interpretive practice relates to institutional contexts. For example, a person might speak “as a father” and call on discourses from the family to signal an identity (Gubrium 1988). In turn, institutional discourses are embedded in

specific locales. Writing in relation to constituting subjectivity, Holstein and Gubrium (2000:95) explain,

Selves are themselves institutional projects in the sense that institutional discourses provide the conditions of possibility and institutionalized discursive practice supplies the mode of production for putting into effect our identities as part of accomplishing matters of ongoing local interest.

Context matters because it conditions the resources individuals use or do not to use during talk and interaction. Contextual resources are matters of situational concern aiming at accomplishing situated goals. Such situated concerns influence, often subtly, individuals' meaning making activities in which broader understandings shape local interpretations, and local practices reify broader social structures. Thus individuals are able to draw upon cultural, institutional, and organizational understandings of teaching and nurturing, for example, and then apply it to the situation at hand. Interpretive practice, then, is a way of analyzing the interplay between systems of meaning and meaning making activities.

Focusing on preschool teachers' discursive strategies is a rich source of data increasing our knowledge of how discourses-in-practice, such as the discourse of caring, relate to preschool teachers' everyday practice. By concentrating on a single preschool and its teachers I link preschool teachers' discursive constructions of caring with hegemonic discourses. Hegemonic discourses conceal socially constructed phenomena like emotional labor during discursive constructions of identity. More specifically, I make visible how preschool teachers use the discourse of caring and identity preservers to construct and manage preschool teacher identities.

THE DISCOURSE OF CARING

In practice, the discourse of caring is not cut and dry. It is a nebulous idea with multiple sources and interpretations. Preschool teachers discursive constructions of the discourse of caring bring it down to earth, so to speak, by showing how they interpret their work and others involved with it, and how they manage identity through behavioral strategies. Below, I identify three dimensions of the discourse of caring in ECE by analyzing how Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers respond to interview questions about being a good preschool teacher, relationships with the preschoolers, and parent expectations.

Constructing the Good Preschool Teacher

The discourse of caring provides a sketch of the good preschool teacher as emotionally adept as well as responsive to the needs of parents. Performing the good preschool teacher is especially important for fostering the impression for parents that children are safe, happy, and loved throughout the day. The good preschool teacher is worked up through many sources, and then pitted against the talk and interaction occurring in the preschool. Falling short of an ideal preschool teacher identity risks acquiring a discredited identity. Below, Jamie, a lead teacher in the upper school, describes the good preschool teacher and parent expectations.

A good teacher [pauses] is, hmm. Very compassionate. Caring. Empathetic. Enthusiastic. Ready to learn, themselves. Because I don't know everything and I know the kids teach me something everyday. And taking those experiences and realizing that you're growing from them. But, also, one that is ready to do whatever it takes in the classroom. Be here on time, you know, dedication. I think it's very important for the teacher to look at it not just from a teacher's point but from a parent's point, too. I think that's the one thing that I wanted when I became a teacher here. I wanted to make sure that my parents knew what was going on in the classroom everyday because as a parent, I wanted to know that my

child, when I was dropping her off, was getting excellent care, learning the compassion, the love, all of it. And I wanted to be communicated to about that.

Jamie constructs the good preschool teacher as emotionally child-centered, personally reflective, dedicated to the work, and able to take the roles of parents. She opens her response using the discourse of caring to describe the emotionally responsive characteristics of a preschool teacher – the “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983) of preschool teaching. Jamie also draws on personal experience as a mother to help convey her alignment with the good preschool teacher identity. In taking the role of parents and anticipating their expectations, Jamie draws on the discourse of caring to discuss parents’ desire to know their child is being treated with care, love, and compassion.

Constructing the Loving Preschool Teacher

Some preschool teachers develop relationships with the children in which they form a strong emotional bond. This emotional bond is a prescription of the discourse of caring. The preschool teacher is more than a conveyor of knowledge. The preschool teacher is a trusted and loving part of the child’s life. Below, Alison, an assistant lead in the upper school, describes her bond with a preschooler.

Um, it’s funny because it does evolve over time. The friends I met when they were two when they’d just moved up and were still getting used to the bathrooms and everything, how much time we spent cuddling. And now those kids are five or six and we’re still really close. On my birthday I got a bunch of really cool cards, and one of them was from a friend that I’ve known the longest in the room now, because he was there when I started and he’s still there, and it had the best picture of us holding hands. I almost started crying because that’s what we do everyday. That’s our thing and it’s something that’s important to him.

Alison’s description of the bond between herself and her student indicates the preschool teacher is an emotional caregiver as much as an educator – a person that loves her preschool students. Preschool teachers spend a significant amount of time teaching

and caring for young children, and strong relationships can develop. Some of these relationships result in experiencing deeper emotional connections, what Arlie Hochschild (1983) calls “deep acting.” On its surface, Alison is describing the genuine emotions she feels for a child and her belief that what is important for the child is important to her. However, her description also aligns with prescriptions from the discourse of caring in which preschool teachers are expected to love children as well as teach them. The discourse of caring, then, conceals the emotional labor involved in teaching and caring.

If the discourse of caring provides an institutional backdrop for preschools and preschool teachers, then this brief sketch of the preschool teacher in the context of the discourse of caring provides an organizational view of Ellis Montessori Preschool and how its preschool teachers interpret their roles. The discourse of caring is something preschool teachers practice by reflecting on what they consider to be a good teacher and their relationships with the preschoolers. All the while, those outside the preschool do not see the work going into everyday productions of the discourse of caring in ECE. In the following section, I analyze the hidden work in preserving a caring organizational and personal preschool teacher identity.

IDENTITY PRESERVATION IN THE PRESCHOOL

The discourse of caring mostly masks the work preschool teachers do, especially during stressful situations, by perpetuating the mother-teacher role embedded in cultural expectations of preschool teaching. In part, the discourse of caring conceals itself, preschool teachers’ emotional labor, the gendered structure of ECE, and the stress involved in working closely with children. By far, preschool teachers cite working with difficult children as the most stressful aspect of their job. The ability for a preschool

teacher to do “surface acting” (Hochschild 1983) during frustrating situations is institutionally necessary, to say the least. Hence, Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers use identity preservers to help work through, or exit, a stressful situation with an unscathed identity. Identity preservers are strategic, and allow preschool teachers to preserve interactions with children, their preschool teacher identity, and the organizational identity of Ellis Montessori Preschool.

I identify two dimensions of identity preservers from the Ellis Montessori Preschool: organizational strategies and interactional strategies. Organizational strategies are sanctioned practices for bolstering a sense of children’s care and wellbeing. Organizational strategies include communicating with parents and anticipating arrivals. Interactional strategies include planned strategies and in-the-moment strategies. Planned strategies are coping strategies preschool teachers use for dealing with previously anticipated stressful situations. Planned strategies include collaborative planning and anticipating repetition. In-the-moment strategies are coping strategies used when an interaction is breaking down. In-the-moment strategies include monitoring emotions, feigning performances, self-talking, walking away, and modeling emotions. Preschool teacher coping strategies preserve identities and conceal the emotional labor involved in being a preschool teacher.

Organizational Strategies

Organizational strategies are those preferred by Ellis Montessori Preschool. These strategies reinforce the discourse of care for the benefit of parents. That is, organizational strategies aim at demonstrating wellbeing to parents through institutionally appropriate emotions and scenery.

Communicating with parents

Communicating with parents is an important aspect of being a preschool teacher. It is important to foster a sense of safety, care, and wellbeing – as Jamie indicates above – to give parents confidence their child is benefiting from attending the preschool. The Ellis Montessori Preschool employee handbook suggests preschool teachers interact in a friendly manner with parents.

When a child is arriving or leaving for the day, be sure to smile and wave or verbally greet the parent. You may communicate with parents about the child's day but please refer any parental concerns to the Lead Teacher or administration.

At first blush, this guideline, taken from the “Staff Expectations and Routines” section, is of little consequence. However, when considered in the context of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), the discourse of caring, and organizational identity preservation, the meaning of the guideline is more significant. It makes concrete the emotional constraints organizations place on employees that do not necessarily benefit the employee (other than maintaining employment). The organizationally constructed preschool teacher is one who is knowledgeable of individual children, friendly, and cares about their wellbeing. The emotional labor involved in communicating with parents most directly benefits the organization by preserving its position as a place devoted to the outstanding care of children.

Anticipating arrivals

Anticipating arrivals is an impression management strategy in which preschool teachers anticipate and prepare for the arrival of parents. They use it to reinforce organizational prescriptions of the discourse of caring. This especially applies to the idea

the preschool classroom, its teachers, and activities provide a nurturing environment. Preparation, in this case, is being sure nothing out of the ordinary is occurring. This is a performance taking place twice a day in which the scenery and the actors must be ready for the curtain to go up, so to speak. Preschool teachers and preschoolers must appear happy and content, and the classroom must appear orderly. Bill, a lead teacher in the upper school, explains parent perceptions and how teachers anticipate parent arrivals.

Like, “How is my kid when I drop him off?” and “How is my kid when I pick him up?” And you know there are ways that I implemented, that I think all teachers implement, they say, “I know the parents are coming. This kid’s had a great day, and generally does, but always around this time something happens.” And you know, you don’t want the kid crying and screaming everyday because that’s when they’re gonna perceive it as being that’s what the whole day was. And yeah, I think that’s a pretty common thing for teachers to be aware of and to share with other teachers – this is when this parent picks up. Don’t have the kid doing something that he’s not doing all day and paint this pretty picture, but don’t let the kid be crying and screaming in the corner or shitting his pants or punching somebody when their parent comes.

Anticipating arrivals is a performance for the benefit of parents. It reinforces the organizational identity of Ellis Montessori Preschool and the institutional identities of its preschool teachers. Preschool teachers tend to know when parents will arrive for their children and prepare for it to display for them that there is nothing out of the ordinary occurring in relation to their child and the preschool. Anticipating arrivals is important because parents tend to believe their child’s entire day resembles drop off and pick up. Anticipating parent arrivals reinforces the discourse of caring and allows preschool teachers to foster the impression the preschoolers are safe and happy, and the classroom is safe and orderly.

Planned Strategies

Planned strategies are coping strategies for expected situations, such as when a child is having a difficult time transitioning from the lower school to the upper school. Preschool teachers prepare for difficult situations by collaborating with other preschool teachers and/or anticipating difficulties.

Collaborative planning

Collaborative planning is when preschool teachers meet to discuss strategies for managing difficult situations. It can be one-on-one, such as when a support staff teacher consults with a lead teacher, or in a group when teachers brainstorm for ideas. The aim is to have multiple perspectives contributing to the development of strategies in anticipation of difficult situations. Collaborative planning usually takes place during naptime, when there is a break from the children and the teachers can discuss problematic events. Below, a lower school assistant lead teacher, Alicia, explains the collaborative approach.

Sometimes I say, well my frustration may just be because I'm feeling a certain way. Or, maybe I just don't know what to do in this situation. And we usually try to find a time to talk about it. We'll get together and if any of the other teachers or myself have frustration with a particular friend [child] we'll sit down at naptime and have a meeting about how we're going to approach this behavior and what sort of action plan we want to have and then we'll talk to parents about it. Especially if it's something mom and dad have talked to us about, and if it's an issue in both places then we will work with mom and dad to find the best and most consistent way to deal with it. And then we ask parents to try to practice that at home too. So that friends are getting the same feedback in both places.

Collaborative planning reduces the potential for missteps during stressful interactions by seeking advice from other teachers. Alicia hints at the situations in which teachers can become frustrated, especially when they do not know how to resolve it. The idea behind collaborative planning is to address specific behaviors and construct strategies for dealing with them. The teachers also take parent concerns into account

when constructing an “action plan.” In many cases, parents ask teachers for their suggestions on how to handle unwanted behavior at home. The goal of collaborative planning between teachers, and also with parents, is to have everyone on the same page, so to speak, so care for children is consistent. Teachers are able to get perspectives of other, more experienced teachers having experience with similar situations. Having a plan to rely on prior to encountering a difficult situation allows a preschool teacher to address difficult situations with less risk to identity.

Anticipating repetition

Anticipating repetition is a preplanned strategy to preserve identity by contextualizing frustration and expressing calmness during stressful situations. Part of preschool teaching is repetition. However, there are days as a preschool teacher when their words fall on deaf ears. No matter how many reminders or redirections a teacher delivers the children do not seem to respond. Some preschool teachers learn to anticipate repetition as part of their daily routine. Repetition is not only a learning experience for children, but also for teachers. Below, Jamie, a lead teacher in the upper school, explains how she anticipates repetition and manages her emotions.

I think that knowing that these children are learning, and knowing that you’re going to have to repeat yourself, that helps keep me calm know that they are learning. I could repeat it ten times, and it’s frustrating, but I think I’ve learned how to deal with that frustration is, yeah you need to keep repeating it, but this is something they need to know. Sometimes it takes two hundred times to tell them something before they actually understand it. And so knowing that I think is just the way to keep calm.

The daily work of being a preschool teacher means anticipating repetition. Jamie understands she will need to repeat something verbally or demonstrate it physically, like routines relating to classroom etiquette for standing in line. She acknowledges it is

frustrating, but believes knowing this on the front end is a way to cope with frustration. Repetition is not only a learning moment for children, but also for teachers. Knowing there will be a good deal of repetition while teaching preschoolers allows teachers to contextualize their frustration and approach constant repetition calmly. Expressing calm during frustrating situations also upholds the discourse of caring. Anticipating repetition preserves preschool teacher identity and affirms cultural expectations relating to preschool teacher feeling rules.

In-the-moment Strategies

In-the-moment strategies are coping strategies used when an interaction unexpectedly becomes stressful, such as when a child refuses to change their clothes after a bathroom accident. In-the-moment strategies do not unfold in a stepwise progression, and can sometimes be contradictory. The discourse of caring, specifically emotion management, underlies in-the-moment strategies.

Monitoring emotions

Monitoring emotions refers to keeping tabs on personal emotions during interactions to avoid expressing a negative emotion and potentially acquiring a discredited identity. This relates to the impression being made with facial features, tone of voice, body language, and the emotions being felt by the teacher. As Brandon, a support staff teacher in the upper school explains, it is challenging to monitor personal emotions, while simultaneously expressing institutionally acceptable behavior.

I think the biggest challenge is just being present and being able to stay in-the-moment with them while being productive. That means that I have to be able to, number one, on the surface be in control of my emotions, but also being able to know how I'm feeling. Being able to name how I'm feeling so that I don't get angry. I've heard that anger is a secondary emotion and that sad is kind of under it, and so is frustrated, and um, fear is under anger. I feel like knowing those

frustrations and things that make me sad or afraid, to notice those before I get angry, that's the hardest part, is just dealing with my own emotions.

Presenting controlled surface emotions while monitoring personal emotions is a type of emotional labor for preschool teachers bound up with self-presentation and the discourse of caring. For Brandon, it involves monitoring things like facial expression, body language, and tone of voice to have a presentation consistent with his preschool teacher identity, and the discourse of caring. For him, it is important to identify personal emotions prior to becoming angry. Monitoring his feelings in-the-moment is a way for Brandon to avoid feeling and expressing anger, both of which are potential blemishes on his preschool teacher identity.

Feigning performances

Feigning performances expresses institutionally appropriate surface displays (Hochschild 1983) while feeling contradictory emotions. The teacher accounts for personal feelings and displays a contextually appropriate feeling – even if it contradicts personal feelings. In some cases, a feigned performance eventually leads to feeling the culturally expected emotion. Below, Ceana, an upper school support staff teacher, explains feigning performances as her preference for coping with her negative emotions.

But I think the best thing to do is just smile [when feeling a strong emotion]. For me, I'll just smile. And at first it might be a fake smile, but then it becomes a real smile. And I find something to be happy about in the situation and that's usually when I find a better solution, or change it up and can get the job done.

Negative emotions contradict expectations of the discourse of caring in ECE, and feigning emotions is one way to conceal frustration. There are potential benefits and drawbacks involved with feigning performances. As Ceana explains, some teachers begin believing their performances, and can sometimes come up with creative solutions to

frustrating situations. Feigning performances also preserves the preschool teacher identity by concealing negative expressions and aligning with cultural expectations. While a preschool teacher feigning a performance conceals strong emotions from a preschooler, it does not demonstrate to children how to communicate their emotions. In addition, other studies have shown there are negative consequences, such as burnout, associated with suppressing emotions (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1999; Scheid 1999; Wharton 1993).

Self-talking

Self-talking is inner dialogue contextualizing a situation and providing distance between the preschool teacher and a stressful situation, which helps the individual display a calm outer expression. It is similar to feigning performances in that it disguises emotions, but rather than working an inner feeling into matching an outer expression, it distances the individual from the situation. It is also similar to anticipating repetition in that it contextualizes stressful situations. Self-talking also provides a way for teachers to contextualize themselves and their feelings in a stressful situation. Lauren, a lead teacher in the lower school, explains self-talking and how she does it.

I know it's probably silly, I self talk in my head. I will like talk myself through a situation. And then I take a deep breath, and then I'm like, this is just how it goes. Not everyday is peaches and cream in our room. I do a lot of like, in my head, I just talk myself through it to calm myself down. And then just take a deep breath. Because if the staff in my room see that I'm struggling then they're going to start struggling, and then the kids will start struggling because they're very intuitive. Like you're having a bad day and I can feel that. And so I try to keep myself as calm as I can... So I'm just like, okay, I'm just going to take it day-by-day. It's just, I don't know, depending on the situation I'll tell myself that it's okay, things aren't always perfect, this is your job, you'll get through it, that's my big thing – you're gonna get through it, Lauren, you're gonna get through it, just take a deep breath. It's only "X" amount of time out of your whole day, out of your eight hour day. It's just this section of it.

Self-talking is a coping strategy for contextualizing a situation and distancing the self from that situation. Lauren explains self-talking as a calming strategy. The main idea is to understand that not every day is going to be perfect and to contextualize the situation as a brief part of the day. Using self reminders to contextualize the situation, such as it is part of the job or things are not always perfect, provide distance between preschool teachers and the stressful situation. As a lead teacher, it is important for Lauren to use this strategy so her identity remains consistent with the discourse of caring and credible with others' expectations. She explains it as a slippery slope in which other teachers and children will mirror her emotion displays because she is the lead teacher. In this sense, self-talking helps Lauren manage herself and others in the classroom.

Walking away

Practically all of the teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool talked about “walking away,” “taking five,” or “tagging out” as a coping strategy. Walking away involves communicating the situation with an emotionally uninvolved teacher, letting that person take over with the child, and then leaving the situation. Presumably this works because the teacher walking away is allowed to leave the frustrating situation, while the teacher tagging in is not emotionally connected to the situation and is better able to resolve it. In turn, the child is not emotionally involved with the teacher tagging in and is better able to work through the problem. When a teacher walks away they usually find some other type of work to do such as working with a different child or cleaning. Below, Claire, a lead teacher in the upper school, explains how she copes with stressful situations.

There are definitely days when you wonder, are they hearing my words? Especially when you've said something twenty times. The nice thing about working here is that I can ask Sandy or Marissa for help. I remember Ben. [the head of school] I had difficulty with a friend [child] when he [the child] first came

to us. I had banana thrown in my hair and all sorts of things. I remember Ben caught me in the hall last year eating a candy bar. He said, “It’s been one of those days, huh?” I just needed one minute to myself. But you can definitely feel it at times.

Feeling it – overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, and/or angry – in the context of preschool teaching is remarkable because it is not prescribed by the discourse of caring. Stress is an unexpected aspect of the job with which preschool teachers must learn to cope. At times, when teachers need one minute for themselves, they ask another teacher for help, tell them about the situation, and then leave the situation. The exiting teacher either picks up some other task, such as cleaning tables, or leaves the room to cool off. Leaving the situation prior to expressing anger or frustration allows the teacher to put some mental and physical space between themselves and the stressful situation and preserve a credible preschool teacher identity.

Modeling emotions

Modeling emotions adds a layer to the strategy of monitoring emotions, but differs significantly from feigning expressions. Modeling emotions refers to an aspect of teaching in which the preschool teacher is honest with the child about feelings. Regarding to a feeling like frustration, the teacher explains the feeling to the child and then explains what action the teacher will take, such as taking some time away to let the frustration pass until reengaging with the child. Alison, an assistant lead teacher in the upper school, explains how she models expectations when interacting with her preschoolers.

When I am feeling something negative, whether it be in the classroom or something like that is going on, if it’s something I am going to end up expressing, I don’t beat around the bush about it. I tell them “You are making me frustrated and I need to walk away.” I’ll say, “I’m going to walk away just for a minute and then we’ll figure out what we’re going to do.” Because that’s what I want them to do rather than getting angry. I think it’s better to model that behavior than to say

“Everything’s fine!” with my lips pursed. Because they’re gonna know it’s not fine and they’re gonna wonder why I’m not being honest with them.

Modeling emotions calls for a foray into the adult world of coping sometimes absent from what Erving Goffman (1979) called the “parent-child complex” in which children are “subjected to various forms of nonperson treatment” (Goffman 1979:5).

Adults often try to keep interactions moving forward, or spare the feelings of children by hiding, disguising, or otherwise lying about their feelings of frustration or anger.

Modeling emotions shows the child how to be honest about their feelings by demonstrating how to express emotions like anger in a non-threatening manner. Alison believes it is important to be honest about her feelings and communicates it to her preschool students. Rather than working through a hopelessly frustrating situation pretending nothing is wrong, she believes it is better to be honest with the child about how she is feeling and why she is doing what she is doing, such as walking away. She is honest about her feelings because children are emotionally intuitive and will know if she is being dishonest with them. In this sense, her identity is preserved as she lives up to the discourse of caring and children learn cultural expectations for how to express themselves in preschool settings.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I shift the focus from taken for granted caring in ECE, to how organizations and preschool teachers construct and preserve caring contexts and identities. I identify a discourse of caring in ECE and the coping strategies preschool teachers use to preserve institutional identities consistent with the discourse of caring. The discourse of caring includes preschool teachers being loving, patient, understanding, empathetic, and compassionate – caring preschool teachers. The caring preschool teacher

identity is mostly taken for granted. However, identity preservation strategies introduce a more complex understanding of preschool teachers emotional labor.

The discourse of caring in ECE exists as a part of, and apart from, the preschool teachers at Ellis Montessori Preschool. It is not just part of their everyday work, as a strategy to keep a job, but also something they live and construct their identities by. As with many other discourses, preschool teachers construct the discourse of caring in either/or terms. That is, preschool teachers are either kind, compassionate, and loving, or they are only working for a paycheck. In this sense, the discourse of caring seems quite deterministic. However, in practice, the discourse of caring becomes a complex assemblage of interactional strategies.

Organizational guidelines found in the employee handbook, and reified in and through preschool teacher practices, provide an important point for understanding the everyday emotional demands of being a preschool teacher. Preschool teachers are not only responsible for personal identity, but also the organizational identity. Deviating from accessible emotional displays, for instance, opens the door for stigmatizing individuals and the organizations with which they are associated. Preschool teachers arrange their performances and the setting to construct a sense of a child's wellbeing for parents. Friendliness and order, then, are better construed as reality constructing resources to preserve identity, as well as part of the broad constellation of what it means to be a preschool teacher.

If the discourse of caring conceals emotional practices of preschool teaching, then it is also a way of analyzing how preschool teachers accomplish caring identities. Identity preservers are behavioral and discursive resources made visible in and through the

discourse of caring, and are part of a toolkit allowing preschool teachers to manage identity during stressful situations. Expressing anger or frustration in a preschool violates the discourse of caring and is grounds for acquiring a spoiled identity (Goffman 1963), unless it is done in an institutionally acceptable manner, such as modeling expectations suggests. Preplanned strategies help the teachers anticipate and contextualize stressful situations, and ready preschool teachers for those situations. Interactional strategies provide a way for teachers to locate, contextualize, and distance themselves from stressful situations. Identity preservers however, can also have drawbacks. Distancing from negative emotions or suppressing them, such as feigning performances, can be problematic for the individual (Hochschild 1983) and cause occupational burnout (Erickson and Ritter 2001), which is particularly problematic in a field already characterized as having high turnover.

As Erving Goffman (1959:56) put it, “the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps” like brief expressions of frustration or anger in institutional contexts unwelcoming of such expressions. At the very least, preschool teachers are tacitly aware of cultural expectations and use identity preservers to actively work toward managing organizational and personal identities. Identity preservers provide a glimpse into the everyday work encompassed in the discourse of caring in ECE. It shows real emotional labor occurs during the course of preschool teaching and that life in the preschool is not always a matter of playing with children or passing out hugs. As an impression management strategy, identity preservers normalize abnormal emotions in the context of ECE, like anger, and provide a way for preschool teachers to conceal it. Identity preservers also

indicate that even those who are not “naturals” with children can learn to foster the impression of naturalness. In this sense, identity preservers protect performers, performances, audiences, and scenes from becoming shattered by the potential missteps encountered during everyday life.

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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to identify discourses in early childhood education and then analyze how preschool teacher identity work relates to the discourses. I relied on ethnographic and interview data to parse out interpretations and practices related to the discourses and show how these discourses exist in and out of Ellis Montessori Preschool. It shows how discourse contributes to our understanding of institutional identities, and how those identities are shaped and reshaped by everyday practice.

Early childhood education provides an opportunity to reflect on how identity occupies spaces interim to individuals and culture, namely institutions and organizations as lived out through individual and cultural interpretations. If identity is constituted in the institution in which it is embedded, then its construction is a way of strategically accomplishing situated goals. Preschool teacher identity work, in other words, is made interesting because of the context of early childhood education and the various matters of concern involved in its production. In this sense, we are able to put the perceived mundanity of the preschool aside to focus on what makes the previously unremarkable so remarkable.

Yet, with all of the discourses circulating in, around, and through the preschool, how are we to know just who the preschool teacher is? What is the preschool teacher identity? How are men potentially threats, but also good for children? How are women naturally competent *because* they are women? These questions linger in various ways, but this research does shed new conceptual light on how to think about them by framing

them sociologically. Rather than considering the questions unanswerable, unimportant, or matters for policy scholars, I argue the preschool teacher is a social construction – a resource in its own right – worked into existence in and through discourse and preschool teachers’ discursive and practical work.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss discourse in the preschool and implications for this work. I will then turn to discourse beyond the preschool and the need for sociological research in early childhood education.

DISCOURSE IN THE PRESCHOOL

I identify several discourses in early childhood education and analyze how these discourses shape preschool teacher identity even as preschool teachers shape discourse. Discourses are put into practice in the everyday circumstances in which we find ourselves, and thus, resources in its own right. The discourses in early childhood education reflect the broader social order in which we find not only the conditions of possibility, but also the moral possibilities. Discourse, then, proliferates in society, institutions, organizations, and everyday life in such a way as to decipher and order conceptualizations of morality, while keeping itself hidden from everyday view.

The discourse of suspicion is a cautionary tale of who to let care for our children. It perpetuates in rumors, vague crime blotters, news stories, and gonzo journalism capitalizing on the popular imagination and parents’ fears. This is not to trivialize the matter of any form of abuse, but the discourse of suspicion would have us believe any man stepping foot in a preschool is potentially predatory. Not only does the discourse of suspicion marginalize men, but also further feminizes early childhood education. The discourse of suspicion not only shapes cultural perception, but also emerges in men

preschool teachers' talk and interaction. Consciously, or not, the discourse of suspicion has far reaching effects for everyone involved in early childhood education.

The discourse of mothering is another gendered prescription conditioning who is competent to care for children in the preschool (and in general). Here, mothering includes all of the stereotypical conceptualizations of the ideal mother placed up against some, but by no means all, of the stereotypical conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity. If women are soft, men are terse. If women are loving, men are impatient. The discourse of mothering is conceptualized as women preschool teachers having maternal instincts men simply do not, or cannot, have. The moral contrast is quite clear in relation to competence: women are always already competent caretakers of children, while men pose a potential threat. This, it seems, is a double-edged sword. The consequence, which is similar to the discourse of suspicion, is preschool teaching is considered women's work. This is not to say it is all doom and gloom, so to speak, in the preschool. One of the taken for granted benefits of ECE work is women are assumed to be able to "do" it, and thus gain employment. However, some men are capable of working with young children despite not having maternal instincts. These men are interpreted as positive male role models.

A third discourse relating to competence is the discourse of the positive male role model. The positive male role model presents a counter narrative to the discourse of suspicion and the discourse of mothering. The discourse of the positive male role model presents a different side of masculinity in the preschool. The positive male role model is a commodity in the preschool because he brings a tempered version of masculinity to the classroom. Here, masculinity is non-threatening, gentler, and more nurturing than

hegemonic masculinity, but still expected to be a “disciplinarian” (King 1998). In short, it is a subordinate masculinity. The discourse of the positive male role model capitalizes on the absence of men in the preschool to construct an idealized male figure children can look up to as a positive example of a “good” man.

The final discourse I analyze is the discourse of caring. The discourse of caring establishes the type of emotional care young children *should* receive. Like the other discourses, practices and displays of care are natural to the preschool teacher. After all, this natural disposition is why people get jobs as preschool teachers. The discourse of care conceals more about the practice of preschool teaching than what it reveals about the identity of preschool teachers. The preschool teacher institutional identity remains consistent through behind the scenes coping strategies preserving interactions during times of stress. The only identity we, as outsiders, see is the one prescribed by the discourse of caring: patient, kind, compassionate, loving, and so on. The ugly mess of emotional labor, especially suppressing feelings of frustration and/or anger and doing surface acting (Hochschild 1983/2003), is almost nonexistent in the preschool. However, analyzing how preschool teachers spoke about anger and frustration, and particularly how they cope with it, rendered the discourse of caring quite visible, and preschool teachers’ identity preservation visible as a situational accomplishment.

There is considerable interplay between the discourses presented here. For example, the idea men are threatening is a theme of the discourse of suspicion. This threat also underlies the discourse of mothering, the discourse of caring, and even the discourse of the positive male role model. Men in preschools provide a readymade resource for storying danger to children, emotional incompetence, and gendered

tokenism. In contrast, but still drawing on gender, the theme of femininity is in each discourse, and prominently featured in the discourse of mothering and the discourse of caring as ideal for the role of preschool teacher. Being a woman is an unmarked category in the preschool, and in the discourse of suspicion it is used as a way to mark men as out-of-place. Similarly, femininity is a prominent theme in the discourse of the positive male role model. Here, there are elements of “male femininity” (Francis 2010) in which men embody feminine social expectations in the preschool.

The discourse of the positive male role model stands in comparison with the discourse of suspicion. Here, men in the preschool are interpreted as having value to the classroom. The positive male role model is characterized as having something important to give young children, and especially boys. The leading idea behind the discourse of the positive male role model is the dearth of men debate in which the prominent belief is there are not enough men in ECE, and hence a lack of role models for boys (Martino 2008). Although Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers want men in their classroom, they must be the “right” kind of men. Men preschool teachers are tokens granted a priori competence by some, but must prove themselves as competent with young children to others. This ambivalence suggests men be treated as exceptional and with caution.

Preschool teacher identity is part of the broader social and cultural context of circulating discourses becoming more and more complex as we locate them in everyday practice. It is embedded in the early childhood education institution and constituted in talk and interaction strategically accomplishing practical matters. Preschool teacher identity varies with the circumstances of a given situation – at once matters of momentary and eternal concern. The discourses at work in Ellis Montessori Preschool are surely at

work elsewhere, and the particularity of how they play out in early childhood education is what makes preschool teaching so remarkable. That is, considering something as mundane as how people move through the halls of a preschool illustrates just how complex and internalized the gender order becomes in practice. In this sense, the preschool teacher is a nuanced production of individual talk and interaction and behavioral strategies, and a broad composition of organizational, institutional, and cultural expectations.

The discourses in early childhood education are not so much competing, as working together to paint a picture of the preschool and preschool teachers. Emotionally, this picture is of preschool teachers who are kind, loving, caring, empathetic, and compassionate. Regarding gender, it is a picture of emphasized femininity in which women are expected to be mother-teacher. Conversely, men are expected to be mostly absent from the preschool. The discourses presented here show how the broader social expectations are made real through the words and behaviors of preschool teachers. The matters of teaching and caring in the preschool are mostly invisible to outsiders, and sometimes to preschool teachers, but are never trivial matters. Instead, the dual responsibilities of teaching and caring influence the institution of early childhood education and preschool teachers' identities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Although the practicality of discourse is mostly overlooked in everyday life, the practical implications for discourses in ECE are worth noting for several reasons. Several issues of inequality undergird discourse, and the everyday uses of discourse bear this out. The data presented here mostly relates to gender inequality and the idea women are in

control of the context of ECE. However, this may be overstated given societal (especially patriarchal) and everyday practicalities.

On its face, the hegemonic norm of male domination appears to reverse itself in the preschool. For example, the organizational practices at Ellis Montessori Preschool are for men to not change diapers, be alone with children, or work in the lower school – where most of the caring work takes place. This relates to men being regarded as outsiders, threats to the gender order, incompetent, and so on. While all of this does emerge in the data, it also grants men preschool teachers a patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995) because they do not have to do as much caring work. Perhaps this is the tradeoff for being considered a social problem of sorts in ECE, but it does reify hegemonic norms from outside the preschool while masking it as gender inequality against men. Therein lies the paradox of discourse: it lets us believe one thing, even showing it to us clear and evident, while doing something contradictory altogether.

If early childhood education is undervalued, then it may be because it is perceived as women's work (Cameron, Moss, and Owens 1999; Francis and Skelton 2001; King 1998; Skelton 2012) in a culture that devalues women and working with children. In part, there needs to be an economic shift in the pay of preschool teachers and a policy shift in how preschool teaching is funded. The practicalities of preschool teaching involve a significant amount of work – it is not all singing and coloring – and this work is underpaid (Whitebook 1999). Shifting the notion of what constitutes real work may relate to pay. This suggests increasing the wages of preschool teachers may increase the prestige of the occupation. An increase in prestige would increase the perception of occupational value of preschool teaching.

The implications of the discourses presented and analyzed here are that they contribute to and perpetuate gender inequality for men, women, and those not fitting into the gender binary (only two of the twenty-three preschool teachers mentioned transgender persons during interviews). The discourses contribute to the marginalization of transgender persons in a very real way – through neglect. Being outside of the gender binary means being somewhat invisible in relation to structural decisions about education policy. In the preschool, it socially marks the individual as problematic for reasons not relating to competence in early childhood education or working with young children. Underrepresentation, or no representation at all, can effectively shut the LGBTQ community (among others) out of the conversation. This suggests structural changes for *who* is involved in policy making. If there is a dearth of men in ECE, then there is also a dearth of LGBTQ persons, a dearth of racial and ethnic minorities, and a dearth of persons with disabilities in shaping education policy. All of this relates to the dearth of historically marginalized and excluded persons from the policymaking processes. A more diverse and multicultural approach to early childhood education is necessary to change cultural interpretations of belonging.

DISCOURSE BEYOND THE PRESCHOOL

If discourse is a way of naturalizing the unnatural, then analyzing everyday practice makes visible the “seen but unnoticed” (Garfinkel 1967:36). Institutions and organizations, here early childhood education and Ellis Montessori Preschool, mediate the interplay between discourse and practice. The discourses in ECE were present in the discursive productions and behavioral strategies of preschool teachers.

Preschool teachers talked the discourse of suspicion into existence through descriptions of threats to children, but it was also brought into existence through suspicion minimizing strategies. Being visible, setting boundaries, using family, and so on, are all ways men (and some women) preschool teachers cope with suspicion. If the discourse of suspicion characterizes men as threats, then men preschool teachers' efforts to minimize suspicion proclaim, "I am not a threat!" The behavioral strategies aim at presenting men in the preschool as safe and positive. In this sense, the behavioral strategies also relate to the discourse of the positive male role model.

The discourse of caring is an interactional and presentational accomplishment. It is an institutional norm preschool teachers live out. Preschool teachers work to present infallibly caring identities by developing coping strategies. These coping strategies preserve institutional, organizational, and personal identities. Identity preservers are behind the scenes resources perpetuating the taken for granted notion preschool teachers have naturally unlimited emotional reserves of kindness, love, patience, compassion, and the like.

The discourses in ECE are not just something preschool teachers blindly follow, nor are they something preschool teachers consciously consider throughout their days. Instead, the discourses in ECE are remarkable because they have often unnoticed consequences for society and individuals. In some sense, failure to live up to, or by the discourses presents an identity problem for preschool teachers akin to a zero-sum game. A spoiled identity in the preschool means more than the loss of employment. It is a moral failure.

The discourses in ECE are not particular to preschools, daycares, in home care, or mother's day out. Nor are the discourses only about suspicion, competence, and coping in preschool teachers' identity work. The stakes and interests are much more consequential and far reaching, and yet the preschool is a unique case for helping us locate and understand the broadest consequences in particular terms.

The discourses analyzed here present us with one of the most fundamental and encompassing characteristics of our lives today, as well as across time and place: morality. Discourses begin and end in morals, maxims, and codas, and provide us with the broadest of contours for making sense of our lives, society, and indeed the world. Discourse, in its most general sense, presents us with conceptualizations of good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral. Binary articulations of discourses become seemingly complicated in everyday life, to the point where it masks itself as tradition, norms, or commonsense. Although particular interpretations change over time, the moral backdrop of discourse shapes interpretations of everything from global historical change, to everyday contexts, situations, and interactions. Everyday articulations of discourse, then, bring a sense of moral order to the cosmos.

In this sense, the drama of the preschool has been playing out since the beginning of time. What an unimaginably interesting thing it is to document the complexity and drama of the ages as it plays out in the everyday social worlds of the preschool!

TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Preschools are potentially one of the most important levels in all of education, given that it is many children's introduction to the education experience and foundation for learning. The question becomes, how do we qualitatively account for the social

worlds of ECE? For many of us, the seeds for how we as adults view the world relating to race, class, and gender are planted in early childhood, and early childhood education settings. How do we account for what occurs in ECE, how it occurs, and why it occurs? The argument I am making here is that ECE is not only important for what it does, but also how it does it. These practices are largely taken for granted. Research taking aim at this target relates to culture, institutions, organizations, and individuals.

This dissertation touches on a gap in the sociological literature relating to early childhood education (Delamont 2002), and, more broadly, identifies the conflation of the sociology of childhood with the “sociology of early childhood education.” The former is an important area of inquiry revealing socialization processes and practices relating to children. The latter focuses on sociological matters in the context of early childhood education, and begins with the institution. However, there is almost nothing categorized as sociology of early childhood education. In fact, a search for “sociology of early childhood education” turns up only one publication (King and Kerber 1968), which is quite dated.

The reason early childhood education is mostly absent from the literature is because it is largely taken for granted. Preschools, daycares, in-home care, mothers’ day out programs, and nurseries generally do not captivate the sociological (or popular) imagination unless there is trouble brewing, so to speak. Preschools are places in which “everyone knows” socialization is taking place, and so there is little reason for investigation. However, problematizing the taken for granted notion of socialization in the preschool directs our attention to analytically rich matters of discourse, pedagogical context, preschool teacher practices, and identity work, to name a few. Although there is

overlap with sociology of education and sociology of childhood, these concerns are better suited for a subfield. This is the stock and trade of sociological inquiry, but does not necessarily have to focus on children. Instead, research in the sociology of early childhood education provides an opportunity to analyze the various intersections, such as contexts, actors, and the practices within them – preschools, daycares, nurseries, at home care; learning philosophies (Montessori, Waldorf, free play, et cetera); administrators, teachers, students, parents, *and* researchers; teaching and caring practices – as they intersect with sociological concerns of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, identity, and so forth.

While the sociology of early childhood education begins with the institution of early childhood education, it can include different institutions such as the family and healthcare. Access and location to “quality” early childhood education are important issues with which many families grapple. A sociology of early childhood education provides a way to reframe the issues to help understand the needs of the families involved. Similarly the institution of healthcare, and more specifically mental healthcare, is having an increasing presence in early childhood education. For example, one preschool teacher at Ellis Montessori Preschool requested a mental health professional observe a student to see if there was a diagnosable disorder. Analyzing institutional interplay, for example the influence of the school on mental health, and in turn on the family is another potentiality.

A sociology of early childhood education presents an opportunity to turn the sociological lens on a field rarely interpreted as relevant outside of the concept of socialization. However, the importance of ECE from a practical standpoint is obvious: it

is the beginning of the education process. Using the sociological perspective, we can analyze ECE as a dynamic institution with nearly limitless forms of talk and interaction, social worlds, institutional identities, and circulating discourses brought together under the auspices of teaching and caring for young children.

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