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Men in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Overcoming Barriers to Increase Men's Representation in Early Childhood Education and Care

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In Ireland, only two percent of the staff in early childhood education are men. The situation is similar in most other European countries, where men make up less than five percent of workers who educate and care for young children (OECD, 2020). Increasingly, research is being conducted with an aim to understanding why men are underrepresented in early childhood and pre-primary education, and what steps can be taken to address this gender disparity. One likely explanation for men's underrepresentation in early childhood education and care is discrimination against men, rooted in culturally shared gender stereotypes. We will outline where these stereotypes come from and what effects they can have on men's experiences in caring professions.

We Think People Are What We See Them Do

Gender stereotypes are culturally shared beliefs, which come from our observations of men and women in their daily lives. When we see women regularly performing caring tasks, such as being nurturing and attending to children, or working as nurses or teachers, we make inferences assuming that women are naturally good at performing these tasks because they would have innate nurturing and caring traits. In other words, we stereotypically associate these so called 'communal traits' more with women than men, because these traits are linked to roles that women typically occupy in society. Conversely, when we see more men than women working in high status, high paid positions such as company CEOs or managers, we assume that men naturally possess related qualities that make a good leader. In other words, we stereotypically associate these so called 'agentic traits' – being strong, assertive, and dominant – more with men than women, because these traits are linked to roles that men typically occupy in society. As such, observations of the social roles of men and women inform our beliefs about men and women as gender categories, the traits they possess, and consequently professions they may be more or less suited to perform.

In addition to shaping how we think men and women typically are, stereotypes also inform our beliefs about how men and women should be. This means that people not only think that women are more communal than men and men are more agentic than women, but also that these differences in traits and abilities are the way that men and women should be. Such prescriptive stereotypes can lead to confusion, prejudice, and discrimination when people do not conform to behaviour prescribed for their gender. For example, women who behave in an agentic manner can be punished for being too dominant and assertive, even when they are in a leader role that may include such behaviour (Williams & Tiedens, 2016)more than men, experience negative outcomes when they display dominance. A closer look, however, reveals ambiguity about the specific forms of dominance proscribed for women. Here, we suggest that negative reactions to women's dominance, a counter-stereotypical behavior, may require that the behavior be clearly encoded as counter-stereotypical—which is less likely when the behavior is expressed implicitly. This hypothesis was tested with a meta-analysis of studies on the evaluation of individuals behaving dominantly, including articles not directly investigating gender. Results revealed that dominance indeed hurts women's, relative to men's, likability (although the overall effect is small, $d = -0.19$, $k = 63$. In a similar way, men can experience negative consequences for behaving in a way that is perceived as too communal. For example, experimental research that used fictitious descriptions of employees found that men who work in caring professions are seen as less worthy of respect and less competent than their identical female counterparts (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). As such, our stereotypical expectations for how women and men should behave have real world consequences for people pursuing careers perceived to be incongruent with their gender, such as men educating and caring for young children.

In addition to affecting how we perceive others, stereotypes can also inform our own beliefs about what professions we may be a good fit for. 'Lack of fit' describes the belief that one's characteristics do not align with those of a particular profession and can be seen, for example, when women pursue leadership positions. Women may see a discrepancy between themselves and the required skills for the role of a leader. As such, women may self-select out of contention for leadership positions. As early childhood education and care requires nurturing and caring abilities, and these are seen to align more closely with stereotypical female traits, men likely experience lack of fit perceptions between the attributes of their male gender role and the role of an early childhood educator. Similar to women and leadership positions, men's perceptions about their lack of fit for the role may result in them self-selecting out of careers in early childhood education and care. This limits the professional pool of applicants, reducing the possibility for increasing diversity in early childhood and pre-primary education from the outset.

Stereotypical Beliefs about Men in Early Childhood Education and Care

When examining the stereotypes that underpin the reason why men may be perceived as unsuitable for a career educating or caring for young children, people typically report either that they believe men are less competent with children than women. In fact, research found that

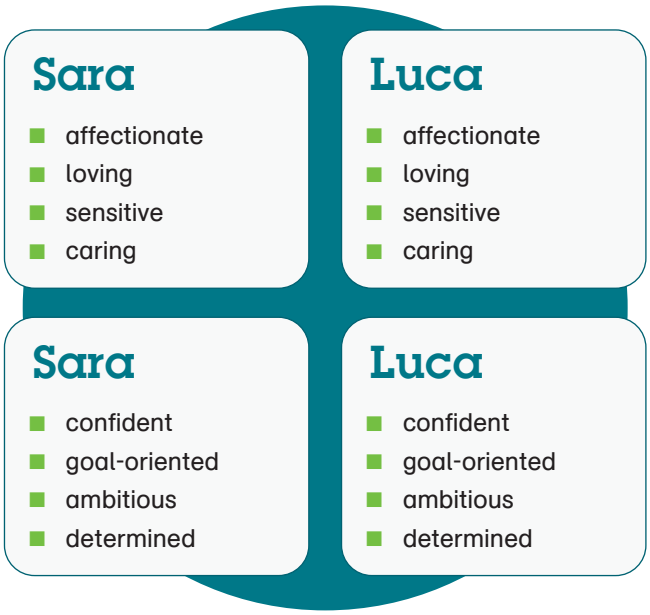
female co-workers report that men are perceived as less competent (Sullivan et al., 2020) and also that men working in early childhood education themselves report having to combat beliefs about their incompetence, particularly when they begin working at their organisation (Cronin, 2014; Pirard et al., 2015). In fact, many people see no problem with a lack of men in early childhood education and care for this very reason—they believe that caring for children is something men are simply not good at. As people believe that working with young children requires 'maternal instincts' or communal traits and men are assumed to possess these traits less than women, men are perceived as less competent with children than women. Naturally, this can be a barrier for men interested in working with children as, because of their gender, they are assumed to be less capable in their chosen role than women.

Another common finding in the literature is that people tend to believe that men may pose a threat to children in their care, and as such, are less suitable for careers working with children than women. This suspicion is based on the flawed belief that men who want to work with children must have questionable motives (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). That is, people assume that it is so unnatural for a man to want to work with children that he must have nefarious intentions. To mitigate this suspicion, men who work in early childhood education and care often monitor their own behaviour, or are monitored by other educators in order to reduce the potential for being perceived as a threat (Sargent, 2005). For example, men who work with small children may avoid physical contact with them, or ensure they are visible at all times to avoid suspicion (Pruit, 2015). These considerations are things their female colleagues would not have to think twice about, which places an additional burden on men working with young children and thus may hinder their ability to fully embrace their role. Working in a career where one is placed under close scrutiny as a result of one's gender likely reduces many men's interest in and enthusiasm for working in early childhood education and care.

Men Applying for Positions in Early Childhood Education: Impact of Lower Perceived Competence and Greater Perceived Threat

In our own research, we set out to test how these two barriers – perceived lower competencies and greater perceived threat – may help explain people's impaired perceptions of men pursuing a career in early childhood education and care. Specifically, we examined how suitable men and women are perceived to be for a career in early childhood education and care, and whether beliefs about their competence with children or the potential threat they pose drive these perceptions. In an experiment, we created four identical fictitious profiles for a potential early childhood educator who had successfully completed an internship in the field. The only factors that varied between the profiles were the gender of the candidate (Sara – female or Luca – male) and their personality traits. That is, we described the candidate as having either communal traits stereotypically associated with women (such as being affectionate and loving) or agentic traits stereotypically associated with men (such as being confident and determined). Figure 1 displays he four candidate profiles we used.

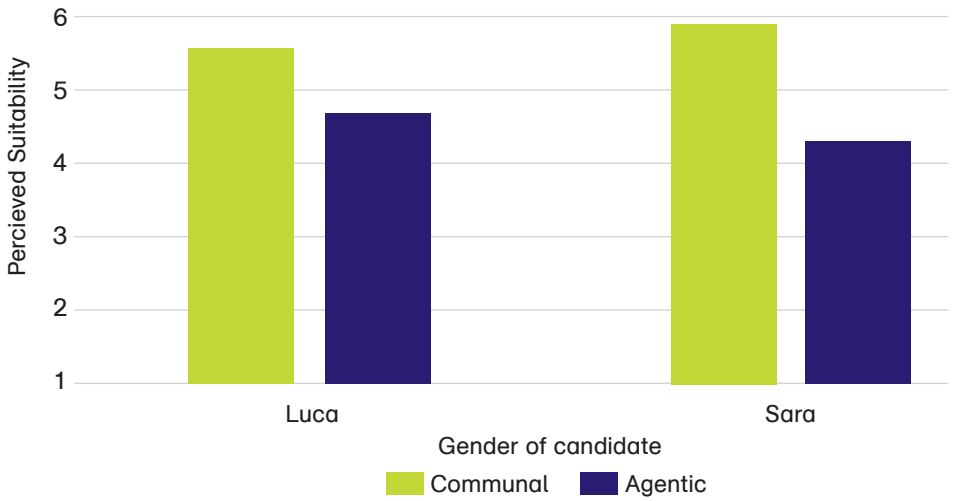
Figure 1. *Profiles of candidates for early childhood educator, with varying gender and personality traits*



In our study, we then provided participants with one of the four profiles and asked them to indicate how suitable they thought the candidate was for a job as an early childhood educator. After this, we also asked them to rate how competent they considered the candidate to be. Finally, we asked participants about how much of a threat they considered the candidate to be – both in terms of sexually and physically abusing a child.

Based on these self-reported ratings, we found that the candidate's gender influenced how suitable people thought they were for a job as an early childhood educator. Consistent with our expectations, the male candidate called Luca was considered less suitable for early childhood education than the female candidate called Sara, regardless of his personality traits. Similar to the effect of the candidates' gender, the candidate's personality traits also influenced how suitable people thought they were for a job as an early childhood

Figure 2. *Average perceived suitability for early childhood education depending on the fictitious candidate's gender and personality traits*



educator. Again, consistent with our expectations, the communal candidates were rated as more suitable for early childhood education than agentic candidates. Figure 2 illustrates these differences in participants' perceived suitability ratings.

In a next step, we examined why these different suitability ratings occur, given we showed participants identical information about the male and female candidate. Results showed that women were considered much more competent in caring for children than men, and this in turn contributed to people's beliefs that the female candidate was more suitable for early childhood education than the male candidate. We also found that though perceived educator competence was highly relevant, perceived threat to children did not play a role in men's lower perceived suitability for the job. As such, we found that men were believed to be less suitable for a career in early childhood education because they were perceived as less competent – but not a greater threat – than women. This perceived lack of competence, and the potential bias it creates in hiring processes, likely has real-world implications on men's desire to pursue a career in early childhood education and care.

Effects of Discrimination and Recommendations to Support Men in Early Education

In fact, gender bias in early education was found to curb men's desire to pursue such careers. A recent experimental study told women and men that gender discrimination in early childhood education either exists, does not exist, or they received no information (Moss-Racusin et al., 2022). When men learned that gender bias exists in early childhood education, they were far less likely to express interest in pursuing a career in the field. When participants received no information, men were also less likely than women to express interest in early childhood education as a potential career path. This is likely because – true to real-world experiences – men anticipate discrimination in early childhood education and care, and as such, are less interested in pursuing it as a potential career. Interestingly, however, when men were told that no gender discrimination exists in the profession, they expressed just as much interest as the women did. This finding suggests that men are less interested in early childhood education and care at least in part because of anticipated gender discrimination. So, the question remains: With gender stereotypes affecting people's beliefs about men's ability to work with children, and potential discrimination in early childhood education and care reducing men's interest in working in the field, what steps can be taken to alleviate these factors and increase men's engagement? Based on the current empirical evidence, we can provide several evidence-based recommendations.

First, we recommend raising awareness of the underrepresentation of men in early childhood education and care. For this purpose, the systemic nature of men's underrepresentation needs to be acknowledged. The gender disparity in the field is not simply a result of individual men's choices, but rather a gendered system that prescribes certain jobs as more appropriate for women than for men. Acknowledging the systemic nature of the issue allows the gender-disparity to be highlighted and makes it a clear issue of gender discrimination. As such, it is important to engage organisational decision makers in gender equality efforts to effectively reduce systematic bias and discrimination in early childhood education and care settings.

Second, to properly reduce gender disparity in early childhood education, gendered expectations of how men are, and how they should be, need reshaping. Potential solutions for this could be encouraging men to engage in communal activities, or developing mentoring programmes for men pursuing careers in early childhood education and care to support their engagement and development in their role (Sullivan et al., 2023).

Third, gender reflexive environments could be created for educators to discuss the ways in which gender may play a role in their everyday experiences of their workplace. This could reduce negative experiences arising as a result of men's gender and allow them to feel more supported and included by their colleagues.

Finally, promoting communal values and encouraging boys to engage in communal activities, such as caring for others, may mitigate and reduce gender stereotypes and increase men's freedom to care openly for others in a variety of ways. This would allow future generations to be less restricted by gendered expectations and allow for greater gender diversity in all occupations.

Conclusion

Men's underrepresentation in early childhood education and care is at least partially a consequence of their anticipated discrimination in a traditionally women-dominated profession. Our research highlights how stereotypical beliefs about gender can negatively influence people's evaluations of male candidates for a job in early childhood education and care. Understanding the mechanisms behind people's gendered hiring decisions is important, as it informs policies and interventions aimed at reducing discrimination against men who aim to enter early childhood education and care. Taking steps to reduce biased hiring decisions and supporting men who already work in the field would not only be the right thing to increase fairness. It could additionally allow more men to become early childhood educators and subsequently reduce the gender disparity in early childhood education and care.

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