ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceived to be incompetent, but not a risk: Why men are evaluated as less suitable for childcare work than women

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Abstract

Men are widely underrepresented in early childhood education and care worldwide. Professional childcare is often believed to require communal qualities typically associated with the female gender role, like being sensitive to others' needs. Men's underrepresentation in childcare work likely occurs as a result of the perceived incongruity between communal qualities required for childcare work and agentic qualities associated with men and the male gender role. Using a between-subjects design, this research examined how personality traits (communal vs. agentic) of people interested in early childcare and their gender (woman vs. man) affect evaluations of their suitability for childcare work. This online experiment further investigated the potential underlying mechanisms—ascribed childcare competence and perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse—and tested whether these explanations contribute to men's less favorable evaluations. Results showed that participants ($N = 242$) evaluated the communal candidate as more suitable for childcare work than the agentic candidate, and the male candidate as less suitable than the female candidate. Structural equation modeling showed that lower ascribed childcare competence, but not greater perceived risk of perpetrating sexual or physical child abuse, contributed to men's lower perceived suitability. This research provides support for the reasoning that persisting gender stereotypes can hinder men's entry into childcare work, as people discount men's competence and ability to care for children. Moreover, this research suggests that incongruity theories are also valid in the context of men pursuing traditionally female-dominated communal roles. Practical implications are discussed in relation to strategies for increasing gender diversity in childcare work.

1 | INTRODUCTION

"I think that being a man there is more curiosity, like, why are you in this field? And it generally comes from the point of view of, what's wrong with you?"—a male childcare worker (Murray, 1996, p. 377).

The benefits of gender diversity in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are manifold, such as offering male role models for children or increased well-being for men interested in caring professions (Croft et al., 2015; Rolfe, 2006). However, men are widely underrepresented in ECEC worldwide. In Europe, for instance, men made up less than 5% of pre-primary educators and about 3% of

childcare workers in 2018 (Eurostat, 2020). In response to this gender inequality, several countries have begun initiatives attempting to increase the number of men in childcare work. For instance, the Men in Care (Men in Care, 2019) project works on reducing barriers for men who want to become involved in caring activities and is supported by twelve national organizations from seven different European countries.

Despite such initiatives, men interested in childcare work often encounter discrimination in the form of negative evaluations when they strive for jobs in childcare. For instance, during childcare training, men are not supported or encouraged in the same way as women (Farquhar, 1997; Naish, 1995) and men are also evaluated as less hirable than women (Halper et al., 2019; Kim & Weseley, 2017). Additionally, in female-dominated careers, people are more accepting of gender inequality and less willing to support efforts to reduce it than in male-dominated careers (Block et al., 2019). Research examining the processes underlying men's social discrimination is essential to provide a better understanding of the reasons why men are underrepresented in ECEC.

The present research therefore aimed to provide deeper insights into why men interested in caring for young children receive more negative evaluations and challenges than women. This research examined the underlying mechanisms of why men are evaluated less favorably than women in the context of early childcare work. The quantitative literature highlights two common responses to men working in ECEC: perceptions of incompetence and perceptions of threat (see Cameron, 2001; Manzi, 2019). That is, men's competence or their motives for wanting to work with children are questioned and they are treated with suspicion by parents or co-workers (Sullivan et al., 2020). Despite the wealth of qualitative evidence, it is unclear how perceptions of incompetence and threat influence the evaluation of men interested in working in childcare. This research tested whether persisting gender stereotypic beliefs about men—namely, a lower ascribed childcare competence and a greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse—may contribute to why male candidates are evaluated less favorably than identical female candidates.

1.1 | Incongruity perceptions between the male gender role and the requirements of childcare work

Stereotypes comprise expectations of how women and men are, as well as expectations of how women and men should (or should not) be (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Gender stereotypes describe women as communal, such as nurturing, caring, and warm, and men as agentic, such as independent, decisive, and aggressive (Eagly et al., 2020; Sczesny et al., 2019). People derive the content of gender stereotypes from their observations of women and men in social roles (social role theory; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Because women are more often observed performing tasks that feature communality (e.g., as mothers and childcare workers), people believe that communal traits come more naturally to women than

men. On the other hand, because men are more often observed outside the home performing tasks that feature agency (e.g., as leaders and decision makers), people believe agentic traits come more naturally to men than women (Eagly et al., 2020; Hentschel et al., 2019).

Childcare workers are primarily responsible for the immediate needs of children. According to extensive occupational data from the Occupational Information Network, the qualities required for childcare are mostly communal in nature such as being sensitive to others' needs and feelings, being honest, maintaining composure, controlling anger, or avoiding aggressive behavior (National Center for O*NET Development, 2021). However, professional childcare also requires male-typed agentic qualities such as being independent and showing initiative (National Center for O*NET Development, 2021). Yet, when choosing a teacher for their own child, participants preferred communal over agentic teachers (Kim & Weseley, 2017). Consequentially, it is unsurprising that positions in childcare are often seen as "women's work" (Rolfe, 2006, p. 103) and people associate childcare with mostly communal qualities rather than with what is actually required, namely both communal and agentic characteristics (see O*NET data).

Incongruity theories (i.e., role congruity theory, Eagly & Karau, 2002; lack of fit model, Heilman, 1983, 2012) offer an explanation for the impact of gender stereotypes on evaluations of men interested in childcare. These theories propose that individuals are evaluated less favorably when there is a mismatch between their gender role and a professional role. In the case of childcare work, a mismatch exists between the beliefs about men's typical qualities and the communal qualities believed to be essential for childcare work, resulting in male childcare workers violating gender stereotypic expectations (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). As their desire to perform communal activities conflicts with the expectations resulting from their gender role, men working in childcare are at risk of experiencing social penalties such as receiving more negative evaluations in hiring procedures and performance evaluations (Heilman & Wallen, 2010; for review, see Manzi, 2019). Such discrimination has already been found for men applying for teaching positions in elementary education: Prospective male teachers were considered less suitable than their female counterparts (Halper et al., 2019; Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016).

In addition to being perceived as suitable for childcare work, it is important that childcare workers are perceived as likable, so that children can easily interact and feel comfortable with their caretakers. Positive relationships between children and their preschool teachers have been found to predict children's school readiness, social skills and academic performance (for overview, see Palermo et al., 2007). It is likely that the relationship between children and childcare workers serves a similar function. However, gender role incongruity likely makes it more difficult for male childcare workers to be perceived as likable, as gender role violations often lead to people who behave in gender incongruent ways being less liked. For instance, men applying for an elementary teaching position were perceived as less likable than identical female candidates (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016). This negative evaluation of male elementary educators likely reflects the experience of men who work in childcare.

Moreover, it is important for childcare workers to be trustworthy, so that parents feel safe leaving their child in their care, and so other staff know their colleague is responsible enough to care for small and vulnerable children. As a result of gender role incongruity, qualitative research suggests that men who work in childcare are perceived as incompetent or treated with suspicion (Cameron, 2001; Manzi, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2020)—the two mechanisms this research examined as potential explanations for why men are evaluated less favorably than women in childcare work. Consequently, men are likely perceived as less trustworthy than the women they work with. Previous research indicates that unlike in other relationships where trust slowly builds, parents need to trust childcare workers immediately to leave children in their care (McGrath, 2007). Thus, in addition to being perceived as likeable and suitable for the position, it is essential for potential childcare workers to be perceived as trustworthy.

Taken together, men interested in childcare work are likely evaluated as less suitable, less likable, and less trustworthy than women who wish to work in childcare, as the male gender role is not associated with nurturing and caring for others. We hypothesized that independent of their traits, male candidates interested in childcare work are perceived less favorably in comparison to female candidates. Following this reasoning, we hypothesized that independent of their gender, communal candidates interested in childcare work are perceived more favorably than agentic candidates.

Hypothesis 1 *Male candidates will be evaluated as less suitable, likable, and trustworthy for childcare work than female candidates.*

Hypothesis 2 *Communal candidates will be evaluated as more suitable, likeable, and trustworthy for childcare work than agentic candidates.*

1.2 | Explaining unfavorable evaluations of men interested in childcare work

Building on incongruity theories (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983, 2012), people who are perceived to be unfitting for a position due to gender incongruity will also be perceived as less competent when performing associated tasks. Thus, people's expectations that childcare work is primarily associated with women and female gender-typed (communal) characteristics will lead to perceptions of men's lower competence when caring for children. This is supported by findings from qualitative research, which suggest that male childcare workers are perceived as less competent than their female counterparts (Sullivan et al., 2020).

1.2.1 | Ascribed childcare competence

The discourse around early childcare is often framed against the larger backdrop of childrearing, based on the gender stereotypic belief that this competence is either innate to women ('maternal instinct') or achieved through practice of domestic work ('housewife

skills'; Moss, 2006). This framing suggests that men are less able to nurture and care for young children than women, contributing to the perceived incompatibility between beliefs about men's typical traits and the traits required to be successful in childcare work. This discrepancy is likely evidenced by male candidates' lower ascribed childcare competence, which may contribute to their lower perceived suitability, likability, and trustworthiness.

In support of this assumption, qualitative research has documented that men are perceived as lacking the competence to be a good childcare worker by both children's parents (Cronin, 2014) and other childcare workers (Sullivan et al., 2020). For instance, although female childcare workers value men as an asset (e.g., as gender role models for children), they also raise concerns about men's competence for childcare work (e.g., because of lack of motherly instinct; Sullivan et al., 2020). In contrast to these qualitative findings, a first quantitative study in the context of preschool teaching, did not find differences between perceived competence of fictitious female versus male candidates (Halper et al., 2019, Study 3). The result of this study might be due to how perceived competence was measured (i.e., ratings of candidates as intelligent, efficient, skillful, and capable), which may not be the most relevant competences for teaching or caring for young children according to the O*NET data (see discussion above).

The present research provides a more appropriate test of whether a perceived lack of men's childcare competence explains why men interested in childcare work are devalued compared to women, by focusing on competence directly relevant for childcare work (see above: National Center for O*NET Development, 2021). We hypothesized that ascribed childcare competence is linked to perceived suitability for childcare work and reduces the likability and trustworthiness of someone interested in caring for small children.

Hypothesis 3a *Male, compared to female, candidate's lower ascribed childcare competence will explain their lower perceived suitability, likeability, and trustworthiness.*

1.2.2 | Perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse

Another factor that likely contributes to men's lower perceived suitability is the assumption of men constituting a relatively higher risk for abusing children. Following from the stereotypical perception of men as more likely being sexual perpetrators than women, male childcare workers are perceived as posing a greater safety threat to children than female childcare workers, specifically in terms of sexual and physical abuse (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Tufan, 2018).

Men's motives to work in childcare are often questioned and they are at risk of being suspected of pedophilia (Brody, 2015; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Nentwich et al., 2013; Pruit, 2015; Tufan, 2018). In a survey about male childcare workers, about half of the participants believed that it is reasonable for people to be suspicious of men working in childcare (Daycare Trust, 2003, as cited in Rolfe, 2006). However, the question of whether men's greater perceived risk of

perpetrating sexual abuse can explain the devaluation of men in childcare work remains unanswered.

Men may also be perceived as more likely to abuse children physically (e.g., beating) due to the stereotype of men being more aggressive than women (Biernat & Sesko, 2018; Newport, 2001). To the best of our knowledge, no research so far has addressed the perceived threat of men physically abusing children in the context of childcare work. Related to our research, previous studies examining the perceived "safety threat" of candidates for an elementary teaching position has revealed mixed findings. Men were more likely to be perceived as posing a safety threat to children than women in one study (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016), but not in other research (Study 3, Halper et al., 2019). Besides these contradictory findings, it remains an open question whether gender differences in the perceived risk of perpetrating physical abuse in childcare exist and whether this explains less favorable evaluations of men in childcare work.

Taken together, the gender stereotypical belief that in comparison to women, men pose a greater risk of sexually or physically abusing children, may explain the biased social perception of male candidates interested in childcare work. The present research provides the first empirical test of whether men's greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse contributes to their less favorable evaluations when expressing interest in caring for very small children.

Hypothesis 3b *Male, compared to female, candidates' greater perceived risk of perpetrating (sexual and physical) child abuse will explain their lower perceived suitability, likability, and trustworthiness.*

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

An a priori power analysis indicated the need for at least 195 participants to have 80% power to detect small to medium effect sizes ($f = 0.20$) when employing the traditional .05 alpha-criterion of statistical significance (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2007). In total, 387 people began the survey and 247 completed it. Five were excluded: two because they failed to correctly respond the manipulation check (asking about the candidate's traits) and three because they were underage. The final sample consisted of 242 German speaking participants (176 women, 66 men), with ages ranging from 18 to 73 years ($M = 34.36$ years, $SD = 12.56$). Most participants were currently living in Switzerland (98.3%), with 93% having been born there. Of the participants, 16.9% had completed high school and 56.7% had completed university or attained higher education; 86.77% were currently employed. Participants were either studying or working in a diverse range of fields: Education (14%); Business and Economics (9.9%); Psychology (7.4%); Sales (7%); Environment (6.6%); Law (5%); Biology (4.5%); Healthcare (4.1%); Information Technology (3.7%), and Engineering (3.3%). Approximately one

third of people indicated they were parents (29.5% of women, 33.3% of men).

2.2 | Design and procedure

The experiment had a 2 (Candidate's Traits: communal vs. agentic) × 2 (Candidate's Gender: woman vs. man) between-subjects design with perceived suitability, likability, and trustworthiness as dependent variables and ascribed childcare competence and perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse as mediator variables.

Participants were recruited via social media. Upon accessing the online survey, they were told that they would be testing a new prognostic instrument and be given information that would allow them to evaluate candidates' fit to specific jobs (cover story). Then, they were asked to carefully read a short report about a candidate. After reading the report, participants indicated their perceptions of the candidate's suitability, likability, and trustworthiness. Following this, participants indicated the candidate's ascribed childcare competence and perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse. As a manipulation check, they rated the candidate's communality and agency. Finally, participants provided demographic information (e.g., gender, age, and parenthood) and were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

2.3 | Materials

Appendix S1 in the online supplemental materials includes the full questionnaire. Variables were measured on 7-point scales ranging from (1) *not at all* to (7) *very much*. For all variables, higher scores indicate greater manifestation on the respective variable. Item order was randomized within each measure. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) ensured one-factor models for all measurement models (see Table S1 in the online supplemental materials). All items showed substantial standardized factor loadings (>0.4).

The report about the candidate provided biographical information including a successfully completed internship in childcare, to document the candidate's strong interest in and experiences with childcare work, e.g., "Sara K. is an affectionate and loving young woman. She is also very sensitive and caring. (…) She possesses a college degree and has already done an internship at a childcare center. (…) Her daily activities there comprised crafting, playing and singing with the children. (…) With pleasure she also took on the feeding of the toddlers, which she managed independently, alone in the kitchen" (communal version; female candidate). The last sentence of the report described that the candidate either fed babies in the kitchen or changed nappies in the baby changing room. Preliminary analyses revealed that these activities did not affect participant's perceptions and we therefore collapsed these two activities for the data analysis.

Within the report about the candidate, we varied both candidate's personality traits and candidate's gender (Appendix S2 in the online supplemental materials displays the four versions). To vary the traits, candidates were described as either communal (i.e.,

affectionate, loving, sensitive, caring) or agentic (i.e., confident, goal-oriented, ambitious, determined). Adjectives were selected from a list of agentic and communal traits with positive valence (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011). Candidate's gender was varied by using either a typical male (Luca) or female name (Sara). Both names were among the most common boys' and girls' names in Switzerland, age-appropriate for people applying for entry-level positions (Bundesamt für Statistik Schweiz, 2020). In addition, the gender of the candidate was salient throughout the experiment due to the grammatical gender inherent in German.

2.3.1 | Perceived suitability

Participants evaluated how well the candidate fit the role of a childcare worker on four items: "I think that Luca [Sara] is very well qualified for this position", "It would be difficult for Luca [Sara] to fulfill the job requirements" (reverse coded), "Luca [Sara] fits the profile of the desired applicant for this position" and "This job will likely meet the skills and abilities of Luca [Sara]" (adapted from Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). CFA yielded a one-factor model, and the resulting scale had high internal consistency, Cronbachs $\alpha = .82$.

2.3.2 | Perceived likeability

Participants evaluated the likability of the candidate on five items: "Luca [Sara] appears to be a likeable person", "Luca [Sara] is a person who is similar to me", "Luca [Sara] is the kind of person that I tend to avoid" (reverse coded), "I would like Luca [Sara] to be a close personal friend", and "I would like Luca [Sara] to come and work in the same place as I do" (Crandall, 1991). CFA yielded a one-factor model, and the resulting scale had high internal consistency, $\alpha = .81$.

2.3.3 | Perceived trustworthiness

Participants evaluated the trustworthiness of the candidate on five items: Luca [Sara] seems to be a "reliable", "honest", "dependable",

"sincere", and "trustworthy" person. CFA yielded a one-factor model, and the resulting scale had high internal consistency, $\alpha = .92$.

2.3.4 | Ascribed childcare competence

Participants indicated how effectively they thought the candidate would take care of children in seven different situations when working in the childcare center (e.g., "able to console a sad child", "be good in settling a dispute", "understand a child very well"; in line with the description of childcare work from the National Center for O*NET Development, 2021). CFA yielded a one-factor model, and the resulting scale had high internal consistency, $\alpha = .91$.

2.3.5 | Perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse

Participants indicated how likely they think the candidate would "sexually abuse a child" or "physically abuse a child" when working in the childcare center. Given that the two items were highly correlated ($r = .88$, $p < .001$), we averaged and combined them to build a scale. This scale had high internal consistency, $\alpha = .94$.

3 | RESULTS

A 2 × 2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on suitability, likeability, and trustworthiness, followed by univariate analysis of variances (ANOVAs). Partial eta squared values (η_p^2) are reported as effect sizes. Table 1 displays the correlations for all variables and Table 2 the means and standard deviations by candidate's gender and candidate's traits.

3.1 | Evaluations of female and male candidates for childcare work

A 2 × 2 MANOVA indicated a significant main effect of candidate's gender, Wilks' Lambda = 0.97, $F(3, 236) = 2.79$, $p = .041$,

TABLE 1 Correlations among all variables

	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Candidate's trait	–						
2	Candidate's gender	−.01	–					
3	Suitability	.50***	−.16*	–				
4	Likeability	.10	−.10	.44***	–			
5	Trustworthiness	.10	−.09	.36***	.42***	–		
6	Childcare competence	.32***	−.13*	.60***	.43***	.49***	–	
7	Risk of child abuse	−.05	.12	−.28***	−.23***	−.45***	−.43***	–

Note: N = 242 for all variables. All items ranged from (1) *not at all* to (7) *very much*. Higher scores indicate greater perceived suitability, likability, trustworthiness and greater ascribed childcare competence and risk of child abuse.
*p < .05; ***p < .001.

TABLE 2 Means and standard deviations for the mediator and dependent variables, by candidate's gender and candidate's traits

Candidate's gender	Candidate's traits	N	Suitability		Likability		Trustworthiness		Childcare competence		Risk of perpetrating child abuse	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Woman	Communal	66	5.99$_b$	0.81	4.92$_a$	1.03	5.78$_a$	0.95	5.80$_b$	0.80	1.75$_a$	0.97
	Agentic	63	4.74$_a$	1.04	4.75$_a$	0.82	5.37$_a$	0.80	5.13$_{a,b}$	0.81	2.09$_a$	1.27
	Total	129	5.38	1.12	4.84	0.93	5.58	0.90	5.47	0.87	1.91	1.13
Man	Communal	57	5.58$_b$	0.99	4.74$_a$	0.99	5.39$_a$	0.86	5.46$_{a,b}$	0.82	2.28$_a$	1.18
	Agentic	56	4.38$_a$	1.31	4.51$_a$	1.16	5.44$_a$	1.04	5.00$_a$	0.97	2.12$_a$	1.13
	Total	113	4.99	1.31	4.63	1.08	5.41	0.95	5.23	0.92	2.20	1.15

Note: All items ranged from (1) *not at all* to (7) *very much*. Higher scores indicate greater perceived suitability, likability, trustworthiness and greater ascribed childcare competence and risk of child abuse. Means in the same column (not including the total scores) that do not share subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$, as indicated by Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) posthoc comparisons.

$\eta_p^2 = .03$, and a significant main effect of candidate's traits, Wilks' Lambda = 0.72, $F(3, 236) = 30.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$. The interaction of Candidate's Traits × Candidate's Gender was not significant, Wilks' Lambda = 0.98, $F(3, 236) = 1.71$, $p = .166$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, a follow-up 2 × 2 ANOVA on suitability revealed a significant main effect of candidate's gender, $F(1, 238) = 8.22$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, indicating that participants evaluated male candidates as less suitable for childcare work than female candidates. This difference represents a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of candidate's traits on suitability, $F(1, 238) = 82.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$, indicating that participants evaluated communal candidates as more suitable for childcare work than agentic candidates. This difference represents a large effect size, by Cohen's (1988) guidelines. Figure 1 illustrates the main effects of candidates' traits and candidates' gender on suitability.

Contrary to Hypotheses 1 and 2, ANOVA results for likability revealed no main effect of candidate's gender, $F(1, 238) = 2.59$, $p = .109$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and no main effect of candidate's traits, $F(1, 238) = 2.46$, $p = .118$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Also, contrary to Hypotheses 1 and 2, the ANOVA on trustworthiness revealed no main effect of candidate's gender, $F(1, 238) = 1.89$, $p = .170$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and no main effect of candidates' traits, $F(1, 238) = 2.16$, $p = .143$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

In additional analyses, we controlled for participants' parental status. Because this variable did not change the significance levels of any analyses, the analyses without controlling for parental status are reported.

3.2 | Underlying mechanisms of men's lower perceived suitability

The ANOVA revealed that male candidates are evaluated as less suitable—but not as less likable or trustworthy—than female candidates (see Hypothesis 1). We therefore refrained from examining the mechanisms contributing to (the lack of) differences in the latter two outcome variables.

Two one-way ANOVAs on the mediator variables revealed that female candidates were ascribed higher childcare competence than male candidates, $F(1, 240) = 4.25$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and male candidates were perceived as posing a near-significant greater risk of perpetrating child abuse than female candidates, $F(1, 240) = 3.73$, $p = .055$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Table 2).

A structural equation model using maximum-likelihood estimation (*lavaan* R package; Rosseel, 2012) tested whether perceptions of male candidate's lower suitability could be explained by their lower ascribed childcare competence (Hypothesis 3a), or greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse (Hypothesis 3b). The residual covariances of the two mediator variables were included. The tests of the indirect effects used 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 1,000 bootstrap samples. For the indirect effects, unstandardized coefficients are reported. The model appears in Figure 2. Fit was assessed by the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), based on the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999).

Results showed a good model fit, $\chi^2(72) = 191.57$, $p < .001$; CFI = .940; TLI = .924; RMSEA = .083, 90% CI [0.069, 0.097], accounting for 45% of the variance in suitability. Supporting Hypothesis 3a, male compared to female candidate's lower ascribed childcare competence ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .041$) helped to explain men's lower perceived suitability ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$; indirect effect = -0.19, 95% CI [−0.43, −0.02]). In contrast to Hypothesis 3b, male compared to female candidate's greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse ($\beta = .13$, $p = .046$) did not contribute to their lower perceived suitability ($\beta = .04$, $p = .628$; indirect effect = 0.01, 95% CI [−0.02, +0.07]).

We performed additional exploratory analyses to examine whether only one aspect of our composite abuse measure—namely sexual or physical abuse—might help explain men's lower perceived suitability. In particular, we reran the structural equation model, but this time included both variables as separate, single-item indicator,

FIGURE 1 Mean (+1 *SE*) perceived suitability for childcare work as a function of candidate's gender (woman vs. man) and candidate's personality traits (communal vs. agentic)
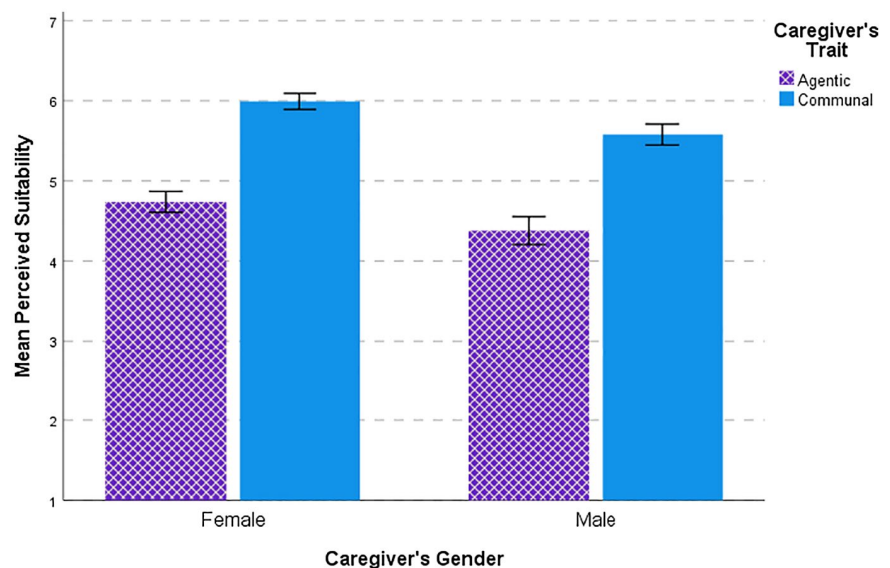

FIGURE 2 Structural equation model of the effect of candidate's gender on perceived suitability through ascribed childcare competence (Hypothesis 3a) and perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse (Hypothesis 3b). Standardized results are depicted. Significant paths are indicated by a solid line, and non-significant paths by a dashed line. Candidate's gender was coded woman = 0, man = 1. Ellipses represent latent variables, and rectangles represent observed variables. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
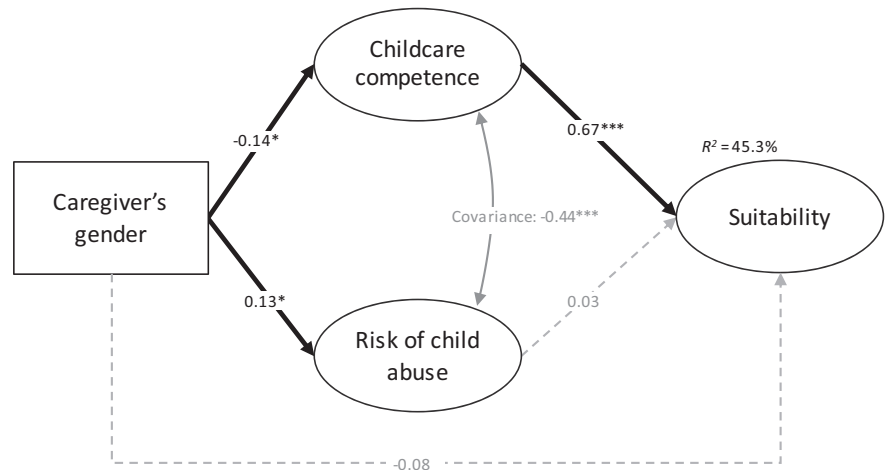
mediator variables (rather than as two items of the latent variable "risk of perpetrating child abuse"). The model appears in Figure S1 in the online supplemental materials. Given the high correlation between the two items ($r = .88, p < .001$), we again included the residual covariances among all three mediator variables. This model revealed a good model fit, $\chi^2(70) = 191.45, p < .001$; CFI = .939; TLI = .921; RMSEA = .085, 90% CI [0.070, 0.099], accounting for 45% of the variance in suitability. In line with the findings of the model reported above (Hypotheses 3a and 3b), the indirect effects of caregiver's gender on suitability through perceived risk of perpetrating physical abuse (indirect effect = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.04, +0.10]) or through perceived risk of perpetrating sexual abuse (indirect effect = −0.01, 95% CI [−0.08, +0.03]) remained non-significant.

4 | DISCUSSION

This research is the first to examine gender stereotypical beliefs as potential mechanisms of why men interested in childcare work are evaluated less favorably than women. Results showed that communal candidates were evaluated as more suitable for childcare work than agentic candidates, independent of their gender. Further, male candidates were evaluated as less suitable for childcare work than women, independent of their personality traits. We also hypothesized that agentic and male candidates would be perceived as less likable and trustworthy than communal and female candidates, but the results did not support these assumptions. Finally, a structural equation model revealed that men's compared to women's lower ascribed childcare competence—but not greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse—contributed to men's relatively lower perceived suitability for childcare work.

Given that the most valued qualities required for childcare are communal in nature (National Center for O*NET Development, 2021), communal candidates were perceived as more suitable for childcare work than agentic candidates, as expected. This likely results in agentic candidates having lower chances of being hired in selection procedures because they fit less to the strongly desired communal qualities for childcare work. Importantly, we did not expect an interaction between candidates' gender and their traits. Although a communality bonus has been observed for men

in male-typed jobs like leadership and negotiation or office work (Hentschel et al., 2018), such an effect is unlikely in the female-typed job of childcare work. As the requirements are already highly communal, the stigma attached to men in these female-typed jobs likely outweighs any type of communal bonus they might receive. Further, it is unlikely that women would experience an agency bonus, as communal attributes are more immediately associated with this female-typed field, and are generally evaluated more positively (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011).

The fact that agentic candidates were not thought to be less likeable and trustworthy than communal candidates may be due to the overall favorable description of the candidate. In particular, the descriptions used in this study mostly contained traits with positive valence, stating that for example, the candidate had good rapport with the children. Thus, it is possible that candidate's traits might affect likeability and trustworthiness ratings when the information about candidates is more ambiguous, allowing stereotypes to more strongly influence people's perceptions.

In support of the incongruity models (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012), male candidates were evaluated as less suitable for childcare work than female candidates, documenting social discrimination. Given that female-typed communal roles and occupations are typically devalued, men's discrimination in these domains is often not labeled as such (Block et al., 2019; Manzi, 2019). If gender inequality in stereotypically female careers remains unacknowledged, the ongoing exclusion of men in childcare work cannot be resolved. The present finding that people liked and trusted male candidates just as well as female candidates might suggest that people value men as an asset in childcare work, which is in line with some of the past research (Croft et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2020), though this benefit comes at the cost of male childcare workers still being perceived as 'other'—different from both the women they work with and other men (Pullen & Simpson, 2009).

In line with male childcare workers' self-reported experiences of being perceived as having less competence with children than women (Cronin, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2020), our research showed that male candidates were also perceived by others as having lower childcare competence. Further, men's lower perceived competence contributed to their lower perceived suitability ratings. This finding documents persisting gender stereotypic beliefs about men as being less able to nurture and care for young children (see review by Manzi, 2019). Because the discourse around childcare is often based on 'maternal instinct' and 'housewife skills' (Moss, 2006), individual men—as competent as they may be—likely need to overcome more barriers to get a chance to confirm that they are indeed competent to work in childcare.

4.1 | Limitations and future directions

Supporting our assumption, the perceived risk of perpetuating sexual and physical child abuse tended to be greater for male than for female candidates. This result is in accordance with the discourse of suspicion, in which men interested in working with children are at risk of being suspected of pedophilia (e.g., Brody, 2015; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). However, in the present study, the perceived risk of perpetuating abuse was very low for both female and male candidates. This floor effect is a potential explanation for why men's greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse did not explain their lower suitability. One reason for the overall low reported perceived risk may be the measurement method used, as participants were asked to indicate how likely they think it is that the candidate would physically or sexually abuse a child while working in the childcare center. Although people may hold an (unconscious) belief that men pose a greater risk of perpetrating child abuse, concerns for social desirability may limit people's willingness to explicitly report it. Other research on men in childcare supports this idea, suggesting that because of social desirability concerns, people are less likely to voice their concern about men directly and prefer to discuss safety concerns from others' perspectives—for instance, from the perspective of concerned parents—rather than their own (Sullivan et al., 2020). To understand whether this was the case, future research should test men's perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse with less explicit measures of risk perception, using implicit or covert measures.

Furthermore, differences in childcare workers perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse may be different in populations for which the evaluation of candidates and childcare workers is of higher personal relevance. Although the present study showed that men were evaluated as less suitable than women by both adults with and without children, parents of toddlers going to the respective childcare center may be more concerned and protective than uninvolved adults. Future research that considers the degree of participant's personal involvement would be valuable to further understand when and why people discriminate against men in ECEC.

4.2 | Practical implications

The current findings have numerous practical implications that may be used to develop successful strategies to promote gender diversity in professional childcare. First, this research indicates that the less favorable evaluations of men's childcare competence likely disadvantage men interested in childcare work. As nurseries are often set-up with the understanding that the workers are women, they create a work environment for women to thrive in—to the exclusion of men (Aday & Schmader, 2019; Peeters, 2007; Schmader & Sedikides, 2017). The strong association of "maternal instincts" with good childcare circumvents men's inclusion, neglecting the fact that professional childcare not only requires female-typed communal qualities (e.g., concern for others, integrity) but also male-typed agentic qualities (e.g., independence, showing initiative; National Center for O*NET Development, 2021). The transfer of this knowledge, for instance, in training materials, job descriptions, job advertisements, and in the media, is a promising avenue to reduce gender stereotypes in childcare work.

In addition to reducing gender stereotypes wherever possible, reducing the salience of gender in the workplace and avoiding men being treated as tokens could decrease the lack of fit perceptions between men and childcare work (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). By reducing the gendered nature of the work environment, men interested in childcare may be less likely to associate childcare work with only feminine characteristics and be more likely to see ways in which they could contribute and fit in, in a childcare environment. In addition to "de-feminising" the nature of childcare work, it is important to avoid biased evaluations of men in childcare work by limiting expectations of incompetence, which arise from lack of fit perceptions (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). In increasing organizational transparency, structuring teamwork and ensuring performance criteria is clear, perceived lack of fit can be reduced.

Although good childcare requires a certain amount of physical contact and affection, some organizational cultures overemphasize intimate and affectionate relationships and respective behavioral expressions to fulfill the professional role (Palmer & Feldman, 2017). Physical displays of affection towards children can not only increase the likelihood of child abuse, but also undermine the ability of others to identify it (Palmer & Feldman, 2017). To this effect, the mother-centered childcare approach might blur the lines between what is and is not appropriate behavior in professional childcare (Darling & Hackett, 2020; Palmer & Feldman, 2017). Though child abuse in childcare also occurs at the hands of women (Moulden et al., 2007), male childcare workers are still singled out from the female majority. Male childcare workers report that their freedom to touch, cuddle, and change diapers is restricted—though this is not formalized or written into policy (Murray, 1996; Rolfe, 2006). It is vital that nurseries treat male and female workers equally, so that children are kept safe and workers of all genders are free to develop and express agency and communion (Meeussen et al., 2020).

In order to ensure that men and women who work in childcare work are treated equally, the varied qualities that make a good childcare worker need to be emphasized by both training courses and centers looking for employees, and both men and women need to be held to the same standards with regards to what is considered appropriate when caring for someone else's child.

5 | CONCLUSION

Men are underrepresented in ECEC worldwide, despite the benefits of gender diversity in professional childcare and initiatives attempting to increase men's participation. The current research on social discrimination of men in childcare work provided additional evidence for persisting gender stereotypes. Results revealed an advantage for candidates with communal qualities and a disadvantage for men interested in childcare work, regarding their suitability for working in this field. Male candidates' lower perceived childcare competence—rather than their greater perceived risk of perpetrating child abuse—contributed to their lower perceived suitability for childcare work. These findings provide additional support for role congruity theories

in the context of men pursuing female-typed communal careers and point towards important factors that likely underpin the discrimination of men in childcare work. Such insights into how gender stereotypes affect men's evaluation in this field are essential to develop successful strategies to promote gender diversity in professional childcare.

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