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Motivations and Barriers to Men's Interest in Childcare: The Role of Norm Perception and Sexual Orientation Stereotyping

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how sexual orientation stereotypes and perceived norms shape young gay and straight men's perceptions of motivations and barriers to interest in early childhood education and care (ECEC) careers. Gay and straight men ($N = 364$) estimated interest and then reported barriers and motivations influencing men's interest in childcare work; either for themselves, gay men, or straight men. Men overestimated gay men's interest in childcare work, regardless of their own sexual orientation. As key barriers, participants cited the low salary, poor working conditions, and the gendered association of childcare with femininity, whereas key motivators were positive interactions with children, salary increases, and intrinsic rewards associated with a care-oriented career. Patterns of distorted norm perception and sexual orientation stereotyping emerged: straight men believed traditional masculinity norms discouraged other straight men more than themselves (i.e., pluralistic ignorance), and gay men overestimated communal motivations of other gay men. These findings highlight how sexual orientation stereotypes and misperceptions of norms reinforce occupational segregation. The discussion addresses the implications of these dynamics for diversifying the ECEC workforce and calls for interventions that challenge restrictive identity-based assumptions about caregiving roles.

In 2022, only 7.7% of U.S. childcare workers were men (Data USA 2022). Researchers have attended to women's engagement historically male dominated careers, such as in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), far more than to men's engagement in careers dominated by women, such as in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). We explored reasons for men's lack of interest in care-oriented careers, examining both their interest in childcare work and their beliefs about barriers to taking it up. Informed by research that professional childcare work is counter-normative for young men (Murray 1996), we focused on how similarly or differently

young gay and straight men perceive themselves and other men. Specifically, we investigated both groups' beliefs about gay and straight men, capturing how sexual orientation stereotyping affects men's interest in childcare work. We also explored how distorted norm perception, such as pluralistic ignorance—the discrepancy between normative beliefs and self-perceptions—or sexual orientation stereotyping creates barriers to gay and straight men's interest in childcare work, giving those men reasons *not* to pursue it.

Using a bottom-up approach to address the barriers to men's participation in childcare, we asked gay and straight men to

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generate reasons why they themselves and other men would or would not be drawn to childcare work. Further, we examined whether these barriers varied by participants' sexual orientation, and whether participants accurately anticipated the level of interest in childcare work that was reported by gay and straight men. Specifically, we considered how interested men are in childcare work, the role of sexual orientation in men's perceived barriers to interest, and men's perception of social norms and sexual orientation stereotyping.

1 | Men's Interest in Childcare Work

Past research has identified several factors that likely prevent men from pursuing a career in ECEC (Haines et al. 2024). In addition to being less well compensated than many other forms of work consistent with male gender roles, men working in childcare can expect to be perceived as incompetent or as immoral (e.g., as a threat to children in their care; Cronin 2014; Moss-Racusin and Johnson 2016; Sczesny et al. 2022). Moreover, men's anticipated discrimination in early childhood education was found to lower their interest. A study that presented women and men with a news article that reported either no information, anti-male bias, or gender equality in early childhood education, found that men were less interested in the role than women when presented with no information, because they anticipated less belonging in early education workplaces than women did (Moss-Racusin et al. 2024). When presented with evidence of anti-male bias, men's interest was even further reduced, and when presented with evidence of gender equality, men's interest matched women's. These results suggest that men's interests in ECEC can be subject to the situational influence of social norms. Of course, gender roles also inform men's norms for work, and we discuss the impact of sexual orientation on those norms next.

2 | Sexual Orientation and Men's Anticipated Barriers in Childcare Work

Communal roles like childcare work, which emphasise nurturing and caring, are strongly associated with femininity (Eagly et al. 1992; Moss 2000). Consequently, gay men, who are stereotypically viewed as less masculine, could be perceived as better suited for childcare work than straight men (Clarke and Arnold 2018). Straight men, on the other hand, are both perceived to be more "masculine" than gay men (Clarke and Arnold 2017; Kite and Deaux 1987), and tend to endorse traditional masculinity to a greater extent than gay men (Massoth et al. 1996; cited in Levant and Richmond 2008; Eggenberger et al. 2021). Further, key aspects of traditional masculinity involve both avoiding femininity and avoiding associations with gay men (Brannon 1976; Hunt et al. 2016; Morin and Garfinkle 1978). That is, heterosexuality is an assumed component of the male gender role (Herek 1986). The association of childcare work and femininity could threaten straight men who are invested in traditional masculinity not only because of associations with "women's work" but also if such work is perceived as "gay". Indeed, in one study, when men were allowed to disclose their heterosexuality explicitly, straight men became less anxious whilst interacting with children (Bosson

et al. 2004). Of course, concerns about being perceived as gay are greater among straight men than among gay men themselves. Consequently, we expected that the feminine associations of childcare work serve as a greater barrier to interest in childcare work among straight men than gay men.

However, gay men may also have reason to be more vigilant about potential accusations of immoral interest in childcare than straight men. Historically, political and media narratives have often intentionally conflated paedophilia with homosexuality, in order to derail progress towards gay rights and fuel anti-gay sentiment (see review by Graydon 2011; Herek 2002), a tactic which is still used today (Jackman 2018). Paedophilia is presumed to be a motive of men who choose to work with children (Cronin 2014; Heikkilä and Hellman 2017), and research suggests that awareness of this suspicion can shape men's behaviour, leading to heightened anxiety, increased self-monitoring and avoidance of contact with children (Buschmeyer 2013; Sargent 2000). Indeed, gay and bisexual men were more likely to exhibit signs of non-verbal anxiety while interacting with children after disclosing their sexual orientation than straight men (Bosson et al. 2004). False cultural associations of homosexuality and paedophilia carry particularly severe social costs and might well reduce gay men's aspirations to pursue childcare work particularly.

In sum, stereotypes about gay men may impede both straight and gay men's interest in childcare, but for different reasons. For straight men, interest in childcare work may particularly threaten masculinity due to its association with femininity. For gay men, however, interest in childcare work may especially activate longstanding cultural stereotypes that conflate homosexuality with paedophilia. Such concerns may become salient barriers that shape both straight and gay men's perceived interest in childcare work as a career option. We next consider why these stereotypes might lead men to misperceive levels of interest in childcare among members of their sexual orientation ingroup and outgroup.

3 | Norm Perception and Pluralistic Ignorance

Social norms play a critical role in shaping people's behaviour and career interests (e.g., Evans and Diekmann 2009). Social norms refer to the implicit or explicit social rules that guide behaviours in a group, often enforced through social pressure to conform to expected attitudes or actions (Ajzen 1991, 2020). In the context of masculinity and career choices, such norms can influence men's perceptions of what is an acceptable or desirable career (Moss-Racusin et al. 2024). Pluralistic ignorance describes a phenomenon by which an individual's perceptions of a norm for their ingroup is systematically distorted in relation to the group's actual endorsement of that norm (Miller and McFarland 1987). One consequence of pluralistic ignorance is that people hide their true preferences—or shape their desires—to conform to norms that they misconstrue to be endorsed by their ingroup (Halbesleben 2009).

With respect to manhood, pluralistic ignorance sustains the illusion that men endorse traditional masculine ideals more so than is the case. For example, men believed their own description of an 'ideal man' was more nurturing and caring than other men's description of an ideal man (Van Grootel

et al. 2018). Consequently, men felt pressured to conform to this norm, hiding their own communal traits to align with what they believed was idealized by men in their ingroup. When told that men do value both agentic and communal traits, men were less likely to hide future communal engagement. This research not only shows that men's norms are amenable to situational influence (Moss-Racusin et al. 2024), but also that the dynamics of pluralistic ignorance could lead men to create situational norms for career choices among themselves. The present research examined whether men's reasons to seek out or avoid childcare work are influenced by social norms, and more specifically, by distorted perceptions of these norms such as pluralistic ignorance. We examined both group similarities and differences between gay and straight men's interest in childcare work, and how individual men in each group perceive those differences.

As part of a minority group, gay men are likely to pay heightened attention to social rules, expectations and potential sanctions, to navigate social environments structured around heteronormativity (Herek 2007). As a consequence of this attention, gay men may develop greater awareness of the different social norms which shape men's interest and willingness to engage in specific careers (Brown 1989). This has been established in applied contexts, such as workplace dynamics, where sexual minorities demonstrate awareness of norms shaping leadership and organisational behaviour (Fassinger et al. 2010). Consequently, when considering specific barriers and motivations for childcare work, gay men may be more accurate when predicting the different social norms that apply to both their ingroup (gay men), and their outgroup (straight men), than straight men.

As heterosexuality forms a core component of the traditional male gender role (Herek 1986), straight participants will likely be more inclined to conflate norms for men in general, with norms for heterosexual men. Indeed, straight men who endorse homophobic constructions of masculinity likely struggle to empathise with the experiences of gay men as a group. Consequently, we expected that straight participants will be less accurate when predicting barriers and motivations of their outgroup (gay men) than gay participants.

4 | The Present Research

This preregistered study examined which barriers and motivations are most relevant to men's interest in childcare in general, as well as which factors are particularly relevant for gay men and for straight men (<https://osf.io/fya8b/>). Specifically, we aimed to clarify how perceptions and social expectations shape young men's initial interest in childcare work, before career paths solidify. By including young men who do not necessarily have prior associations with childcare, this study captures novel information about how potential misperceptions of peer norms (i.e., pluralistic ignorance) and the influence of sexual orientation stereotypes can shape men's interest and perceptions of barriers (and motivations) to work in childcare.

To this end, participants were allocated to one of three conditions: providing information about themselves, gay men, or straight men. To provide a benchmark for actual attitudes, participants in the self-condition reported their own interest in

childcare. This also created a point of comparison from which to examine pluralistic ignorance—whether men misperceive the interest, barriers and motivations for their ingroup and outgroup. We focused on men under 30, as this is an age when career decisions are made and career paths are yet to be fully explored. An equal number of gay and straight men participated.

We anticipated that gay men would particularly wish to avoid being treated with suspicion with respect to paedophilia. Hypothesis 1 predicted that gay participants report less interest in childcare work than straight participants.

Given their marginalised position, gay men may have a better understanding of masculine gender norms in comparison to straight men, including the incentives and challenges that would help or hinder men's interest in childcare work. Consequently, Hypothesis 2 predicted that when evaluating their ingroup, straight participants' estimations of straight targets' interest in childcare work are less accurate than gay participants' estimations of gay targets' interest. By comparing actual self-reported interest to men's judgments of their ingroup and outgroup, this research examined where misperceptions of peer norms exist, reflecting pluralistic ignorance.

Similarly, differences between men's ratings of gay and straight men's barriers and motivations show how stereotypes about sexual orientation can influence expectations about men's interest in childcare. We expected that straight participants' conflation of norms for men in general with norms for heterosexual men could hinder their ability to empathise with outgroup members and to accurately estimate gay men's interest in childcare. Consequently, Hypothesis 3 predicted that when evaluating their outgroup, straight participants are less accurate when estimating gay targets' interest in childcare than gay participants when estimating straight targets' interest. We examined the main effect of participant sexual orientation and target condition on interest in childcare in general to test these hypotheses.

In addition to these hypotheses, we included two preregistered open-ended questions allowing us to examine which factors participants drew to mind as barriers and motivators of interest in childcare work. We tested the effects of participants' sexual orientation and target condition on the total number of barriers and motivations men called to mind. Finally, we compared the most commonly mentioned barriers and motivations by participant and target to generate new insights and research questions about the real and perceived reasons for men's interest in childcare careers.

5 | Methods

5.1 | Participants

A total of 364 men aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 25.5$, $SD = 3.21$) who resided in the United States were recruited via Prolific to participate in the online study. Participants were compensated 1.00 USD for their participation.

As preregistered, we excluded participants who did not report demographic information ($n = 27$), or who withdrew consent for data processing at the end of the survey ($n = 3$). The resulting sample consisted of 334 men, of whom 174 were

sexual minority men and 160 sexual majority men.¹ The sexual minority men all registered their sexual orientation as gay on Prolific, yet, provided more diverse answers in our survey ($n = 159$ gay, $n = 7$ bisexual, $n = 2$ queer, and $n = 1$ unsure). The sexual majority men all identified as straight, both on Prolific and in our survey. For simplicity in the analyses, we refer to the sexual minority and sexual majority participant groups as *gay* and *straight*. However, to avoid issues such as bi-erasure, these labels should be interpreted whilst bearing in mind that 6% of the "gay" men identified with a label other than "gay."

In terms of employment, 70.4% of participants indicated that they were employed (thereof 17.4% in part-time or temporary work), 15% were unemployed, and 13.5% were students. For a complete list of participant occupations, see Table S1 in the Online Supplement.

5.2 | Design

This study had a preregistered 2×3 between-subjects design. The two independent variables were participants' sexual orientation (straight, gay) and the experimental target condition (self, gay men, straight men).

In the *self target condition*, participants reported their own interest in childcare work using a rating scale, and both the barriers they personally faced and the factors that could potentially motivate their interest in childcare work, using an open-ended measure. In the *gay men* and *straight men target conditions*, participants answered the equivalent three questions about the relevant target.

5.3 | Materials and Procedure

The goal of the study was described to participants as aiming to examine how people perceive different occupations in relation to different groups of people. Participants were informed that they would be asked to think about a specific career and answer several questions in relation to that occupation. Each participant was randomly allocated to one of the three target conditions and completed three key items.

Interest in Childcare. Participants estimated one of three target's interest in working in childcare (i.e., the self, gay men, or straight men), using the item "*How interested are [target] in working in childcare?*" Interest was reported on a rating scale ranging from 0 (not at all interested) to 100 (extremely interested). This single-item approach was considered appropriate because the construct is concrete, unidimensional, and straightforward, making it suitable for a single-item assessment (Allen et al. 2022). Research has shown that single-item measures can effectively capture simple, well-defined attitudes and can perform comparably to multi-item scales under these conditions (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007; Cheung and Lucas 2014; Lukoševičiūtė et al. 2022).

Barriers to Interest in Childcare Work. Two open-ended questions provided richer insight into participants' considerations for engaging in childcare work. The first solicited thoughts about barriers to childcare work, asking participants to list up to five factors that would make the target less interested in childcare work "*Please list up to five factors that would make*

[target] less interested in childcare work". Potential barriers to childcare work are likely to be broad, diverse and vary depending on individual experience or context. Using a single, open-ended prompt provides a flexible, participant-driven account of the most salient barriers to childcare work.

Motivations for Interest in Childcare Work. Second, participants were asked to list up to five factors that would make the target more interested in childcare work; "*Please list up to five factors that would make [target] more interested in childcare work*". As with the item for barriers to childcare work, we used a single-item measure, providing qualitative material to help establish foundational insights into this emerging area of inquiry.

Finally, participants provided demographic information (i.e., age, gender, sexual orientation, and current occupation) and approved their data for inclusion in the research. The full survey can be found the Online Supplement. This research received ethics approval from the ethics committee of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

5.4 | Analytic Strategy

All analyses followed the preregistered plan unless otherwise noted. We first examined participants' quantitative ratings of interest in childcare and then analysed the open-ended responses relating to barriers and motivations for childcare work.

5.4.1 | Men's Ratings of Interest in Childcare Work

To test the preregistered hypotheses concerning interest in childcare work, we conducted a 2 (participant sexual orientation: gay, straight) $\times 3$ (target condition: self, gay men, straight men) between-subjects ANOVA. Hypothesis 1 was evaluated through the main effect of participant sexual orientation on interest in childcare work. Hypothesis 2 was assessed by comparing the accuracy of participants' estimates for their ingroup—specifically, whether straight participants' estimates of straight targets differed more from straight men's self-reported interest than gay participants' estimates of gay targets differed from gay men's self-reported interest. Hypothesis 3 was assessed by comparing the accuracy of participants' outgroup estimates—whether straight participants' estimates of gay targets differed more from gay men's self-reported interest than gay participants' estimates of straight targets differed from straight men's self-reported interest. Accuracy scores were operationalised as the absolute difference between participants' estimates for a given target and the corresponding average self-reported score.

5.4.2 | Barriers and Motivations in the Open Responses

The purpose of the open responses was to enrich the information gathered using the rating scale and explore what men brought to mind when contemplating a career in childcare work. We first counted the barriers and motivations for childcare work reported by the participants and then content coded those responses. Following this, we examined the total number of barriers and motivations listed by participants as a function of participant sexual orientation and target condition. As

preregistered, we used chi-square tests of independence to compare the frequency of the most commonly mentioned barrier and motivation categories across participant and target groups to provide descriptive insight into the factors that men perceive as most relevant to childcare work. We preregistered three exploratory hypotheses based on raw frequency comparisons across groups in the open responses. These analyses are reported in the Online Supplement; they did not yield significant differences and are not discussed further in the main text as they do not contribute to the study's conclusions.

6 | Results

We first report tests of our preregistered hypotheses about responses to the interest measure and then our exploration of the open-ended responses relating to barriers and motivations.

6.1 | Effects of Participant Sexual Orientation and Target Condition

Table 1 presents the main effects of participant sexual orientation and target condition on interest in childcare work. The *n*'s for participant group and target condition are presented in Table 2. The 2 (participant group) \times 3 (target condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated a significant main effect of participant sexual orientation, $F(1, 328) = 13.30, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.039$. Overall, straight men estimated higher levels of interest in childcare across all three targets than did gay men (see Table 1). The main effect of target condition was also significant, $F(2, 328) = 18.33, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.101$. Participants reported greater interest in childcare work for gay men, than for straight men or for themselves personally (see Table 1). The interaction between participant sexual orientation and target was not significant, $F(2, 328) = 0.74, p = 0.476, \eta^2 = 0.01$.

Simple slope analyses indicated that both gay and straight men attributed greater interest to gay men than to themselves (gay participants: $p = 0.002$; straight participants: $p < 0.001$). Relatedly, both groups attributed greater interest to gay men than to straight men (gay participants: $p < 0.001$; straight participants: $p = 0.001$). Neither of the groups attributed different interest to straight men and to themselves (gay participants: $p = 0.632$; straight participants: $p = 0.307$).

Gay men's ratings of straight men exhibited both the lowest mean and the lowest standard deviation. This suggests a high degree of consensus in gay men's judgment that straight men are uninterested in childcare work.

6.2 | Men's Interest in Childcare Work

To test our pre-registered hypotheses, we used this 2 (participant sexual orientation) \times 3 (target condition) ANOVA on interest in childcare work. First, Hypothesis 1 predicted that gay men would report less interest in childcare work for themselves than straight men would for themselves. However, there was no difference between gay and straight men's interest in childcare work for themselves, $F(1, 110) = 0.94, p = 0.336, \eta^2 = 0.008$ (see Table 1).² This result refutes our hypothesis that stereotypes linking gay men with paedophilia create a specific barrier to childcare work for this group.

Second, Hypothesis 2 predicted that straight men would be inaccurate when estimating the interest reported by other straight men (in the self-target condition), whereas gay men would accurately estimate the interest reported by other gay men (in the self-target condition). Contrary to this prediction, results showed no difference between straight participants' ratings of other straight men's interest and the average interest reported by straight men in the self-target condition, $F(1, 107) = 0.71, p = 0.402, \eta^2 = 0.007$ (see Table 1). On the other hand, gay participants significantly overestimated gay men's interest in childcare relative to the average interest reported by gay men in the self-target condition, $F(1, 114) = 11.06, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.088$ (see Table 1). Consequently, gay men, but not straight men showed pluralistic ignorance when estimating the interest of their ingroup in childcare work.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 predicted that straight participants estimates of gay men's interest would be less accurate with respect to the actual interest reported by gay men (in the self-target condition), whereas gay men's perceptions of straight men's interests would be more accurate with respect to the actual interest reported by straight men (in the self-target condition). In line with these predictions regarding outgroup perception, straight participants overestimated gay men's interest in childcare relative to the interest reported by gay participants, $F(1, 102) = 16.03, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.136$. Moreover, as predicted by Hypothesis 3, gay participants' estimates of straight men's interest in childcare were not different from the actual interest of straight participants, $F(1, 115) = 0.32, p = 0.575, \eta^2 = 0.003$.

In sum, Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted a pattern of pluralistic ignorance that varied by participants' sexual orientation, but the pattern of pluralistic ignorance observed varied by target condition. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 and 3 predicted a particular pattern of pluralistic ignorance among straight men by virtue of their being a dominant social group. However, what we observed was inaccurate stereotyping of gay men's interests among both straight and gay men. Both groups of

TABLE 1 | Mean Estimates (and Standard Deviations) of Interest in Childcare by Participant Group and Target Condition.

	<i>Target condition</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Self</i>	<i>Gay men</i>	<i>Straight men</i>	
<i>Participant group</i>				
Gay men	23.34 ^a (25.23)	37.26 ^b (19.37)	21.26 ^a (12.70)	27.21 (20.94)
Straight men	28.28 ^a (28.88)	48.80 ^b (22.92)	32.88 ^a (28.12)	36.43 (28.06)
Total	25.68 ^a (27.01)	42.71 ^b (21.80)	26.97 ^a (22.37)	31.63 (25.00)

Note: Means are presented with standard deviations in parentheses. Means in the same row, for gay and straight participants separately, that do not share superscripts are significantly different at $p < 0.05$, as indicated by Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) comparisons (ignoring the total averages for gay and straight participants).

TABLE 2 | Mean Number of Barriers and Motivations by Participant Group and Target Condition.

Participant group	Target condition	<i>n</i>	Barriers	Motivations	Difference
Gay	Self	59	3.92 ^a (1.54)	3.29 ^a (1.59)	0.63 (1.35)
	Gay	57	3.74 ^a (1.43)	3.21 ^a (1.63)	0.53 (1.17)
	Straight	58	4.07 ^a (1.24)	3.05 ^a (1.64)	1.02 (1.08)
	Total	174	3.91 (1.41)	3.18 (1.61)	0.72 (1.22)
Straight	Self	53	4.11 ^a (1.25)	3.43 ^a (1.49)	0.68 (1.09)
	Gay	51	3.73 ^a (1.43)	3.51 ^a (1.68)	0.22 (0.78)
	Straight	56	4.16 ^a (1.32)	3.50 ^a (1.55)	0.66 (1.03)
	Total	160	4.01 (1.34)	3.48 (1.56)	0.53 (0.10)
Total	Self	112	4.01 ^{abc} (1.41)	3.36 ^a (1.54)	0.65 (1.23)
	Gay	108	3.73 ^b (1.43)	3.35 ^a (1.65)	0.38 (1.01)
	Straight	114	4.11 ^c (1.27)	3.27 ^a (1.60)	0.84 (1.07)
	Total	334	3.96 (1.37)	3.33 (1.59)	0.63 (1.12)

Note: Mean number of responses per participant are presented with standard deviations in parentheses. Means in the same column, for gay and straight participants separately, that do not share superscripts are significantly different at $p < 0.05$, as indicated by Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) comparisons.

participants—straight and gay men—accurately predicted straight men's interest and both groups overestimated gay men's interest. The open ended responses reported next help to understand these unpredicted findings.

6.3 | Barriers and Motivations for Interest in Childcare Work

Participants listed a total of 1,321 barriers to interest in childcare ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.37$, $95\%CI[3.81, 4.10]$) and 1,111 motivations for interest in childcare ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.59$, $95\%[3.15, 3.50]$). A binomial test indicated that participants generated significantly more responses that were barriers (54.32%) than were motivations (45.68%), $p < 0.001$.

Table 2 displays the mean number of barriers and motivations reported by each participant group in each condition. To capture the overall balance between approach and avoidance tendencies, we computed a difference score for each participant by subtracting the total number of motivations generated from the total number of barriers generated. This measure operationalizes the predominance of positive and negative aspects of childcare work that participants could bring to mind for the relevant target. As such, it provides an indication of ease of recall or salience, highlighting whether barriers or motivations were more easily produced by men when considering childcare work as a potential career. Positive scores on this measure mean that men could call to mind more barriers than motivators to engage in childcare.

We conducted an exploratory 2×3 ANOVA with participant sexual orientation (gay vs. straight) and target condition (self vs. gay vs. straight) as between-subjects factors on this difference measure as the dependent variable. There was no significant effect of participant sexual orientation, $M_{\text{gay}} = 0.72$, $SD_{\text{gay}} = 1.22$; $M_{\text{straight}} = 0.53$, $SD_{\text{straight}} = 0.10$; $F(1, 328) = 2.87$, $p = 0.091$, $\eta^2 = 0.009$. Yet, the main effect of target condition was significant, $M_{\text{self}} = 0.65$, $SD_{\text{self}} = 1.23$; $M_{\text{gaymen}} = 0.38$, $SD_{\text{gaymen}} = 1.01$; $M_{\text{straightmen}} = 0.84$, $SD_{\text{straightmen}} = 1.07$; $F(2, 328) = 5.03$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta^2 = 0.030$. The interaction between participant sexual orientation and target condition was also not significant, F

(2, 328) = 1.15, $p = 0.318$, $\eta^2 = 0.007$. In sum, although the barriers predominated over motivations among participants' available thoughts, this difference was greatest when calling to mind factors that might influence straight men's career interests. Simple slopes analysis for this ANOVA can be found in the Online Supplement.

6.4 | Coding of the Content of Open Responses

We inductively developed a coding scheme consisting of twelve categories for *barriers* to interest in childcare care and twelve categories for *motivations* for interest in childcare work (see Table 3). As preregistered, two independent coders unaware of the hypotheses and study design categorized all responses into one of the 12 categories for each outcome. The responses categorized into the twelve most frequently mentioned barriers, accounted for 79.29% (1,047 responses) of the 1,321 barriers and for 78.85% (876 responses) of the 1,111 motivations reported in the study. To avoid over-interpretation of rare or idiosyncratic responses we limited our analysis to these responses. Interrater reliability was high, Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.86$. Disagreements were resolved through discussion to achieve a single set of data for analysis.

6.5 | Men's Distorted Norm Perception: Pluralistic Ignorance

To examine more fine-grained patterns of norm perception, we used chi-square tests to determine whether gay and straight men accurately perceived the norms of their ingroup, or whether they were subject to pluralistic ignorance. Pluralistic ignorance was operationalised as a standard residual of $> +1.96$ (or < -1.96) indicating significantly greater (or fewer) mentions of a category. Table 3 shows patterns of pluralistic ignorance in gay and straight men's barriers and motivations for childcare work. It presents the percentage (and raw count) of participants who mentioned each of the 12 most frequently noted barriers and motivations about childcare work in the study, broken down by participant group and target condition.

TABLE 3 | Patterns of Pluralistic Ignorance in Gay and Straight Men's Barriers and Motivations for Interest in Childcare Work.

Participant group Target condition	Gay men		Straight men	
	Self	Gay men	Self	Straight men
Barriers				
Dealing with children	27.8% (64) ^a	14.6% (31) ^b	26.5% (58) ^a	11.6% (27) ^b
Salary/benefits	15.7% (36)	9.4% (20)	18.7% (41)	12.9% (30)
Working conditions	17.8% (41) ^a	7.0% (15) ^b	17.4% (38)	9.0% (21)
Other interests	6.1% (14)	7.0% (15)	2.7% (6) ^b	11.2% (26) ^a
Gender stereotypes	0.0% (0) ^b	5.6% (12) ^a	0.5% (1) ^b	9.0% (21) ^a
Negative evaluations	1.3% (3) ^b	7.5% (16) ^a	0.5% (1) ^b	8.6% (20) ^a
Working hours	6.5% (15)	1.4% (3)	9.6% (21) ^a	2.1% (5) ^b
Women's work	0.0% (0) ^b	3.3% (7) ^a	0.0% (0) ^b	7.3% (17) ^a
Treated with suspicion/paedophilia	0.0% (0) ^b	8.0% (17) ^a	0.5% (1) ^b	6.0% (14) ^a
Parents of children	5.7% (13)	1.9% (4)	6.4% (14) ^a	0.4% (1) ^b
Wanting to be masculine	0.0% (0)	0.5% (1)	0.0% (0) ^b	5.6% (13) ^a
Anticipated discrimination	0.0% (0) ^b	7.0% (15) ^a	0.0% (0)	0.4% (1)
Other/exclude	19.1% (44)	26.8% (57)	17.4% (38)	15.9% (37)
Motivations				
Positive interactions with children	18.6% (36)	13.7% (25)	21.4% (39) ^a	9.7% (19) ^b
Improved salary/benefits	21.6% (42) ^a	9.3% (17) ^b	20.9% (38)	17.9% (35)
Rewarding work	14.4% (28)	8.7% (16)	16.5% (30)	9.7% (19)
Changing gender roles	1.0% (2) ^b	8.2% (15) ^a	0.0% (0) ^b	14.3% (28) ^a
Having communal traits	6.2% (12)	13.7% (25)	0.5% (1)	4.6% (9)
Better working hours	8.8% (17)	2.7% (5)	11.0% (20)	4.6% (9)
Building relationships	5.2% (10)	4.4% (8)	4.4% (8)	3.6% (7)
Having/developing parenting skills	0.5% (1)	2.2% (4)	0.5% (1)	5.1% (10)
Greater access to education/training	2.1% (4)	1.6% (3)	0.5% (1)	4.1% (8)
Teaching role	1.0% (2)	2.7% (5)	4.4% (8)	1.0% (2)
Difficulty having biological children	0.0% (0) ^b	6.6% (12) ^a	0.0% (0)	1.0% (2)
Future oriented career	0.5% (1)	2.2% (4)	2.2% (4)	3.1% (6)
Other/exclude	20.1% (39)	24.0% (44)	17.6% (32)	21.4% (42)

Note: The percentage of the total number of mentions for each participant group, for each target, are presented with raw frequency of mentions reported in parentheses. Frequencies marked in bold indicate pluralistic ignorance (a standardised residual of greater than +/− 1.96 between self and ingroup target conditions). The 'other' and 'exclude' categories are combined here but were coded separately.

^a = std. residual > +1.96.

^b = std. residual < −1.96.

The chi-square tests examining barriers to gay and straight men's interest in childcare work found that gay ($\chi^2(12) = 102.97$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.48$) and straight ($\chi^2(12) = 128.86$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.53$) men systematically described different barriers for themselves, than for their ingroup. Specifically, gay and straight men were both significantly more likely to report practical barriers for themselves (e.g., dealing with children), but when asked to suggest barriers for their ingroup, they were more likely to highlight stigma-related barriers (e.g., negative evaluations from others, being treated with suspicion). These patterns suggest that both gay and straight men experienced substantial distortions in norm perception, consistent with pluralistic ignorance.

Turning to men's motivations for childcare work, Chi-square tests again found evidence of systematic differences in the motivations gay ($\chi^2(12) = 54.18$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.38$) and straight ($\chi^2(12) = 67.86$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.42$) men

mentioned for themselves and their ingroup. There were fewer instances of distorted norm perception, however. Gay men and straight men were more likely to mention improved salary or benefits as a potential motivating factor for themselves and were more likely to ascribe the desire to create social change in gender roles as a motivating factor for men in their ingroup. Gay men were also more likely to mention gay men's difficulty in having biological children as a potential motivating factor for other gay men. Though there are fewer instances in men's motivations than barriers, these patterns still suggest men experience pluralistic ignorance when estimating motivating factors for their ingroup.

6.5.1 | Sexual Orientation Stereotyping

As noted above, the tendency for participants to generate more barriers than motivations for childcare work was significantly

greater when thinking about straight men as a group than when thinking about gay men as a group or themselves. We next explored whether sexual orientation stereotyping led men to call to mind some factors more commonly for gay or for straight men, again using chi-square tests—one for barriers and one for motivations. Sexual orientation stereotyping was operationalised as a standard residual of $> +1.96$ (or < -1.96) indicating significantly greater (or fewer) mentions of a category. Table 4 shows patterns of sexual orientation stereotyping in men's barriers and motivations for childcare work. It presents the percentage (and raw count) of participants who mentioned each of the 12 most frequently mentioned barriers and motivations about childcare work in the study, broken down by target condition. When looking at the barriers men called to mind, there was evidence of sexual orientation stereotyping, $\chi^2(12) = 86.08$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.31$. Men were significantly more likely to attribute prejudice-based barriers

(e.g., concerns about dealing with the parents of children, or anticipated discrimination) to gay men than to straight men. On the other hand, men were significantly more likely to attribute gender-incongruity-based barriers (e.g., childcare work being associated with women's work, wanting to be perceived as masculine, and gender stereotypes) to straight men than to gay men.

Turning to the motivations men attributed to gay and straight men, again there was evidence of sexual orientation stereotyping, $\chi^2(12) = 56.51$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.28$. Men were more likely to associate gay men's motivations with a desire to nurture (e.g., having communal traits or difficulty having biological children of their own) than straight men. On the other hand, men were more likely to associate straight men's motivations for childcare work with material gain (e.g., having a better salary or increased benefits) than gay men.

TABLE 4 | Patterns of Sexual Orientation Stereotyping in Men's Barriers and Motivations for Interest in Childcare Work.

<i>Target condition</i>	<i>Gay men</i>	<i>Straight men</i>	<i>Total</i>
Barriers			
Dealing with children	12.9% (52)	10.2% (48)	11.5% (100)
Salary/benefits	9.7% (39)	11.3% (53)	10.6% (92)
Working conditions	6.7% (27)	8.3% (39)	7.6% (66)
Other interests	10.4% (42)	8.7% (41)	9.5% (83)
Gender stereotypes	5.5% (22) ^b	11.1% (52) ^a	8.5% (74)
Negative evaluations	8.2% (33)	7.7% (36)	7.9% (69)
Working hours	2.2% (9)	2.6% (12)	2.4% (21)
Women's work	2.7% (11) ^b	9.2% (43) ^a	6.2% (54)
Treated with suspicion/paedophilia	6.2% (25)	3.8% (18)	4.9% (43)
Parents of children	2.5% (10) ^a	0.2% (1) ^b	1.3% (11)
Wanting to be masculine	0.7% (3) ^b	7.0% (33) ^a	4.1% (36)
Anticipated discrimination	6.9% (28) ^a	0.6% (3) ^b	3.6% (31)
Other/exclude	25.3% (102)	19.2% (90)	22.0% (192)
Motivations			
Positive interactions with children	16.9% (61)	9.9% (37)	13.3% (98)
Improved salary/benefits	8.0% (29) ^b	16.1% (60) ^a	12.1% (89)
Rewarding work	9.4% (34)	10.2% (38)	9.8% (72)
Changing gender roles	9.7% (35)	14.7% (55)	12.2% (90)
Having communal traits	11.6% (42) ^a	4.0% (15) ^b	7.8% (57)
Better working hours	2.5% (9)	4.0% (15)	3.3% (24)
Building relationships	4.1% (15)	4.3% (16)	4.2% (31)
Having/developing parenting skills	3.3% (12)	6.2% (23)	4.8% (35)
Greater access to education/training	2.5% (9)	3.8% (14)	3.1% (23)
Teaching role	2.8% (10)	1.3% (5)	2.0% (15)
Difficulty having biological children	5.2% (19) ^a	0.5% (2) ^b	2.9% (21)
Future oriented career	1.7% (6)	2.7% (10)	2.2% (16)
Other/exclude	22.4% (81)	22.3% (83)	22.3% (164)

Note: The percentage of the total number of mentions for each participant group, for each target, are presented with raw frequency of mentions reported in parentheses. Frequencies marked in bold indicate sexual orientation stereotyping (a standardised residual of greater than ± 1.96 between gay and straight men target conditions). The 'other' and 'exclude' categories are combined here but were coded separately.

^a= std. residual $> +1.96$.

^b= std. residual < -1.96 .

7 | Discussion

Our findings extend the existing literature about men's underrepresentation in ECEC by offering nuanced insights into the factors shaping young men's interest in the field. While previous research has primarily focused on men already working in childcare (e.g., Brody 2015), men training to be preschool educators (e.g., Heikkilä and Hellman 2017), or people's perceptions of men in these roles (e.g., Haines et al. 2024; Sczesny et al. 2022; Sullivan et al. 2020), our study uniquely examines young men's perceived barriers and motivations for interest in childcare work, without assuming any prior interest or association with ECEC. This approach allowed us to capture a broader and potentially more representative set of career considerations inductively. The results highlight societal and individual factors that may shape men's initial engagement in ECEC as a potential career option and some common ways that those motives may be misconstrued.

Before turning to the broader implications of these findings, we first address two preregistered hypotheses that were not supported. First, contrary to Hypothesis 1, gay men did not report lower interest in childcare work than straight men in the quantitative ratings of their interest, nor did concerns about accusations of paedophilia appear in (gay) men's self-reported barriers. The convergence of null findings across both the rating scale and open-ended measures optimistically suggests that this concern was not cognitively accessible or motivationally salient for participants when considering childcare careers for themselves.

Second, Hypothesis 2—that straight men would be less accurate at estimating their ingroup's interest than gay men—was not supported. This suggests that the advantage that marginalization might confer to gay men in perceiving social norms is likely limited and does not apply to this context. Together, these null effects suggest that stereotypes linking gay men to paedophilia are available, but they are not relevant to these career motives. On the other hand, norms and stereotypes tied to gender role expectations appear more readily activated when men reason about childcare work as a potential career. The next sections discuss the implications of our findings for three areas: barriers to men's involvement in childcare, sexual orientation stereotyping, and pluralistic ignorance.

7.1 | Barriers to Men's Involvement in ECEC

Men's continued underrepresentation in ECEC is typically attributed to structural and sociocultural barriers such as low pay, gendered occupational norms and the associations of the field with femininity (Brody 2015; Rohrmann 2020), in addition to men being perceived as incompetent or morally suspect for pursuing ECEC roles (Cronin 2014). Our findings support and expand this literature by showing that men—regardless of sexual orientation—reported barriers to childcare work more frequently than motivations, and consistently referenced salary and working conditions as deterrents to their own interest. Higher status careers and breadwinning are still important components of men's expectations for themselves, whether those men are straight or gay. Structural changes to the remuneration associated with these careers may increase all men's motivations to engage with them.

Interventions aimed at diversifying ECEC and reducing gender segregation in ECEC fields beyond improving working conditions have also been suggested. These include addressing the gendered and sexualized meanings attached to caregiving, by reframing caring roles within alternative masculinities, increasing the visibility of men in ECEC, mentorship programs, and fostering caring masculinities (Haines et al. 2024). Men's career decisions are shaped not only by financial concerns, but also by the threat of social judgment and misrecognition in professions that are coded as “feminine”. The responses to open-ended questions in the present study suggest that the current coding of ECEC leads men to systematically overestimate gay men's interest in such professions. As such, we suggest that challenging stereotypes about gay men being particularly interested in ECEC as it is a “feminine” career path, may serve as a means of intervening in both gay and straight men's low interest in ECEC careers.

In addition to addressing stereotypes about gay men specifically, stereotypes about men also bear redressing more generally. Both gay and straight men more quickly called to mind how gender roles might impact other men in their ingroup than how those same gender roles might impact on themselves personally. These perceived differences between the impact of gendered barriers and motives on the individual self vs the group reflect how normative pressures around masculinity and childcare remain pervasive, but might be over-estimated for other ingroup members or disavowed for the self. Men showed a heightened sensitivity to suspicion or stigma for others in their ingroup, suggesting that concerns about negative perceptions of men in nurturing roles shape how they interpret social norms and anticipate others' reactions. This dynamic may perpetuate men's underrepresentation in caregiving roles, if men believe that such roles are socially risky or incongruent with expectations for their sexual orientation group. Ironically both gay and straight men seem to be quicker to consider such barriers for their sexual orientation in-group than for themselves. Addressing projected concerns that “men like me can't do that kind of work” may therefore be critical to shifting broader cultural narratives around masculinity and care.

7.2 | Sexual Orientation Stereotyping

Sexual orientation stereotypes appeared to strongly influence the motivations and barriers to ECEC work available to gay and straight men. Gay men, as a group, were assumed to be more suited to ECEC roles, due to communal traits or difficulties having biological children, than straight men. Straight men, as a group, were thought to be motivated primarily by structural changes (e.g., pay, working conditions). Similarly, when looking at barriers to gay and straight men's interest, gay men were perceived to be more limited by factors associated with discrimination, whereas straight men were expected to be more limited by the requirement for straight men to appear masculine. This pattern is consistent with entrenched stereotypes assigning only straight men to the traditional masculine “breadwinner” role. These findings do more than highlight the need for interventions that not only challenge how society views men in care work. They also reshape how men understand and relate to norms within their own groups—efforts that may be crucial for increasing male representation in ECEC.

These results suggest that sexual orientation stereotypes do more than shape perceptions—they may structure the very framework by which participants interpret others' motives and barriers. Stereotypes of gay men as more suited to caregiving reinforces heteronormative divisions of labour and upholds rigid associations between masculinity, sexuality, and professional domains. Challenging gender norms and stereotypes alone may be insufficient to sustain men's engagement in ECEC; men who continue in this work may need to construct counter stereotypic narratives that make sense of their work. Past qualitative research highlights how male ECEC workers construct alternative masculinities that integrate caregiving and emotional expression while actively managing stigma, and how some men negotiate societal expectations and carve out space for themselves in feminised professions (Brody 2015). Building on this work, future research could explore how such counter-stereotypical narratives might reshape broader perceptions of occupational fit and identity alignment across sexual orientation groups. An intersectional approach is critical here, as focusing solely on gender or sexuality in isolation may obscure how these identities jointly influence men's experiences in ECEC and the structural and cultural barriers they encounter.

7.3 | Pluralistic Ignorance

Pluralistic ignorance occurs when individuals misperceive the attitudes or beliefs of others in their social group, often conforming to norms they privately reject (Miller and McFarland 1987; Van Grootel et al. 2018). In the current study, pluralistic ignorance was evident in how gay participants overestimated gay men's interest in ECEC relative to that reported by gay men themselves. Responses to the open-ended questions showed patterns of pluralistic ignorance for both groups. For straight men, gender stereotypes and masculinity concerns were more frequently called to mind as deterrents with regards to other straight men than themselves. Responses to the same items showed that for gay men, a desire to change gender stereotypes and being child-free would more strongly motivate other gay men more than themselves. Both results show that men may apply traditional norms or stereotypes more readily to their ingroup than warranted by men's actual motives and concerns. Of the two groups, straight men exhibited more pluralistic ignorance around barriers, while gay men exhibited more pluralistic ignorance around motivations.

Addressing pluralistic ignorance may thus be key to shifting occupational interest and self-perception among men. Interventions that provide accurate feedback about peer attitudes—such as those shown to reduce conformity to traditional masculinity norms (e.g., Van Grootel et al. 2018)—may help reduce social pressure to adhere to outdated identity scripts. The present results not only suggest stereotypes of gay men as a target for intervention but also show how and why data on men's real interest in ECEC could be used to dismantle pluralistic ignorance among gay men with regard to ECEC. Future research should examine how pluralistic ignorance interacts with sexual orientation stereotyping in shaping not only perceptions but actual behaviour in gender-atypical career contexts, and how targeted norm-based interventions might foster more inclusive understandings of occupational fit across diverse groups of men.

7.4 | Limitations and Future Directions

This research provides new insights into the barriers and motivations that influence men's interest in childcare work; however, it is not without limitations. Our sample consisted solely of young men from the United States, which likely influenced some participants' answers, particularly in regard to specific socio-cultural barriers, such as concerns about school safety. Future research should replicate these findings in different social and cultural contexts to determine the generalisability of the results. The fact that participants were aged between 18 and 30 years allowed us to capture young adults who are potentially open to career exploration, yet may also include participants who have already committed to a specific career path. This may have limited their ability to fully engage with hypothetical career considerations in childcare. Future research might benefit from focusing on even younger age groups, such as high school students, who are in the early stages of career-decision making and may provide more nuanced insights into the barriers facing men considering childcare careers.

A further limitation of this research is the reliance on single-item measures for both the quantitative rating of interest in childcare work and the two open-ended questions capturing barriers and motivations. While this approach was appropriate for an initial investigation in an under-researched area—and helped keep the task manageable for participants—it does not allow for an assessment of internal reliability and limits the precision and nuance of the interpretation possible. Future research could use multi-item measures to capture men's interest in childcare work and the range of barriers and motivations, allowing for a more detailed examination of how gendered expectations and perceived career value shape men's willingness to pursue caregiving professions.

An additional consideration concerns the difference scores used to compare the number of barriers and motivations generated in the open responses. These scores reflect the ease with which participants were able to generate items in each category, highlighting which types of considerations were most cognitively accessible. Participants who listed more barriers than motivations appear to conceptualize the decision primarily in terms of barriers, providing insight into the patterns that naturally emerge for men when thinking about childcare careers. Future research could extend this work by asking participants to rate or rank the importance of each barrier and motivation, providing an additional picture of which factors most strongly influence men's career decisions. This would allow cognitive accessibility to be compared both generally, and across specific barriers or reasons.

8 | Conclusions

This research revealed how stereotypes influence both gay and straight men's anticipation of barriers and motivations, showing that men— independent of their own sexual orientation—often overestimate gay men's interest in childcare. Results emphasize the importance of addressing stereotypes and social norms that shape how ECEC is perceived, particularly regarding sexual orientation. Furthermore, the results underscore the roles of pluralistic ignorance and stereotyping in shaping perceptions of

social norms, as men view barriers and motivations differently for themselves compared to other men. Addressing both societal barriers is crucial to fostering an environment that encourages greater male participation in ECEC. A detailed understanding of sexual orientation stereotypes and pluralistic ignorance effects is important for fostering a more inclusive social environment that motivates and allows for men's increased participation in ECEC.

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Endnotes

¹ All participants identified their gender as men on Prolific, and in our survey as men ($n = 320$), trans men ($n = 10$), intersex men ($n = 2$), or non-binary ($n = 2$). To ensure that the inclusion of minority groups did not affect our results, we re-ran all analyses on the majority that indicated their gender as men. Results did not differ from the results presented here, unless explicitly stated (see Table S2 in the Online Supplement for details).

² This analysis was repeated, removing all participants who identified outside the gender binary, were trans, or indicated that their sexual orientation was not gay or straight. There was still no significant difference in men's interest $F(1, 101) = 1.41, p = 0.238, \eta^2 = 0.014$.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Table S1: Participant Occupations and Classification. **Table S2:** Descriptive Statistics for Gay and Straight Men's Self, Ingroup and Outgroup Estimations of Interest in Childcare Work.